Hackneyed Phrases
Intertextual and Linguistic Migrations in Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*

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Abstract

Tayeb Salih’s world-literary classic *Season of Migration to The North* (1967) has been read widely in Arabic as well as multiple world languages. Primarily examined in terms that pertain to the postcolonial field of study, it showcases all the well-rehearsed topics such as coloniser-colonised, identity, nationality, culture, hybridity, literature, language, gender, sexuality, historiography, and most importantly for this thesis: migration.

Although the novel has been translated into many world languages, it is Johnson-Davies’ famous English translation (1969) that in my view produces a unique dialogue with the Arabic text. This translation is generally much admired, with only a few critiques, but criticism has not quite addressed the fact that it is in Salih’s colonial language, that is the language he himself could have used. Given that most prominent “writing back to the imperial centre” is in the languages of the colonisers, often in creolised versions of those languages, Salih’s production in Arabic begs the question of linguistic hybridity.

In this thesis, I will engage in an intertextual and linguistic analysis of the novel to argue that one cannot regard the Arabic text as “the original” and English as the secondary. Rather, both English and Arabic are co-originary languages of this novel. This demonstrates that the core of the novel is a restless migration between dichotomies produced by the colonial history.

Keywords
Tayib Salih, migration, language, hybridity, postcolonial
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“if we are lies we shall be lies of our own making”
(Salih 50)

Introduction

Readers of Tayeb Salih’s world-literary classic *Season of Migration to The North* (1967) in Johnson-Davies’ famous English translation (1969) must be struck by the sheer Englishness of the text. Knowing that the original is in Arabic, and especially given the prevalent use of exoticism in the story, this feature can create a sense of defamiliarization vis-à-vis Western readers’ expectations/prejudices. What stands out in this beautiful translation are no doubt its aesthetics features, in particular certain diction, which I will refer to as hackneyed phrases, and which sound all too English. An unusual question may be, could these features be a case of deeper fidelity to the Arabic original, rather than domestication?

Translation studies teach us there are multiple ways of approaching translation. Discussions among experts and lay people are most often about the “fidelity” to the original text. In other words, one expects the translators to try their best to render the meaning of the text as closely to the original as possible. Fidelity here is about “semantic fidelity, representation politics, or mimetic truth” (Stanton loc 610). At the same time, it is practically a truism that such fidelity is impossible in principle, and the general assumption is that all translations are but interpretations with significant “loss in translation,” especially when it comes to elements of craft such as the aesthetics and poetics of high literary prose. The best one can hope for is that the translation correctly renders the meaning while it is assumed that certain stylistic features and deeper cultural connotations will not be prioritised. However, in rendering the text into another language, translators can opt to try and keep some of the formal features of the original, thus making it sound foreign, for instance, as if it was written in a broken target language. Alternatively, they can move in the opposite direction and domesticate the text, that is, make it sound like it was written in the target language.

Salih’s “writing back to the empire” is not of the type that is written in the coloniser’s language. Often such postcolonial texts employ creolisation or bastardisation of the colonial
language, and in that way play with the hybrid identities of their characters, making them digestible for cultural outsiders. As a graduate of the University of London, Salih could no doubt have written in English. While it is not his native tongue, it is after all the language of his higher education and his experimentation with form must be the result of his study of the English classics, in particular modernism. The plot of the novel, which reminds of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, follows an unnamed narrator who returns to the rural Sudan after years of study in England, where he meets the mysterious figure of Mustafa Sa’eed, who is practically a hyperbolic mirror image of the narrator. In many ways both characters mirror Salih’s own trajectory. Given that the setting is a Sudanese village, except for the flashbacks, one could easily fall into the trap of thinking Johnson-Davies domesticated the text, thus in some ways making it more digestible for the English-speaking readers. Given the sheer political charge of such a move regarding a postcolonial text that critiques colonialism both thematically and through formal textual features, the domestication of an Arabic text would be like the proverbial domestication of the Other.

My analysis takes as a point of departure Sofia Samatar’s (2019) analysis, in particular the way she makes a big case against Johnson-Davies’ use of “hackneyed phrases” as the translation of the Arabic “امثال” (Samatar 29-30), which is seen both a form of domestication and practically an example of the colonial discourse that makes the character of Mustapha Sa’eed a stereotypical Arab African. At the surface level, and following a particular notion of what the text is, this argument makes much sense. However, it also does not make sense, exactly because it operates with a particular characterisation of Salih’s text that pits the West against the East. My argument will be somewhat in the vein of deconstruction: Salih’s novel does not have an original. Rather it is always already a translation. In this case, it is fruitful for the critical analysis attempt to think in terms that are at first sight counterintuitive: that the “Arabic original” could be seen as the author’s translation from English and that the English translation could be like a retrieval of that non-existent original in the colonial language, which is sensed through its uncanny presence. Put differently, it could be argued that the novel operates simultaneously in two cosmopolitan languages, Arabic and English. Both are therefore original or rather co-originary. It is impossible, of course, to fully determine the scope of such a migratory feature,

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1 An anecdotal note, which resonates with my interpretation, but whose content I have not been able to find in any published work: I asked a former MA student of mine, a Sudanese, who wrote her thesis on Salih, if she too had this sense when for instance reading Arabic, and she wrote to me that Rex O’Fahi, a history professor at Bergen University who happened to be a friend of Salih’s, related to her that Salih told him that in the process of writing Season he “realized that he was actually writing in English (in his mind) and then came to write down in Arabic what seemed to be a fully structured English paragraph. That was an extraordinary statement for me to hear but it partially explains that elusive, hard to pin down unfamiliarity I sense when I read his work.”
and it would be safer to state that certain sections or limited number of features are operating in this fashion. However, in my view, a bolder thesis is far more conducive the development of more serious revisions of critical approaches exactly because it does not set limit to such hybridity. While my analysis itself will operate with a limited, albeit diverse sets of examples, I wish to keep the bolder claim as an invitation to both find other features.

Judging fidelity becomes quite impossible in the typical way where the knowledge of a text in one language takes precedence and carries the weight of the “original.” This does not work for Salih’s novel and should be bracketed to really observe the linguistic migration at work at the core of the novel. In other words, I aim to show that the trope of migration, which is omnipresent in the novel, is not only a feature of its content but also of its formal character, of its style and its language. This “linguistic hijra” is the fluctuating core or the governing principle of the text.²

Much is lost and much is gained in this endless stream of translations at the core of Salih’s text. Ideally, one should read it in Arabic and English. This entails that I am not really concerned with translation (theory) in general. My objective pushes the discourse away from any other translation into any other global language. What we have here is clash of two cosmopolitan languages, Arabic and English, against the backdrop of uneven distribution of power due to colonisation. It is important to establish, as Mohammad Shabangu (2016) puts it, that language not transparent and that it is “a deep-rooted quagmire that not only questions the representation of that which preoccupies the African writer, but also problematizes the very tools with which such a writer undertakes their mission” (Shabangu 45). Indeed, “[a]s a result of the inability to recognize the conventional and arbitrary nature of the signifying systems within cultural formation, the narrator and the reader are both left with unresolved anxieties. … as language is neither transparent nor innocent in the way in which it carves up the world into the way that we experience it” (Shabangu 53).

To reiterate, let me quote Benita Parry’s (2005) excellent summary:

Salih’s Season of Migration to the North, published in Beirut in 1967 and in an English translation in 1969, is one such elaborately orchestrated work that self-consciously inscribes reflections on the medium and uncertainties of narrative. Simultaneously a melancholic evocation of a rural community in sub-Saharan Africa, a melodramatic tale of Arabian days and nights in the equator and the English North, and a critique of

² The phrase “linguistic hijra” is a hybrid of two languages that define Salih’s novel. We can imagine Johnson-Davies translated the title as Season of Hijra to the North. I will address this later.
colonialism, its singular unfolding of theme and meaning makes it at once legible and opaque. … Season dramatizes the trauma of a peripheral modernity, and does so in an innovative form that calls on traditional Arabic and contemporary European narrative conventions, joining poetry and prose, disposing of antique modes of story-telling in order to deliver timely meditations on present dilemmas, and hence containing a polyphony of discrete and competing voices. (Parry 72, emphasis mine)

Parry sums up practically all the key issues that Salih criticism has dealt with in over half a century. She adds “the unevenness between the metropolitan and the peripheral … the ancestral and the modern … the mundane and the enigmatic, the recognizable and the improbable, the seasonal and the eccentric, the earthborn and the fabulous” (Parry 73). Indeed, these “disparate discourses invite and frustrate a realist reading, demanding instead a reception able to hold these contradictory registers within one inclusive response” (Parry 73). This is exactly where I want to situate my reading. Hybridisation of forms, which tests the thesis of the potential of the form to migrate across cultural borders, can be read as effectively dispossessing of “these genres in order to dramatize a state of permanent emergency as intrinsic to the colonial experience of modernity, divided between an affection for and a dislocation from tradition, drawn towards but not integrated into the modern as this had been received by way of an aggressive and predatory colonialism” (Parry 75).

In my view, such hybridisation is not necessarily about dispossessing. It is about complementarity. The figure of the grafted lemon-orange tree, to which the character of Sa’eed introduces the narrator, suggests that “while the true hybrid may or may not be fertile and bear fruit, … grafting, or fusion of two entities, can produce a healthy tree with a split of dual productivity” (Salih 133). The old proverb, or perhaps a hackneyed phrase, that it takes a village to raise a child, is applicable to this work that is the child of its time. Just as Sa’eed has multiple mothers, so are different narrative forms all surrogate mothers to this text. I state they are all surrogate to emphasise my position on there being no single origin. Rather multiple sources are co-originary. In some sense, I treat the Arabic and the English versions the way Sa’eed treats both his biological mother and Mrs Robinson. This may sound counterintuitive, but at a deeper level of the text itself, it makes most sense because it shows that the novel’s core is a restless migration between all kinds of dichotomies (most of which Parry listed).

Johnson-Davies’ translation satisfies the criteria recently outlined by Anna Ziajka Stanton, which departs from “an enhanced degree of verisimilitude,” and instead relocates “the apparatus of ethical possibility away from mimesis to the affective encounters with Arabic
literary form that a translation can make possible for Anglophone readers” (Stanton loc 541). While this approach has to do with translation in general, I argue that Salih’s case is idiosyncratic to a large extent in that the translator deals with a text that linguistically plays the games played by the narrator and the Othelloesque Sa’eed, a text is always already a play in intercultural translation.

My focus will be on intertextuality and language, though I will touch upon the form. The paper will be structured along following lines. Firstly, I will outline the major elements of the postcolonial theory relevant for Salih’s work, and then use some key research to establish a ground and identify a gap. I am in general agreement with most postcolonial readings, which do seem to reiterate more or less same things with some subtle differences. The analysis will largely close read selected passages in the light of the main thesis. Finally, I will conclude with indications where I see Salih scholarship, and wider considerations of postcolonial translations, may need to move.3

Theory

Salih criticism is largely situated in postcolonial theories and given the fact it was one of the early works that was popularised globally, becoming in fact a work of World Literature, it is no surprise that the main sources of theory are Edward Said’s classical works (such as Orientalism) and Homi Bhabha’s poststructuralist work (such as Location of Culture).4 According to Sofia Samatar, “Season maintains the affective force that is apt to fade, to be softened and tamed, in conceptualizations of modernity that blur the line between the West and the rest, whether we invoke affiliation (Said, ‘Traveling’), hybridity (Bhabha), indigenization (Appadurai), enmeshment (Ramazani), relation (Glissant), matrix (Bauman), or planetarity (Spivak).” Indeed, the novel “gives us an anguished affiliation, a diseased hybridity, an indigenization disinherit and in mourning, a delirious and degraded enmeshment, a sadomasochistic relation, a matrix of mirrored bedrooms, an abject planetarity” (Samatar 37). Although my own analysis aims to focus on linguistic and symbolic migrations in Salih’s novel, postcolonial theory will

3 A note on transcription. In the paper, I will generally avoid transliterating Arabic text myself. In the cases where the quotes scholars use transcription, I will leave those instance as they are rather than standardizing the system throughout.

4 Said’s major examination of postcolonial exoticism is important in relation to the way Salih constantly evokes the politics and workings of the exotic in the migratory meetings between the East and the West. Said’s work also figures in that he was an interpreter of modernist works, in particular Joseph Conrad, which Salih uses quite extensively.
be part and parcel of this investigation. The main reason for this is that the textual migrations are deeply tied to and conditioned by the history of colonialism that Salih treats in terms of for instance “identity,” “culture,” “politics,” and even “sexuality.”

The narrative as such migrates along the axis of exoticism between two places (Great Britain and Sudan). Characters come to embody the discourse typically ascribed to the Other, the perpetual exotic, restless, out of place and time, but also untamed: “You, Mr Sa’eed, are the best example of the fact that our civilizing mission in Africa is of no avail. After all the efforts we’ve made to educate you, it’s as if you’d come out of the jungle for the first time!” (93-4). This migratory movement lends itself quite well to the readings through the lens of hybridity. For Bhabha, the Other is ontologically conditioned to be in-between (places, times, histories, cultures, languages). The hybrid Other as constantly being “neither-nor” rather than “either-or,” points this reading into a direction of constant and consistent oscillation, or migration. According to Bhabha, colonisation created a loss of meaningfulness “in cross-cultural interpretation” (Bhabha 1994 179) and produced “anxiety” that occupies “the space between frames; a double frame, or one that is split” (Bhabha 1994 306). The colonised cannot go back to some pre-colonial state, the way Salih’s narrator thinks he can, nor fully adapt and this leads to “aporetic coexistence, within the cultural history of the modern imagined community, of both the dynastic, hierarchical, prefigurative ‘medieval’ traditions (the past), and the secular, homogenous, synchronous crosstime of modernity (the present)” (Bhabha 1994 358-59). Salih writes: “You, Mr Sa’eed, are the best example of the fact that our civilizing mission in Africa is of no avail. After all the efforts we’ve made to educate you, it’s as if you’d come out of the jungle for the first time!” (93-4).

To give a simple linguistic example, it is like citing an old proverb which historically has deep meaning and wisdom but due to the colonial rupture has become just a phrase, a hollow shell. Salih’s characters, as many have noted, seem to exist in such an aporetic condition between being and appearing authentic. Often, they aim to mimic the coloniser’s agency not only in action (e.g., Saeed’s conquest of women), but also in the migratory language (often proverbs, phrases, metaphors, symbols). What happens is that language, for instance through “[m]etaphor produces hybrid realities by yoking together unlikely traditions of thought” (Bhabha 1994 212). For Paul Huebener (2010), the character of Mustafa Sa’eed “thrives on shifting identities” (Huebener 25). Indeed, he used five identities – Hassan, Charles, Amin, Richard, and Mustafa – bragging about possessing “the appropriate garb” for every new challenge (Salih 35) and yet he “cannot find a way to inhabit a personal narrative unburdened by the tropes of colonization” (Huebener 25). It is fascinating to note how Sa’eed “can bewitch
himself, escape into a Metaphor, provide a believable order and form for his life, act as if the Metaphor were the truth, and turn his awareness of his imminent destruction into an occasion for heroic affirmation” (Huebener 25).

In addition, as a work of World Literature that has been translated into more than twenty languages, it is important to address Salih’s translingualism, which is where I seek to examine the effects of migration in the text. The word “trans” as in “translation” (Latin) is the same as the word “meta” as in “metaphor” (Greek). Both are based in migration and transfer from entirely different domains, cultures, ideologies, etc. This migration is typically seen in terms of loss and gain (often more loss than gain, though much is gained in translation). Addressing the question of translation in Salih is necessary, and for this purpose it must be the English translation as English is the language the novel treats specifically. English is the imagined North to the characters’ South. Stefan Helgesson and Christina Kullberg’s recent work on translingualism in World Literary studies points to the cruxes of the linguistic and symbolic migrations. For them, “translingualism” is a term used to articulate certain “contradictory quality of literary language” (Helgesson & Kullberg 137). They “do not see translingualism as a quality that certain texts have and most do not but rather as a primary condition that literary texts can either work with or disavow and—by the same token—that reading practices can choose to highlight or ignore.” Such “a primary condition should be understood as distinct from, yet related to other terms such as heterolingualism, multilingualism, and monolingualism” (Helgesson & Kullberg 137). They approach translingualism as an “event,” which is significant for my reading because there is often more at stake than simply language migration. So, this translingualism is a particular relation, “whereby language is defamiliarized and ‘othered’ in relation to a perceived hegemonic norm.” Indeed, “[w]hen a translingual event is produced by and in the encounter with a literary text, it is not immediately apparent what should count as foreign or familiar—this polarity may shift or even become irrelevant as one engages with the textual material” (Helgesson & Kullberg 138). It is this aspect of failing to determine what is foreign and what familiar, depending on the point of view we assume (from Arabic original or translation, for instance), that I hope to utilise in my reading.

Salih Scholarship

According to the MLA database, the research on Season in English comprises around one hundred articles and book chapters, spread from the 1980s on, which cover a limited number of
topics typical of the postcolonial field of study: migration, identity, hybridity, sexuality, intertextuality, and aesthetics. The bulk of the articles deal with the issues of colonialism, imperialism, postcolonialism, and neo-colonialism more broadly (Adeaga, Al-Leithy, Calbi, Caminero-Santangelo, Huebener, Krishnan, Maalouf, Maley, Murad, Parry, Schultheis, Topan, Walker, Zeidanin, Masmoudi). Sarah Fekadu (2017) points out that “scholars of English literature have read the novel in the context of postcolonial rewritings of colonial fiction” while “scholars of Arab and/or Comparative Literature have pointed to the context of the Nahda – the late-nineteenth-century Arabic literary renaissance’ (Makdisi 805)” (Fekadu 257). 5 The postcolonial research emphasises the instability of the colonised, and mainly uses Bhabha’s notion of “hybridity” to depict the migratory character of the colonial subjects, that is the ambivalence of being here and there at the same time, at home and abroad, being both-and and neither-nor. Regarding colonialism, the authors largely attempt to read the novel as part and parcel of that which Salman Rushdie called “writing back to the imperial centre” (Rushdie 49), that is, the work of a former colonial subject which asks what are

the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make any concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from the ones that came here with us? These questions are all a single, existential question: How are we to live in the world? (Rushdie 18)

A rather large number of specific intertextual readings testifies to the apparent obsession with the colonial hauntings of the former colonised. In other words, the intertextual analyses of Shakespearean influences, specifically Othello and “the exotic” (Calbi, Laouyene, Quayson, Harlow, etc.), and Conradian influences (Caminero-Santangelo, Ford, Krishnan, Maalouf, Shaheen, etc.), showcase the most typical ailments of postcolonial writing: the contamination of the local/native by the foreign at the level of language and cultural expression. The intertextual engagement with Joseph Conrad’s work, by means of content and form, has been the epitome of the postcolonial response to the coloniser’s Canon, especially since the scathing critique by Chinua Achebe. Questions of the agency of the (former) colonised, and the possibility of writing authentically, permeate the field. In other words, there is always a question if the influences of the coloniser’s cultural heritage diminish the authenticity of the colonised,

5 Unfortunately, I was unable to procure and read articles that may have been written in Arabic.
turning the colonised into empty shells, what I call “hackneyed phrases,” that is, historically meaningful expressions which have lost their original charge.

To expand, aside from concerns about the content, research on Salih recognises the problem of separating the content from the form when it comes to the purity and the impact of the postcolonial critique. This is why so much Salih scholarship deals with “language,” “aesthetics,” “poetics,” “voice,” “translation,” “metaphor,” “allegory,” “rhetoric,” and “irony,” to mention only the major issues (Ghanem, Jurdi, Manzanas Calvo, Meyer, Osei-Nyame, Shabangu, Walker, Huebener, Khalifa, Scott, AlBzoor, Windt, Creswell, Lowry, McDonald, Salih). If we read Season as an allegory, which is a rather generic reading of non-Western works in the West, we run the risk of deflating the impact the narrative seeks to create. As Lloyd Spencer puts it, allegories are “symptomatic of a significant loss of a sense of genuine, immediately accessible, imminent meaning. Allegories, even those which proclaim the stability and fullness of meaning in the (hierarchical) universe can thus be seen as deconstructing themselves” (Spencer 63). In other words, to read Season as an allegory would be like turning an old proverb into a hackneyed phrase. Given that Salih is working with an awareness of such a trap, I will address this issue as something being solved through the linguistic and symbolic migrations. I will discuss this problematic in terms of myth-building, following Jean-Luc Nancy’s analysis of the mythical heroes who are supposed to make the community come together, thus putting themselves in the migratory space between individual and community, both pragmatic and symbolic (Nancy 51).

6 The point that pertains to my thesis the most is the fact that the “migrant aspect is central” in the novel (Ghanem 157). The narrator says at one point, “Over there is like here, neither better nor worse” (Salih 49), but also that he is “from here, just as the date palm standing in our courtyard of our house has grown in our house and not in anyone else’s” (Salih 49). He may attempt to use local cultural specificities and objects as metaphors of rootedness to sell himself to the villagers, while all along showcasing his affinity with Sa’eed, the character that is constantly migrating between places: “I veered between seeing and blindness. I was conscious and not conscious. Was I asleep or awake? Was I alive or dead? … half-way between north and south … unable to continue, unable to return” (Salih 167).

Further on migration, James Tar Tsaaior (2009) argues:

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6 With the same token, given the very explicit way that Salih connect issues such as “gender,” “sexuality (sexual politics),” and “love” to the postcolonial “nervous condition” we find multiple way of intersecting the mentioned topics (Adeaga, Hassan, Homad, Khalifa, McInnis, Murad, Neimneh, Sandapen).
deeply embedded in the narrative is this migratory trope which functions as a veritable structural gestalt, narrative/discursive strategy and thematic thrust. Salih’s creative appropriation of the trope of migration is informed essentially by the elaborate construction of the world into geo-spatial, political, ideological, linguistic and econocultural zones by the empire-building project of imperial Europe. (Tsaaior 224)

The hybrid strategy is present at multiple levels. According to Maurizio Calbi, it is a state of being, that “is not merely paralyzing” but also empowering (Calbi 354). Nouha Homad (2001), in contrast to many who use Bhabha’s hybridity, insists on exploring impurity, which for Bhabha is a strategy that “unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (Bhabha 1994 112). Leonie Windt’s (2014) shows that the hybrid characters fail “to (re)connect to what they imagine are their authentic cultural identities in Sudan” (Windt 78) and are forced to learn through a deep introspection “that the ‘season of migration to the North’ cannot be halted” (Windt 83), that their existence is about a certain perpetuity of migration.

G. A. R. Hamilton (2005) too uses Bhabha’s models of ambivalence “to map the complex ontological positions of Mustapha Sa’eed,” who dwells “in the ambivalent space between the distinction between subject and object” and thus “exposes the inability of colonial discourse to ‘fix’ his ontological position” (Hamilton 59). Since “hybridity is a call for the perpetual erosion of the mythic and monolithic construction of identity” (Hamilton 58), Sa’eed’s revenge does not merely introduce “subversive elements into British colonial discourse,” but also creates “variation by drawing out those elements that are regarded as foreign to the standardized discursive constitution of British imperialism” (Hamilton 63). In a way, Sa’eed’s presence calls to question the hackneyed phrases of the coloniser (structures, ideologies, systems, culture, etc.). Representing himself “as uncivilised yet obedient, deeply sexual yet innocent, simple-minded yet an accomplished liar for his own ends, enables Sa’eed to recognise the ambivalent nature of colonial discourse. Indeed, it is such ambivalence that allows Sa’eed to confidently proclaim ‘I am a lie’” (Hamilton 56). I will return to this proclamation later, but for now I want to add that that Sa’eed seems to evoke the famous liar’s paradox only in an extended version.

Mohammad Ahmad Al-Leithy (2021) evokes stereotyping as a part of the colonial project, and here we can find a migration of tropes between the West and the East. Notions such as darkness, savagery, eros, animalism, corruption, laziness etc. as opposed to the symbolic value of whiteness, light, civilisation, humanism, morality, work ethic, etc. are imported and symbolically charged concepts.
Sa’eed is not merely pointing out the logical contradiction but refers to the ontological paradox of the postcolonial hybrid. To resolve the contradiction that he has become, and that the narrator fears he too is becoming, there is a need for authority to proclaim an identity and to control the episteme, but there is no such authority in principle just as, I hope to show, there is no way of controlling language.

Starting with Salih’s own notion that his novel stages the conflict between East and West, Apala Das corrects Patricia Geesey’s 1997 reading and argues that the novel does not “simply portray hybridity as mixed cultural identity … but also ‘a process of self-reflection and subjective transformation … which can lead to a realization of personal agency’” (Das 19). For Das, hybridity is “an endlessly fertile subjective space … a promising theoretical and political stance in that it lays claim neither to a discernible origin nor to hopes for transcendence” (Das 21, emphasis mine). Indeed, the impossibility of transcending “hybrid condition does not result in absolute failure but signals an emergence” (Das 23). In other words, “the narrator’s recuperation of agency involves an awareness of his own inner sensuous resources, and of the possibility that these very resources can be both stimulating and provocative, and sources of redemptive agency” (Das 27). In this manner, Season introduces “human agency robust enough to qualify as the centre of the human subject and as the driving force for human volition” (Das 28). This type of hybridity which does not chase its proverbial tail (of origins) is in my reading effectively embedded in Salih’s linguistic migrations. Sa’eed himself is language and story (or stories), and as such it is his character to be both firm and volatile, both clear and ambiguous. In other words, there is no paradox if one assumes that migration is original/originary ground.

Analysis

My analysis of the novel will tackle two related issues, both of which emphasize the abovementioned hybrid features in the novel in relation to two specific cultural heritages: the English and Arabic languages and literatures. I will split this section into two parts: intertextual considerations and linguistic migrations. The focus on intertextuality, which is otherwise much covered by Salih criticism, serves to a larger extent to help me situate my reading in the field and suggest a few interventions. I will discuss the way Salih’s employment of Shakespeare, Conrad, and Arabic poetry, helps him move away from the binaries such as East-West, coloniser-colonised, local-global, authentic-inauthentic, original-derivative, etc. Subsequently, linguistic migrations will prove to a greater extent the thesis that the migratory trope determines the character of the novel at the level of language. I will show that the text, despite first being
published in Arabic and then, only a few years later, in English, is always already translated. By this I mean that we cannot simply take Arabic as the original SL (source language) and English as the derivative TL (target language). Rather, both these languages are co-originary. The Arabic text implies the English, and the English implies the Arabic in a manner that goes against the regular (hackneyed) notions of linearity in translation. To make it easier to understand, one could imagine that a struggle of two languages took place in the author’s mind, and although the text was written down in Arabic, it captured this struggle and English remains within it.

**Intertextuality**

It is hardly a surprise that a work stemming from postcolonial historical conditions engages with the literary Canon of the coloniser. This is true even for the colonisation of the world by English as global lingua franca. Thus, it is even less of a surprise that a novel in Arabic such as Season, now world-literary classic, gravitates to Shakespeare and Conrad. Their texts would be quite familiar to both native English readers (target audience number one-two) and the Sudanese readers (target audience number one-two). Chinua Achebe’s and Edward Said’s famous quarrel about Conrad also created a third kind of audience for this kind of intertextual work: postcolonial critics. In Salih, Shakespeare is introduced quite explicitly by the mention of Othello, just as the poet Abu Nuwas, while Conrad’s Heart of Darkness is more implied in the subconscious of the text.

John J. McDonald’s (2004) characterises Season as a Bildungsroman that migrates between Joseph Conrad and Sufism (McDonald 23) and Salih’s style “as notably Western” because the 1960’s was a period when many postcolonial subjects had gone to the former colonisers’ countries to study and consequently adopt ‘new ideas and writing techniques’” (McDonald 21). The novel is thus “organized by the framed narrative, a traditional method of storytelling employed in oral cultures [popularised by the Arabian Nights],” that is used in Heart of Darkness but also “in much of Faulkner, and in Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye.” Thus, “a non-linear time frame … a feature prominent in literary Modernism” (McDonald 22) is suitable for the narrator’s “double consciousness” that is manifested in “his obsession with

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8 McDonald also adds “the English epistolary novel” such as Pamela and Clarissa (McDonald 22-3), while Homad adds Brontë’s Wuthering Heights, Stendhal’s Le Rouge et le noir, and Camus’s L’Etranger (Homad 57), and Lowry evokes Mann’s Doctor Faustus.
Mustafa Sa’eed,” then “in his Doctorate in English poetry,” and “in his thoughts and actions contrary to his tribal upbringing and the village customs” (McDonald 29).

There are many ways in which a text can deliberately employ other texts as intertext, the major being form and content. For instance, the content in *Season* can be a direct or reworked content of the other texts: Sa’eed being like-Othello but also like-Kurtz which makes the narrator like-Marlow. When it comes to form, we can look at plot-structures, conflicts and resolutions, characterisation and temporality, themes and tropes, but also stylistic features, for instance, those of high-modernism and classical Arabic poetic rhythms. As Das argues, already from the start one can recognise “[t]he *in medias res* opening” as “just one instance of the novel’s formal hybridity” (Das 19). The hybridity at stake here, as shown in the previous section, is one that goes deep and entangles the subjects in ways that cannot be disentangled in principle. In other words, the use of different literary heritages is not simple referencing like in postmodern fiction. Rather everything grows as one being and one cannot say if for instance Salih first borrowed a certain plot or trope and then reworked it, or if it came to be called-for quite naturally at a later stage. In relation to the very form of the work, Atef Laouyene uses Barbara Harlow to emphasise that *Season* is “a novel, a form imported by the Arabs from the West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,” as well as the traditional Arabic form of “opposition, contradiction, but here a formula whereby one person will write a poem, and another will retaliate by writing along the same lines, but reversing the meaning” (Laouyene 221).

Jay Rajiva (2016) has shown that the existing critical discourse tends “to subordinate postcolonial experience to epistemologies in which literary devices work largely to support the broader theory” (Rajiva 691). Indeed, “[o]nly Michael Velez’s characterization of the novel as ‘a string of theatrical monologues’ (2010, 190) calls into question the feasibility of reading the novel in metaphoric and symbolic terms” (Rajiva 690). Although my reading is not focused on metaphoric readings of the content, it is worth pointing out that the direction Rajiva takes in characterising the text resonates with that which I aim to show through attention to linguistic

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9 In contrast, Shauna Walker (2020) proposes that *Season* “is a response to Sudanese postcolonial modernity through the mode of Gothic modernism,” which “is symptomatic of the contradictions fundamental to modernity as the ‘regressive’ past continues to haunt the ‘progressive’ present” (Walker 285). The novel “exhibits a number of formal qualities that align it with the Gothic as well as with literary modernism. For example … conventions such as doubling, stories within stories, multiple narrators, uncovered manuscripts, dream-like states, the unspeakable and apparitions from the past” (Walker 289). A reference to modernist stream of consciousness may be found here: “I mention them to you because they spring to mind, because certain incidents recall certain other ones” (Salih 22).

10 In response to Hassan, Al-Halool, Gibson, and Velez, Rajiva argues that *Season* “challenges any attempt to “explain” the colonial condition that relies on a single, closed system of interpretation and meaning” (Rajiva 691).
migration. For Rajiva, Salih’s text “forsakes causality for synergies of scale: the swift interaction of elements in a time and place at which the threshold effect – the decision to pursue a colonial education – occurs without warning” (Rajiva 692, emphasis mine). Furthermore, it allows “the theatricality of doubling and metaphor to overdetermine Mustafa’s narrative” to challenge “both the substitution of symbol for material experience and the rational logic of causation” and suggest “an emergent form of postcolonial experience – an unpredictable interaction of parts that redefines the whole” (Rajiva 689, emphasis mine). It “illustrates both the agony of the postcolonial subject, searching for ‘a dialectics of deliverance’” and “uses downward causation to explain the postcolonial condition: non-gradualist and transformative, a challenge to colonial teleology and scientific positivism” (Rajiva 693, emphasis mine). We can see this when Sa’eed “experienced a violent desire for a cigarette. It wasn’t merely a desire; it was a hunger or thirst” (Salih, 139), that is, where this “urge … appears with no apparent cause” (Rajiva 696). This emphasis on the disturbance in the causality, that is, what came first and has the authority of the origin/source, plays a big part in establishing what I call the migratory core of the novel and which I will trace at the level of language. This is why I want to rid my reading of the colonial teleology and argue that both Arabic and English are co-originary languages of the novel. The causation does not have to be established, not only because it is impossible to do so with any firmness, but because the novel describes a state of migratory being where no such endeavour is desirable. To establish a pure linear chain of causation goes against its core principles and it is to give in, ultimately, to the Western mechanical time of modernity that the novel seems desperate to dismantle. Removing the temporal aspect of causation, thus establishing a loop, is primary. Indeed, as Samatar argues, it is “a novel of loops and digressions, of replacements and displacements, characterized by uncanny repetitions” (Samatar 19).

To give an example related to content, Sa’eed describes his home to fifteen-years-older Isabella Seymour as being “deserts, golden sands and jungles where non-existent animals call out to one another” (Salih 38) and himself as “a naked, primitive creature, a spear in one hand and arrows in the other, hunting elephants and lions in the jungles” (Salih 38). None of these symbols work easily outside the Western imaginary. What does it mean then that it is written in Arabic or to say that it is originally in Arabic when such a discourse shows quite clearly that the Arabic text is, in this sequence, an attempt to translate the English context. As Laouyene puts it, “Sa’eed’s self-portrayal suggests an autoethnographic masquerade in which an exotic native is performing his native dance to the ‘hankering’ eyes of a metropolitan audience” (Laouyene 222). This is truly to read the novel as if it was written in English, or at least always
expected to be translated. Ultimately, all scenes, regardless of our analytic determination as I did above, require double (hybrid) consciousness, because one needs to be in the shoes of the ambivalent character to fully understand how this complex discourse works. In other words, just like certain types of jokes can be understood by different audiences, these kinds of jokes require that one is like several different audiences at the same time.

Sandalwood and incense; the ostrich feathers and ivory and ebony figurines; the paintings and drawings of forests of palm trees along the shores of the Nile, boats with sails like doves’ wings, suns setting over the mountains of the Red Sea, camel caravans wending their way along sand dunes on the borders of the Yemen, baobab trees in Kordofan, naked girls from the tribes of the Zandi, the Nuer and the Shuluk, fields of banana and coffee on the Equator, old temples in the district of Nubia; Arabic books with decorated covers written in ornate Kufic script; Persian carpets, pink curtains, large mirrors on the walls, and coloured lights in the corners. (Salih 146)

The movement of symbols in this way is what I consider to be the core migration of the text itself. Regardless of the specific content, it is the language itself, filtered through well-established forms of narrative and symbolic registers, that is very much where migrant agency is negotiated. It is no chance that Sa’eed uses the ultimately recognisable figure of Othello to describe himself. Patricia Geesey, exploring the connection to Othello, engages with Ali Abdallah Abbas who has argued that “to view Sa’eed’s sexual conquests as a colonized person’s vendetta is to fall into the trap of cultural stereotyping that is at once Sa’eed’s weapon of seduction against the women and ultimately his own downfall” (Geesey 129). In addition, Adega takes Wail S. Hassan’s position that Sa’eed performs “a metaphor for colonial violence and a parody of European stereotypes of Africa and the Orient” (Adega 311) and sees the text as asking for the Sudanese to reclaim “their self-dignity, traditions, cultural identities, and languages” (251). All this is fine, but one thing is clear, the critics struggle with which parts of the narrator’s and Sa’eed’s discourse to take at face value and which as lies.

For instance, when Sa’eed states in the court “I am the desert of thirst. I am no Othello. I am a lie” (Salih 33) no critic really explains it, practically as if the meaning is obvious. Did Sa’eed try to be Othello? What specific interpretation of Othello did he have? Was Othello a victim or a perpetrator? Or both? Or neither? In which ways does he think the English discourse perceives Othello (what has he learnt in school)? Does he mean he did not manage to live up to Othello’s character, as if Othello was the truth. Yet later he says, “I am no Othello. Othello
was a lie” (Salih 95). There is a great sense of irony in an assumption that he is (like) or is not (like) Othello. Othello is the Other that is supposed to be domesticated, a symbol that is digested and therefore, if emulating this symbol, Se’eed can become digestible to the English court and the English audiences of the story. It is somewhat like introducing Abu Nuwas to his British audience. He tells them that Abu Nuwas is superior to Omar Khayyam (Salih 143), because he needs a recourse to oriental poetry they would be familiar with, and in some way, perhaps tells them he was supposed to be superior to Othello. The point of such explicit intertext is that the Other cannot enter the discourse as totally Other, but must have some way of being understood, which is what certain symbols and recognisable references help with. But at the same time, by virtue of using pre-digested symbols, what I will later discuss as hackneyed phrases, render the Other as inauthentic, as mere form without substantial content, in other words, a lie. Indeed, as Calbi has it, “Othello’s literary and historical afterlife in the postcolony is not an exterior addition one can simply erase in order to return to the Shakespearean ‘original’” (Calbi 342). As a symbol he functions exactly because he lacks stable essence or a homogenous identity (Calbi 343). For this reason, to say one is not Othello is to double the lie. To claim that there is an essence to be copied but that one failed to do it is an irony lost on Sa’eed’s audiences.

Alternatively, by saying he is not Othello, Sa’eed could mean that he did not manage to live up to this migratory, unstable character of Othello: “to be like Othello is— emphatically— not to be Othello. To play the role of the ‘exotic other’ is not to be it” (Calbi 346). Or “what Mustafa objects to is his being cast in a ‘sentimentalised’ version of the Shakespearean drama, in which, like Othello, he can merely play the role of the victim of a conflict between two worlds, a role that is just as passive as that of the white European woman who is subjected to the impersonal force of desire” (Calbi 346). Furthermore, “Othello is and is not an identity. He is almost of Europe but not quite, an articulation of ‘black skin / white mask’ construed around an ambivalence, simultaneously comforting and threatening, both resemblance and menace. As argued earlier, one cannot quite ‘speak’ of Othello as he is. Faced with the aporia Othello is, Mustafa cannot but inhabit and reenact Othello’s story, making it strangely ‘unfamiliar’” (Calbi 348).

At the level of the narrative, one could argue that Season is not simply an appropriation of Othello, if appropriation means usurpation for one’s own purpose, nor can it “be defined as

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11 The Othello connection is clearest in the scene where Sa’eed finds another man’s handkerchief (Salih 162), but Morris is no Desdemona. They are both very much the opposites of the Shakespearean couple, especially in the act of murder.
a ‘writing back,’ if ‘writing back’ means an economic and calculated practice of redressing wrongs perpetrated by the colonizer, or a ‘counter-discourse’ that ‘subtly subvert[s] the values and political assumptions of the originals” (Calbi 343). Salih’s text does not “adequately render justice to either Othello or his postcolonial heirs. Instead, it forces us to rethink some of the terms in which the issue of appropriation is often couched in Shakespearean and postcolonial studies” (Calbi 343). It “shows how the ghost of Othello haunts without properly residing. It measures the extent to which the appropriated Shakespearean text appropriates its appropriators/appropriations” (Calbi 343). The Arabness of the Arabic text is drenched in Shakespearean drama: “Salih’s enactment of the West’s cult of the eroticized Moor generates a post-exotic narrative dystopia that disrupts the Orientalist economy of desire and derision, Self and Other, colonizer and colonized” (Laouyene 217). I agree with Laouyene that “the lawyer’s speech perpetuates the myth of the Afro-Arab who is destined to brave the odds because he is not sophisticated enough to be able to ‘catch up’ or ‘make it,’ as it were, in an ostensibly advanced cosmopolitan culture” (Laouyene 226). In other words, Sa’eed is trying to show agency, but the English court presents him with yet another fixed form within which his statements bear no significance. If the lawyer wanted to depict him as vile, they would do so with reference to his race, and to save him, they deprive him of his agency (premeditation) and infantilise him.

The sheer excess of possible interpretations is for me a way of showing the instability of the signs, or rather the very fact that there is a constant migration at the core of it all. Sa’eed is thus not derivative of Othello. The Shakespearean intertext precedes Salih’s in temporal terms but does not exercise the authority of “the original.”

As for Conrad, Byron Caminero-Santangelo (1999) finds that “the Conradian echoes,” are “too deliberate on the part of the highly literate author to be missed” (Caminero-Santangelo 8). Though I do not contest the deliberation, in my view Salih is using Conrad at a deeper subconscious level. The dialogue between the texts, the way they converge and repel is too organic, rather than and simply a matter of skill and intellect. As R. S. Krishnan (1996) argued the novel does not only show “resist, reinterpret, and revise from the perspective of the colonized Other, the epistemology and language of discourse signified in Conrad’s novel” (Krishnan 7), it produces what Fredrick Jameson called “the ‘paradox’ of the ‘subtext,’” which means that “the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction” (Krishnan 81). I read this in part to support my thesis that it is impossible to state, with absolute authority, the originality and therefore supremacy of the Arabic over English text, or vice versa. This is what
creates a sense of continuous migration (even though the readers can only read one version at a time).

Already Mohammed Shaheen showed that the affinities between Salih and Conrad intensify “the total trust which the characters put in narrator” (Shaheen 158). Deep intimacy between the novels poses the question of translation in a different way. Conrad is not just emulated and transformed in the Arabic text in terms of form and content but also Conrad’s English is at the core of the Arabic poetics in Salih’s text. May Maalouf’s (2000), discussing the narrator’s “poetic effusions,” which stand “in complete ironic contrast to the referential language of the villagers” (Maalouf 161), analyses two scenes from the respective novels that seem to reflect each other. Shaheen finds that both employ “a sentimental and pampered diction” (Maalouf 164). The very fact he makes this interpretation based on the English translation entails that Maalouf is not thinking of the text as a translation. There is no note on whether Salih’s text sounds typically sentimental and pampered in Arabic. In my view, Maalouf is right to use the translation as if it were the original. The fact that this coincides with the intertextual reading with Conrad shows quite well that the translator is here engaging with a complex migration of meaning between two cosmopolitan languages. In other words, migration (as translation) is embedded in the core of the text, hybridized without any possibility at retrieving the original in principle. This is an excellent example of Bhabha’s definition of hybridity that works at a deeper level of discourse. The text is always already a translation.

Similarly, in terms of character, as many have noted, there is a sliding between the narrator and Sa’eed. For instance, when the narrator is in Sa’eed’s private room he becomes “aware of the irony of the situation,” for he finds himself beginning “from where Mustafa Sa’eed had left off” (Salih 134), and once he is in the room, he mistakes his reflection in the mirror for that of Mustafa (Salih 135). If we argue that the translation is like trying to hold a mirror up to the original text, reflecting it perfectly in another medium, these scenes suggest that it is hard to establish what exactly is the original and what a reflection. Thus, “Season writes back” by “draw[ing] its formal inspirations from Europe as much as it seeks to distort and undermine them” and it creates “an unstable synthesis of European and Arabic forms and traditions (Makdisi 81). Indeed, “Salih adopts Conrad’s narrative structure and characterization only to deconstruct them and show that Marlow/narrator’s (or the Western) epistemological solipsism is an ineffectual approach for the understanding of the self and of the Other” (Maalouf 167). Migration is not unstable, it’s originary. Structure is not primary, movement is.
Hackneyed phrases

Following Samatar, for whom “[e]very intertext is interference” (Samatar 26), I now want to look at the clearest and most significant moment of intertextual engagement, both in terms of the plot and character, in fact, Sa’eed’s recital of Ford Madox Ford’s modernist poem “Antwerp” (first published as “In October 1914”). It is interesting to note how little scholarly attention it drew (in comparison to Shakespeare and Conrad). I will first outline Samatar’s argument and then discuss it as a moment that, linguistically, shows the migratory core of the novel. The scene takes place in the village when the inebriated Sa’eed suddenly recites Ford’s poem in English, which completely shakes the narrator, derailing him, or rather putting him on a path of self-insight:

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

For Samatar, this is significant not because “[t]he narrator is pulled out of his own place and time, out of his comfortable village home, toward England, Flanders, invasions, refugees, world wars, empires, the world” (Samatar 20), but how this happens. The recitation and the use of poetry as such draws on the theory of “nazm (construction/composition)” (Samatar 23) and Salih’s own poetic prose with plenty of “metonymy … and ‘entanglement of past, present, and future’” (Samatar 23). The recital of the poem is a metonym of the omnipresence of the colonial literary heritage and language that the characters can never get rid of even if they hide in remotest villages. This heritage is in them, forever, and in Sa’eed’s case, even in material form as a library of English books. Samatar shows how the evocations of places such as Victoria and Charing Cross stations “exert a similar uncanny force on the narrative,” disrupting “the linear progression of time” (Samatar 27). Indeed, Season “is a patterned story that critiques patterns of storytelling. Full of breaks, blocks, and vortices, this narrative cannot flow easily, and it is precisely in the interruptions that a new perspective emerges, one that observes context, acknowledges intertext, and identifies hackneyed phrases. Mustafa’s repetitive language and brazen appropriation of colonialist stereotypes draw attention to the proliferation of deadly discourse, the spread of a fatal disease” (Samatar 32-3). What Samatar’s discourse leads to is the migratory core that governs the flow/flux of the novel. And this migratory core is not
unidirectional. One can sometimes discern a direction, but it is seasonal, NOT linear. Before I discuss the poem, I’ll address two examples from Samatar to prove my case.

Firstly, when referring to the sex Sa’eed has with Ann among “large mirrors, so that when I slept with a woman it was as if I slept with a whole harem simultaneously” (Salih 27), Samatar, argues that “[t]he Arabic text underscores this scene of doubling with a pun on ‘Ann’ and ān (moment or time): Mustafa’s mirrors allow him to sleep with a whole harem ‘at one time,’ or ‘in one Ann’ (fi ān wāhid),” which shows his yearning to experience “a moment of simultaneity when the fragmented self, reflected in mirrors, becomes one” (Samatar 30). If we accept this interpretation, and not think of this as an amazing coincidence, the beautiful poetic merge of Ann and ān is even more intimate because it is hybridisation across two languages that is best felt and understood by someone who constantly moves between the two languages. It may not translate well back into English, but still, it shows that the migratory movement is primary (a pun that needs two cosmopolitan languages to function). 12

In the second example I take issue with Samatar interpretation of Sa’eed’s words “My storehouse of hackneyed phrases is inexhaustible” (Salih 30, repeated on 34). Samatar complains that “hackneyed phrases” is Johnson-Davies’s unfortunate “rendering of the Arabic amthāl, a word that does not have the negative connotations of the English ‘hackneyed’ (‘lacking in freshness or originality,’ …)” (Samatar 29). Indeed, “Lisān al-’Arab defines amthāl as examples, proverbs, models, or precepts to be followed” so instead of “triteness and tediousness in ‘hackneyed phrases,’ the word amthāl has a positive meaning, suggesting an ideal model or an example used to support an argument.” Furthermore, in “Sa’eed’s case, the amthāl collected in his ‘storehouse’ (dhākirah) concern the proverbial simplicity and sexual prowess of the ‘Arab-African’” and it suggests “more powerfully than ‘hackneyed phrases,’ the presence of an established tradition upon which Mustafa Sa’eed draws for his own purposes. … To accomplish his seductions, he makes himself a stereotypical ‘Arab-African,’ a copy of an image copied through time, the double of a repetition” (Samatar 29-30). Samatar has a point, no doubt, but here the discourse moves away from the previous discussions and into the territory of fidelity in translation, the supremacy of the original over the translation, the loss if translation etc.

In my view, Samatar disregards from several facts. First of all, Salih’s is an artistic expression and the way words are used depends on the context and not the absolute authority

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12 The reason it could be a coincidence is due to the fact أن an is more common in literary contexts than وقت. Then then is followed by a masculine attribute واحد. An intention to play on both meanings would make Salih avoid using an attribute and the sentence would still be correct.
of the dictionary. Second, Sa’eed is using these “hackneyed phrases” in England and only later reflecting on it. It is a deliberate choice of form. Instead, I would turn the question around and ask if amthāl is the proper translation of “hackneyed phrases.” I am twisting things around, assuming the amthāl is Sa’eed’s attempt to render in Arabic something he first conceived of in English. In this case, the loss of meaning, moving from negative to positive, means we would give the original force to the English discourse. Except for the poem which he recites in English, we can, and perhaps must assume Sa’eed is always translating his English experience to the narrator into Arabic while it would have been more natural if he related it in English (as both are educated in it). We cannot assume that amthāl is the original that is then ruined in translation, but rather that the text itself is always already a complex set of translations. In other words, the scenes, especially if we take both versions into account simultaneously, evoke migration (between languages, cultures, and discourses) that is at the core of it all, and not a derivative of post-fact cross-cultural interpretation processes.

Taken in this way, the English translation could be seen as an attempt to retrieve that lost/non-exiting original. It is then looking deeper into the context of the scene and the choice of “hackneyed” emphasises an interpretation of Sa’eed’s reference to proverbs as being empty of the richness Samatar refers to. It bears little import if Sa’eed is speaking to others or brooding on his condition for himself, the use of the proverbs is not necessarily for the sake of deeper cultural wisdom but also mere exoticism. This is part and parcel of the ambivalent character of the postcolonial subject, the inability to access full authority to put signifiers at rest, like in Samatar’s analysis of Ann and ān above. The proverbs can thus be like Schrödinger’s cat, both meaningful and empty.

I do find it interesting that the English phrase imposes some interpretative authority, while the Arabic text possibly leaves it more ambiguous, which is proper to the situation in which Sa’eed is engaging in hybrid mockery. In addition, it is even possible to read the character of Sa’eed as amthāl and a hackneyed phrase, as someone always oscillating/migrating being hackneyed (inauthentic, no agency) and authentic (with agency). Samatar notices this when referring to his words “For every occasion I possess the appropriate garb” (Salih 30).

Now let us explore the use of the poem13 to further strengthen this point about the migratory core: “I heard him reciting English poetry in a clear voice and with an impeccable accent … ‘What an extraordinary thing!’ I said, deliberately speaking English. [فقلت له بالانجليزي، عمداً شيء مدهش]” (Salih 14-15). After the exchange of shocks, one man shocking the other, it is

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13 I have not been able to ascertain if the translation of the poem is Salih’s own or he used an already existing translation.
not clear how long they continue to speak in English or if the rest is in Arabic. The narrator repeats the phrase in English but in the rest of the passage the readers have no guidance. They are free to imagine them conversing in either Arabic, English, or even a mix of both, almost like in a battle of languages. This allows for multiple versions of the dramatization of the scene in the reader’s mind. If we imagine it was a film it would be very hard for the director to choose the distribution of languages, and this happens many times in the novel, both in Sudan and in England. Such instances show that both Arabic and English languages are co-originary.

No doubt, Sa’eed’s speaking in English becomes an uncanny moment “that symbolically foreshadows the feeling of alienation that will haunt the narrator until the end” (Al-Halool 34). Al-Halool (2008) is correct to argue that Freud’s famous analysis of Das Unheimliche works well within the novel, because it thematically deals with home/homeliness (heimlich) and that which is strange or un-homely (unheimlich). To experience the uncanny is thus to experience a certain strangeness in the very safe familiarity of home. Sa’eed, a stranger to the narrator, suddenly appears familiar, close, intimate, through the medium of a foreign language. In other words, he is not scared simply by strangeness of/at home, but the fact that the supposedly strange was now evoking something deeply familiar, that is, homely.¹⁴ The poetic verse is indeed like an immigrant, misplaced in the new environment, and yet also at home (as a remnant of colonial legacies). This migration between being homely and unhomely (uncanny) is what makes the narrator feel as if “the ground suddenly split open and revealed an afreet standing before [him], his eyes shooting out flames” (Salih 19).¹⁵

In my view it is important that, just as Sa’eed in England evoked various works of recognisable literature, characters, plots, symbols, etc, what is evoked here is language and literature as such. Sa’eed is drunk and quotes the poem instinctively. This shows affection, love, and intimacy with the foreign language and art. The fact that it touches the narrator so deeply

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¹⁴ Ghanem correctly identifies poetry as displaying “the confusion of the categories of ‘host’ and ‘guest’ through the two returned migrants, Sa’eed and the narrator” (Ghanem 160) and that Sa’eed “employs the hospitality practice of poetry recitation to further alienate the narrator” (Ghanem 172).

¹⁵ The “afreet” image comes back two times (14, 74). The afreet is indeed a local legend, but in this case, we have a scene perfect for a mixed audience. The Westernised narrator is expecting the exotic and he gets the exotic. Later, we have the same sort of scene in Sa’eed’s all-too-Western library where the narrator hallucinates, a strange but quite a natural reaction of the hybrid character: “the whole floor of the room was covered with Persian rugs. … A fireplace – imagine it! A real English fireplace with all the bits and pieces” (Salih 136). Contrast this to “Your tongue’s as crimson as a tropic sunset … How marvellous your black colour is! … the colour of magic and mystery and obscenities” (Salih 139) and “‘I want to have the smell of you in full — the smell of rotting 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’” (Salih 142). For Parry, “the extravagance of the rhetoric signifies the febrile condition of an imperial imaginary inflamed by fantasies of sensual colonial places and licentious native peoples, and to designate the novel as melodrama is not a pejorative judgement but rather an attempt to suggest that Salih’s representation of the confluence of desire, violence and death in the colonial encounter, cannot be contained in conventional language” (Parry 82).
makes him realise how much of an Englishman he really is and that his semi-nationalist project and the romanticisation of the rural life (typical of postcolonial nationalism) is a lie. I would not go as far as to claim, like Al-Halool and several other critics, that the narrator and Sa’eed are one and the same. The uncanny is not based in sameness but familiarity. To reiterate, there are two aspects that cause the feeling of the uncanny, the primary is the English language itself, and the secondary is the poem itself (content, form, etc.). The shock is also due to the fact that Sa’eed was earlier mocking the narrator’s education England: ‘We have no need of poetry here. It would have been better if you’d studied agriculture, engineering or medicine’ (Salih 9). By stressing the “we” he deems the narrator the foreigner and himself an insider. The complexity that produces the uncanny is stunning. We have a moment where the colonial language and art, which was once used as part and parcel of colonisation, appears in a supposedly decolonised space as a matter of course. The English language appears scary precisely because it feels homely. It feels closer to the narrator than his mother tongue Arabic. This shows us that the ambiguity as to which languages are spoken at what point, in terms of the very content, support my claim that there is a constant migration between Arabic and English.

The narrator’s and Sa’eed’s relationship to English as the colonial language is quite similar and quite typical of the postcolonial hybrid position:

But I had lived with them superficially, neither loving nor hating them. I used to treasure within me the image of this little village, seeing it wherever I went with the eye of my imagination. … Over there is like here, neither better nor worse. But I am from here, just as the date palm standing in the courtyard of our house has grown in our house and not in anyone else’s. The fact that they came to our land, I know not why, does that mean that we should poison our present and our future? Sooner or later they will leave our country …. The railways, ships, hospitals, factories and schools will be ours and we’ll speak their language without either a sense of guilt or a sense of gratitude [و ستحدث لغعتهم دون إحساس بالذنب ولا إحساس بال جميل]. Once again we shall be as we were—ordinary people—and if we are lies we shall be lies of our own making.” (Salih 49–50)

There is an oscillation between love and hate, desire for and revenge against, just like in Sa’eed’s relationship with the English women. He thinks he is performing some form of vengeance but as his final revelation about Jean Morris shows, it is her character, her violence, her desire, that completely consumes him (she destroys everything that connects him to the
South/East). Sa’eed was brilliant at English among his Sudanese peers, but once in the homeland of English:

“My ears had become used to their voices, my eyes grown accustomed to their voices [تعودت أذناي أصواتهم، وألفت عيناي أشكالها].” (Salih 1)

“I discovered other mysteries, amongst which was the English language. My brain continued on, biting and cutting like the teeth of a plough [كأسنان محراث].” (Salih 22)

“‘How are you, Mr Sa’eed?’ ‘Very well thank you, Mr Robinson’ [كيف أنت مستر سعيد؟ أنا بخير يا مستر روبنسون].” (Salih 25)

“The language, though, which I now heard for the first time is not like the language I had learnt at school. These are living voices and have another ring. My mind was like a keen knife. But the language is not my language; I had learnt to be eloquent in it through perseverance.” (Salih 28-29)

Discussing intertextuality, Joseph E. Lowry (2011) finds that the diction used by Sa’eed at times becomes, almost as in an act of ventriloquism, that of the narrator. While this works in favour of the readings which tend to equate the narrator and Sa’eed, the more logical conclusion would be that the narrator, as the one reporting Sa’eed’s speech, is filtering it through his own style, rather than quoting him accurately. In a typical deconstructive fashion, and quite in keeping with modernist aesthetics, the text produces the effect of further distance or unreachability (incomprehensibility) of the mysterious character.

In the sheer mass of scholarship on the novel, Rula Jurdi’s (2018) exploration of Arabic poetics through the canonical English translation is quite unique and a necessary intervention. Although the study mainly recounts a particular pedagogy in teaching Salih’s novel, it contains numerous examples which will help me articulate my main claim about the migratory core of the novel. Aiming to show her students that translation is “deeply shaped by politics, history, and current events,” Jurdi tries to create “an experience that would take them to uncomfortable

16 When the narrator meets a man who went to school with Sa’eed, the man tells him of Sa’eed’s exceptional skill: “He was the spoilt child of the English and we all envied him …. We used to articulate English words as though they were Arabic” while “the black Englishman” was brilliant and this caused in them “annoyance and admiration” (Salih 52).
and ambiguous spaces” (Jurdi 79). Working with two-language versions of the same content produces in them that sense we find in Salih’s characters. For this reason, it is something of a shortcoming in Jurdi’s article that she does not show how this very migratory character may be part and parcel of both the Arabic and the English versions. For Jurdi, the novel was located, from the very beginning “in a mixed Arab-Western intellectual and political context. It represented a type of literature that was sanctioned by both British imperial officials and a diverse group of orientalist scholars consulted by them,” and “[i]t’s success in the West enhanced its authority for Arabs” (Jurdi 84). Indeed, it is a matter of course that Johnson-Davies utilises the fact that Salih’s novel “referenced European colonial literature” (84). At the same, his knowledge of Arabic traditions may be a shortcoming that is glaring in the English text.

I will now look at some specific examples Jurdi gives to push for my reading. To begin with, I want to sum up a part of Jurdi’s analysis which points out that the passage about Ann Hammond has explicit reference to the poetry of Abu Nuwas (unlike the big names of Western authors typically seen as dominating this narrative). By illustrating the implied complex sexuality of Abu Nuwas, as if he were a Sufi poet, and “his themes of love and wine drinking” (Jurdi 81) she demonstrated “Salih’s treatment of love, sacrifice, and death in the context of the poetics of the Arab literary tradition” (Jurdi 82). So “the complexity of Salih’s style of representation,” was shown for instance through “Al-Hallaj’s sexual references to death as a virginal, ecstatic experience, and the notion that death is the door to the truth became extremely significant in the murder scene. Salih depicts Sa’eed’s killing Jean Morris while ravishing her sexually” (Jurdi 82). In other words, without the subtext, one can easily miss the “metaphorical and allegorical meaning in the scene of Jean Morris’s celebration of her own death in the moment of fulfilled desire” in terms of “[a]nnihilation (فنا اللعاب), the extinguishing of the individual self for the beloved … as a path toward universal truth and universal beauty” (Jurdi 82). This “vision may seem politically defeatist or fatalistic, but in a Sufi framework it can imply a radical transformation, a rebirth. … Jean Morris and Sa’eed, as they experience this kind of Sufi death, realize that the contradictions pushing them apart are merely a veneer behind which is hidden the universal truth of love” (Jurdi 82). All things being equal, this reading of the Sufi influences in not different from a reading that shows Conradian or Shakespearian intertext. It is no way the fault of a translator nor is it a given that all Arabic readers will automatically understand the complex dialogues between different traditions, just as I have shown that most critics do not properly engage with the Othello reference. Besides, despite the
Sufi context, this passage could be in dialogue with Freudian influences, which, for someone educated in England are far from negligible.\textsuperscript{17}

Of course, every text, whether or not one can read it in the original language, contains content which has specific cultural connotations. Same words can have different local connotation. So, for instance, things like “afreet” (a jinn) will be recognizable to the English audiences vis-à-vis the exotic stories of the East, and maybe even swearing on divorce (Salih 63, 76, 78), but even such a reader will not have access to its wider connotations. What is more, it is bound to have different meanings locally. Salih’s book contains cultural connotations which can thus be recognizable across the East/West divide or understood only within certain target cultures. There are way too many elements pertaining to Sa’eed’s and the narrator’s stays in England that will be obscure to the Arabic readers even though the book is “originally” in Arabic. In the same way details that for instance pertain to Islam and in some cases even more to the Sudanese culture will not be fully understood for their significance by Western readers. A couple of examples would be the discourse on female circumcision and the powerplay between the eros of the East and the West evoked by Bin Majzoub (80), which is also about the conflict between religion and local custom.\textsuperscript{18}

Furthermore, this is also done in the passage where Wad Reyyes tells the narrator “‘Women and children are the adornment of life on this earth,’ God said in His noble Book,” to which he answers, “the Koran did not say ‘Women and children’ but ‘Wealth and children.’” He answered: ‘In any case, there’s no pleasure like that of fornication’” (Salih 78). It is probably very hard to understand the gravity of the situation where a man deliberately alters the wording of the holy scripture to suit his patriarchal agenda. This is an extremely charged moment and a critique of the supposed authenticity of the Sudanese.\textsuperscript{19} Then we have the mention of “the age of Aad” (110) in the poetry of Abu Nuwas, which only readers of The Qur’an can understand.

The point I am making is that in terms of its cross-cultural, transnational content, the novel is a hybrid that can only be fully understood with recourse to all the varied heritages (English

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\textsuperscript{17} Sa’eed speaks of the widely accepted discourse that wine and desire in Sufi poetry is metaphoric of a relationship to God as “all arrant nonsense with no basis in fact” (Salih 143). It is not clear if he really means this or is he acting again. A possible interpretation is that whatever appeals to the coloniser is just fake and veneer, just like Sheila Greenwood sees him and just admires his black skin, “the colour of magic and mystery and obscenities” (Salih 139).

\textsuperscript{18} They practice female circumcision and attribute it to Islam (Salih 81). This is already a contamination, precolonial.

\textsuperscript{19} Another small example would be the phrase “Halting at Arafat” (Salih 79), which all Muslims would understand as a key moment in the rituals of the Hajj that is absolutely required for the pilgrimage to be formally valid. The translator uses the capital letter for “Halting” to emphasise the significance, but it is not likely to be well understood, and especially not the significance of this moment as it metaphorically reflects on the journey of the two men that ends with the washing (“gusul”) in the Nile.
and Sudanese, and wider). In terms of its content then, the novel is, to reiterate my phrase, always already engaging in cross-cultural migration/translation and there is no one single source. This perpetual migration at the core of the text is quite beautifully shown in the passage where Mahjoub tells the narrator that Sa’eed is “the Prophet El-Khidr” and that “treasures that lie in this room are like those of King Solomon, brought here by genies, and you have the key to that treasure. Open Sesame” (Salih 107). Cultural references speak best to a hybrid audience. Very specific Quranic references such as “[when the white thread is distinguished from the black [وَحِينَ يُبِينُ الخِيطَ الأَبيضَ مِنَ الخِيطَ الأَسودَ]” (Salih 61-2) and the figure of the mythical El-Khidr are meant to create immediate intimacy with the Muslims and intrigue others, while the treasures of King Solomon would speak to all Abrahamic traditions (and wider) and Open Sesame would be the epitome of the exotic from the Arabian Nights. All three examples are exotic in this cross-cultural moment, just as the following scene of the tripping party in the desert with young men dancing like women while they all, like “some tribe of genies” (Salih 114) feast on roasted mutton. Salih is obviously playing with the audience’s expectation, serving exoticism, like Sa’eed did to the women, and yet always with some dose of irony and mockery.

As for the specific decision in the translation, aside from Johnson-Davies’s removal of “the numbering from the chapters” and adding of “section breaks … to give the English-language novel a coherence,” a large point is the fact that the characters “especially Saeed, speak a highbrow British English. For example, Johnson-Davies uses the term ‘prefects’ instead of ‘heads’ of boardinghouses (Mawsim 55; Season 51),” which “accentuates Saeed’s connection with upper-class society” (Jurdi 85). In contrast, “Salih’s dialogues between Sudanese locals … are translated into Standard English. Making these conversations colloquial would have given them a different flavor” (Jurdi 85). This is no doubt true, and I agree that using more dialectal English for the villagers would create a greater contrast and emphasise the dichotomies between classes, spaces, histories, etc. However, Sa’eed’s posh English only shows that the English version renders that aspect of his personality better than the Arabic version because that is the original language he used. The Arabic version, even in Fusha, reads as Salih’s attempt to evoke Sa’eed’s performance of Englishness. As for the villagers, to use any English dialect would confuse the English readers as they would sound like English villagers.

This example shows quite clearly that Salih’s novel is a text in two languages. The Arabic version is always already a translation. The Arabic reader knows that certain passages are translations of that which the characters would be saying in English, and they experience them as Arabic translations just as certain passages are clearly in Arabic and the English reader is aware they are reading a translation whereas others sound like they are the original discourse.
There are a few more examples where the text draws attention to the factual use of a particular language, be it Arabic or English, in the wrong setting. First, it is not clear if the opening (single) sentence of Sa’eed’s notebook (Salih 151) and the poem that the narrator finds in the library are in Arabic or English? The second is the letter Sa’eed leaves to the narrator (Salih 65-67). One might assume it was in Arabic, but it would make a lot more sense if it was in English given their initial exchange around Ford’s poem. The novel is ambiguous on this point and the reader is left in the dark. A third significant scene is when Sheila Greenwood speaks in Arabic, “You are beautiful beyond description … and the love I have for you is beyond description” (Salih 143). Sa’eed then counters this shallow expression of love (based on the looks) by saying he loves her blue eyes. The question we are left with here is if the entire conversation is in Arabic, or just the part indicated. The fact we cannot know leaves the text ambiguous, in the perpetual state of migration just as the characters move in the haze of their sexually charged setting.

My argument goes even deeper that these instances that would be obvious to the readers. I agree with some critics that there are instances where one can have conventional analyses of the English translation as being secondary to the Arabic. For instance, as Jurdi shows, sexual imagery sounds rawer in Arabic where Salih writes “ضّاجعـتُها (…‘had sex with her’) is not really the same as نمت معها … ‘slept with her,’ …. Cruder sexual lexicon and imagery are more in keeping with the artistic and thematic concerns of Mawsim” (Jurdi 85). I also agree that some clear omissions, as for instance Salih’s use of the well-known Arabic proverb طبقة شن وافق which was probably removed “because it was too difficult to make the expression accessible to an English-speaking readership. But this line adds a clever and artistic touch to the novel. The proverb is commonly used in colloquial Arabic, and the accounts of it appear in medieval Arabic sources” (Jurdi 85).20

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20 In addition, Mahmud Husein Salih and Naser Y. Al-Hassan Athamneh’s (1995) analysis of the English translation is interesting in that they try to identify “the translator’s inability to grasp the semantic and functional significance of silence” (Salih and Athamneh 217). Out of ninety-five occurrences they claim eleven are mistranslation (Salih and Athamneh 218). In my view, even if all these were grave mistranslations, eleven out of ninety-five does not make the translation bad. What is more, I disagree with most of their cases, which are often about extremely subtle textual nuances. They miss the fact that different languages and publishing models have different conventions. Not only do the ellipses mean entirely different things, but it is not a given that Salih uses them to state something culturally recognisable even Arabic. Rather they can very well be idiosyncratic. However, there are two examples worth addressing. The first is the introduction of silence in the translation where it is non-existent in Arabic, and it can confuse the reader as to who is speaking. The second, more important, is when the minister reports that Sa’eed said, “I’ll liberate Africa with my penis” (Salih 120). In Arabic, Salih uses the ellipses to indicate a missing word that is implied. Such “euphemistic use of ...” shows the minister is “one of those ‘wolves’” of the postcolonial Africa and his politeness is “hypocritical and ironic” (Salih and Al-Hassan 225). This is a very interesting possibility, but quite nuanced. It is not very likely the Arabic reader would immediate understand/interpret them in this way, nor is the English version very far from it.
However, most important for my analysis, Jurdi discusses the passage describing Sheila Greenwood, a waitress who committed suicide: “She died without a single word passing on her lips. My store of hackneyed phrases is inexhaustible [ Antar من الأمثال لا تنفد]. For every occasion I possess the appropriate garb (Salih 35, emphasis mine). Objecting to the translation of امثال as “hackneyed phrases,” Jurdi offered a different translation to stress “that the proverb is anything but a hackneyed phrase: … My ammunition of proverbs is inexhaustible. For every occasion I possess the appropriate garb. Shannun, the proverbial shrewd man, knows when to meet Tabaqa, his true match among women” (Jurdi 86). For Jurdi, the point is that “Salih manipulates the Arabic proverb to bring out the idea that Sa’eed, a man with extraordinary intelligence, like the proverbial Shannun, has the right words for every occasion” (Jurdi 86). Later on, “[t]he same proverb is repeated later in connection with Isabella Seymour. … Here, Sa’eed talks to himself as if he were an Englishman” (Jurdi 86). Repeating “‘My ammunition of proverbs is inexhaustible. Shannun, the proverbial shrewd man, knows when to meet Tabaqa, his true match among women.’ Salih stresses that Sa’eed’s stories – much like Shahrazad’s – are the source of his power” (Jurdi 87).

This is indeed a nuanced reading that attempts to draw on the cultural repertoire of the Arabic language and literature to explore the novel’s main themes. It is, however, very unlikely that a translator simply jumped to “hackneyed phrases” (itself somewhat hackneyed) out of sheer disrespect or misunderstanding of the Arabic text. The wording is so specific, and the difference appears quite jarring. Jurdi is therefore right to take note of it. In my view, the translation interprets the meaning امثال in the light of Sa’eed’s his performance. Sa’eed’s message is exactly that historical irony of the coloniser falling into a trap due to exotic sounding phrases. I assume Sa’eed is not simply using proverbs, but rather explicitly pointing out a strategy, that is, he is using them as a trap. Their original connotations would be entirely lost on the English woman, and she would not be able to notice if he changed them, as he is prone to do. Thus the proverbs too appear restlessly migrating between being historically deep and meaningful and being mere exotic shells, which is exactly how Sa’eed is treated. They would be mere shells, just flashy surface without the depth Jurdi points out. In other words, they would be nothing but hackneyed phrases repeated without intent to mean something culturally deep.

Moreover, with this interpretation in mind, one could argue that Salih himself failed to translate “hackneyed phrases” into Arabic while that was what he had always intended. I use this reasoning to illustrate the sense of migration between languages that has lost the point of origin and a goal and has turned into an oscillation between two conflicting points. This in a nutshell is a perfect rendition of the postcolonial condition of Bhabha’s in-between space, the
simultaneous neither-nor and either-or. This aporia cannot be simply resolved by imposing the authority of one side. This is to misunderstand, using purely materialistic assumptions and ideologically shaped hierarchies, that very state of being Salih struggles so much to depict in the novel.

A very early critical response, by Muhammed Siddiq (1978) emphasises such irreconcilable “schism between Mustafa Sa’eed’s consciousness and his unconscious” (Siddiq 101). The example he is gives is: “You are right my lady: courage and optimism. But until the meek inherit the earth, until the armies are disbanded, the lamb grazes in peace beside the wolf and the child plays water-polo in the river with the crocodile, until that time of happiness and love comes along, I for one shall continue to express myself in this twisted manner” (Salih 41, emphasis mine). In Siddiq’s view, after the initial direct statement the bulk of it is “metaphoric invocation of a familiar biblical theme. The direct statement is conscious and personal while the imagery is universal and cosmic, expressing a yearning for a cosmic unity of opposites” (Siddiq 69-70). Furthermore, “[t]he ‘far-away horizons’ of the initial impression have become ‘horizons deep within,’ and the total darkness around serves to underline the shift, cancelling out the possibility of any horizons existing outside the self” (Siddiq 99).21 This move on the part of Sa’eed is equally eastern and Western, thus affirming the narrator’s claim that the two are both alike at the same time as they appear incompatible. I agree with Siddiq that “Johnson-Davies’s deviation from the straightforward Arabic syntax in translating مثلنا تماماً into ‘exactly like them’ instead of what it says, ‘exactly like us,’ is lamentable because it loses the subtle point the original syntax makes” (Siddiq 89), but at the same time I find the English version emphasises the fact that the narrator does not feel that he really is entirely and authentically of the place, that he is a stranger just as Sa’eed:

In any event I have no choice, and perhaps you will realize what I mean if you cast your mind back to what I said to you that night. It’s futile to deceive oneself. That distant call still rings in my ears. I thought that my life and marriage here would silence it. But perhaps

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21 Furthermore, Siddiq’s analysis of maternal and sexual archetypes shows a gliding over cultural borders. Archetypes, especially that of the mother, determined largely through the Biblical and the Quranic subtexts, travel easily and settle easily in supposedly incompatible East and West. Also, the use of sexual imagery and the sexualisations of places is a part of the colonial legacies that saw foreign territories in feminine terms, as objects of sexual conquest. Also see Tomi Adeaga (2021) argument “about colonialism as ‘male power-fantasy’” (Adeaga 247). Since the eroticisation of the Other is tightly connected to the Arabian Nights, which constitute a large part of the Western imaginary of the East, we can observe quite a natural migration of symbols between conflicting discourse (and large discrepancy in power). Sa’eed does not have, despite his alleged extraordinary intelligence, any real power and agency to exact justice in any way that is not always already shaped by colonial structures, and he knows this (evident from his books: The Rape of Africa, The Economics of Colonialism, and The Cross and the Gunpowder).
I was created thus, or my fate was thus—whatever may be the meaning of that I don’t know. Rationally 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 faraway parts that loom up before me and cannot be ignored. (Salih 66-67)

In that way, the double phrases مثلنا تماماً and “exactly like them” complement each other to show his state of being. This for me is an example that this story operates in two languages which are incompatible but in certain ways very much alike (especially in that they both defined biggest empires in the history of the World).

Take for instance how the symbols of the sun and the moon work in the novel. Siddiq points out masculine/feminine features of Sa’eed’s personality as shown through his eyebrows, which are “set well apart ... forming crescent moons above his eyes” (Salih 7). If we read the novel in English the crescent moons are suggestive of femininity because English, like many languages, codes the moon as the symbol of the feminine and the sun of the masculine. In Arabic, the coding is the opposite: “I remembered too that when I emerged from Mustafa Sa’eed’s house that night the waning moon had risen to the height of a man on the eastern horizon and that I had said to myself that the moon had had her talons clipped. I don’t know why it looked to me as if the moon’s talons had been clipped” (Salih 55, emphasis mine). If we were to stick to Arabic as the sole originary language of this story we would have to tweak the translation to not just translate the original cultural coding of the symbol, but also to prevent complete distortion. If the Arabic text wants Sa’eed to appear extremely masculine, sharp, and powerful, that is capable of the conquest of European women, then the translation feminises his looks. And yet, as Siddiq rightly notices, the narrative at its core seems to want to combine the two: “Either way, his androgynous makeup cannot be missed” (Siddiq 102). In addition, in Arabic, the combination of the genders is perhaps already embedded in that the moon, despite being “masculine” is also used as a symbol for female beauty (roundness, brightness, etc.). In any case, the clash of cultural coding of these prominent symbols establishes, especially in the English version, the general drive of the narrative, and Sa’eed’s hybrid character.

This is very much in tune with what most critics understand the book is doing, deconstructing opposites, emphasising the struggle, and leaving this restless migration at work. This is why Siddiq argues there is a certain awareness in the narrator of “the dangers of one-sidedness and extremism” (Siddiq 104). So, when he says, “How strange! How ironic! Just because a man has been created on the Equator some mad people regard him as a slave, others as a god. Where lies the mean? Where the middle way?” (Salih 108), Siddiq sees the climax in
“the psychological polarity of conscious/unconscious [that] has been coordinated with the
cultural polarity of the icy, rational North and the warm instinctual South. That polarity,
of course, is merely a myth of prejudice, one that Mustafa Sa’eed exploits and yet is trapped by,
while the narrator confronts and finally transcends it through the arduous process of
individuation” (Siddiq 104). I too see this as a form of resolution of the conflict, while most
critics understand it as having no resolution whatsoever.22 This is because for me the resolution
does not entail solving the paradox but understanding how it works to produce the very
disturbing ontology of the postcolonial subject.

To further substantiate my claims, using the notion of “hackneyed phrases” as the
metonym for the migratory core of the text, I want to stress the fact that Salih continuously uses
hackneyed phrases throughout the text. It is not simply the loss of meaning/authenticity in cross-
cultural encounters. Just as Jurdi pointed out, a possible use of proverbs is as part and parcel of
Salih’s aesthetic. That is, just as he draws the readers’ attention to the indeterminacy of which
language is spoken in some situations, the narrator often comments on certain behaviours and
diction of Sa’eed as being merely performative, that is empty: “Sa’eed said to them, ‘I have
come to you as a conqueror.’ A melodramatic phrase certainly [عبارة ميلودرامية لا شك]. … It was
a melodramatic act which with the passage of time will change into a mighty myth” (Salih 60).
Once he understands he has been enthralled by Sa’eed he starts interpreting him as a lie: “Sa’eed
used regularly to attend prayers on the mosque. Why did he exaggerate in the way he acted out
that comic role” (Salih 64). Since the narrator knows Sa’eed has consistently put on an act for
different audiences, he has made it impossible to know not just when and in what is he authentic,
or even if there is such a thing as the authentic Sa’eed (if we assume an identity beyond the
veneer of the various performances). Performance itself, at least the way the narrator suggest,
is a lie, an exaggeration, it is melodramatic and indeed hackneyed. When the narrator finds
Sa’eeds’s papers with bits of information, he realises this too is an act and that he was tricked
through cheap tropes to look for depth where there is none, and so he decides to burn it all
down, and not “immortalize him” (Salih 154). His performances mainly employ what the
narrator starts to understand as cheap tricks: “If Mustafa Sa’eed had chosen his end, then he had
undertaken the most melodramatic act in the story of his life [قام بأعظم عمل ميلودرامي في رواية حياةه]
(Salih 67). Like the River Nile, Sa’eed too “after flowing from south to north, suddenly turns
almost at right angles and flows from west to east” (Salih 62), thus encompassing all
orientations.

22 Unlike many critics, Saree S. Makdisi (1992) argues that the novel does not have a “firm conclusion or
resolution.” Instead, it works with “some alternative future that it is in the prouacess of inventing” (Makdisi 815).
I have chosen a few interesting phrases that stand out and sometimes break the fourth wall. When the narrator says, “silent not as the grave but as a ship that has cast anchor in mid-ocean” (Salih 88), we see how Salih deliberately evokes the hackneyed phrase “silent as a grave” and changes it to try and access the deeper meaning of her silence. The fact that he uses this proverb in this manner stresses its state as a dead metaphor, something that is operative culturally but also not quite capable to describe the new situation. This shows quite that Salih questions the usefulness of proverbs in the new postcolonial world which requires new words, not old, hackneyed phrases. In this case, the phrase is exactly the same in form and content in English and in Arabic, which is either the result of independent development or colonial contamination. Being the exact same gives it a very universal meaning, which Salih finds necessary to tweak anyway. In contrast, the phrase that is not tweaked is in: “People like you are the legal heirs of authority … you’re salt of the earth” to which Mahjoub answers with a laugh “If we’re the salt of the earth … then the earth is without flavour” (Salih 99).

When Wad Reyees is said to have “changed women as he changed donkeys” (Salih 96), this too is an example of a change in a hackneyed phrase. Normally in English one would say “change socks.” The construction is the same but adapted to the local setting. Thus, a hackneyed phrase becomes more meaningful and authentic and shows that new times require new kinds of thinking. This is the typical writing back of the postcolonial subject who tries to have agency in language. This can best be seen in English exactly because the breaking of the standard phrase is more conspicuous. It is an unusual phenomenon, but it is as if Salih is trying to affect English while writing in Arabic. An alternative is of course that it sounds jarring in Arabic, and not at all local, which too would show certain migration at work.

When the narrator says that the sun “is exactly in the liver of the sky, as the Arabs say” (Salih 111), we have an example of a very unusual move. Salih adds the source of the proverb as if the text was originally in English and not Arabic. We must assume that using such a proverb or a saying would be understood by the Arabic reader just as “the apple of my eye” would be to an English reader. What is more, it entails a reference to what the Arabs used to say historically (thus evoking a migration between precolonial-colonial-postcolonial eras). This additional emphasis, despite the book being in Arabic, shows that the text considers non-Arabic-speaking readers for whom such a phrase would be quite strange. Here again we have the English discourse delivered in Arabic, which probably creates an effect of defamiliarization in the reader.
of the Arabic version because the part “as the Arabs say” is surely superfluous.23

Furthermore, I reacted to the translator’s choice of rendering a phrase such as “for the sake of Allah” (109) and some other similar cases in this manner, instead of writing the typical/hackneyed “for God’s sake”. This choice makes it more exotic, and I do not see that the text called for that. In other places Allah is simply rendered as God, as it should be, not to give a sense it is a separate god of Muslims. It is clear from numerous scenes where the characters repeat certain religious phrases, like “There is no power and no strength save in God [لا حول ولا قوة إلا بالله]” (Salih 124, 127), that the narrator considers them to be said by rote, like hackneyed phrases, often without true investment. A scene where he emphasises this is in “When they laugh they say ‘I ask forgiveness of God’ and when they weep they say ‘I ask forgiveness of God. [أستغفر الله]’ Just that. (This can also be contrasted to the fact the translator does not use Allah, which makes the other cases quite stand out).

In contrast, and quite significant for my thesis, is the fact that the word “hijra” in the title is translated as migration. This word, especially since it defines the main theme of the novel, has the cultural connotations of the Prophet’s migration from Mecca to Medina which is the starting point of the Hijri calendar. This is immensely significant because it employs the notion that migration is at the core of human existence, and at the core of being Muslim (but we find this omnipresent in the Bible as well). This is why the narrator goes out to travel with the tribes, for instance. In other words, as he and Sa’eed try to articulate so many times, they are split between being migratory and sedentary. They call for stability but everything around them speaks to the fact that life is defined by migration. We see for instance how the narrator, after having done his hijra to the north engages in nomadism for a while to stabilise himself: “I, like millions of mankind, walk and move, generally by force of habit, in a long caravan that ascends and descends, encamps and then proceeds on its way” (Salih 61). Colonialism and forced migrations made migration receive negative connotations, but originally it is a core idea of human life. It is no surprise then, that we find this core in the novel even at the level of language. Had the translator left “hijra”

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23 An interesting, very English-sounding phrase occurs twice: “old windbag” [رجل مخرف] (Salih 99, 102). The word مخرف denotes an older person suffering from dementia but also someone that speaks nonsense. “Windbag” is a person who speaks a lot but it’s all empty phrases. Some other examples of phrases, proverbs, and metaphors: “Good riddance [في ستين داهية]” (Salih 128); “dagger [الخنجر]” (Salih 164); “I felt not like a storm-swept feather but like that of a palm tree [ريشة في مهب الريح]” (Salih 2); He speaks of his mind as a “keen knife [كان عقلي كأنه مدية حادة]” (Salih 29) and “sharp knife [كانت عقلي كأنه مدية حادة]” (Salih 31); “I am the desert of thirst [انا صحراء]” (Salih 33); “No, I am not a stone thrown into the water but seed sown in a field” (Salih 5); “one fell swoop” (Salih 7); “There is no use at all in a donkey that doesn’t foal” (Salih 64); “such was life: with a hand it gives, with the other it takes … I now realise this maxim [تعطي يد وتأخذ باليد الأخرى ... هذه الحكمة]” (Salih 5).
untranslated it would call attention to itself and become entirely opposite of the rather transparent use of “migration.” On the other hand, if the Arabic readers miss the fact that “hijra” in the title draws on the specific Prophetic heritage, it means that “hijra” has become a hackneyed phrase. Translating it with a word that will sound hackneyed is, from the point of view of the translator’s understanding of the textual intent (and my understanding of it) quite appropriate, but it also shows that reading the text in two core languages opens up the richness of meaning.

Lastly, I want to bring up perhaps the most hackneyed phrase in the history of literature, a phrase that wraps up Sa’eed’s story in that final revelation that use the end of Othello: “I love you” (Salih 165). Killing his wife, Sa’eed finds this phrase to be said in absolute truth and brimming with meaning, but having conditioned the reader into suspicion, the reader may guess it is wishful thinking on his part. His infatuation completely emptied him of proper agency and made him succumb. What precedes the murder is of course marriage and the scene really unsettles the ground. It employs several of the features I’ve discussed so far: “I Jean Winfried Morris accept this man Mustafa Sa’eed Othman as my lawfully wedded husband, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health [انا جين ونفرد مورس أقبل هذا الرجل مصطفى عثمان زوجي الشرعي في السراء والضراء]” (Salih 158). First, here it is clear that the reader is reading the Arabic translation by the author trying to render the instituted phrase of the marital vows, which obviously have a deep meaning, just like all Arabic proverbs, but is also something one must say regardless of whether or not one means it. In other words, it is just a hackneyed phrase. We see this when Jean is crying violently as to persuade the Registrar she is deeply in love with Sa’eed, but upon exiting she laughs and says, “What a farce” (Salih 158).24 She points out she is just acting. She is entirely ambiguous, and like him, can be both-and and neither-nor: “betray both anger and a smile” (Salih 155). This is exactly how the narrator sees Sa’eed, as simultaneously perhaps the most unique and authentic and the most inauthentic exotic image which Anna names “Moozie’ as a pet name” (Salih 147). In other words, Salih leaves it up to the reader to decide if Sa’eed was like deep or just another hackneyed phrase.

24 Jean Morris is usually expressing her violence to Sa’eed by “ripping up an important book or burning some piece of research” (Salih 161), which is a very symbolic act against the erudite postcolonial subject. She destroys everything that ties him to his origin, the vase, the rare manuscript, and the prayer rug (Salih 157). While in the eyes of women like Jean Morris she is the colonizer and he the slave, “his nobility lies in his ability to absorb Western culture and, like Shakespeare’s Caliban in The Tempest, is then able to ‘use the master’s language to deconstruct his absolute power’ or apply his own standards to him” (Homad 62).
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that Tayeb Salih’s world-literary classic *Season of Migration to The North* is a text that not only exhibits features of postcolonial hybridity in terms of its content, characterisation and the setting, but also in terms of its formal features and its language. Putting the Arabic text into a dialogue with Johnson-Davies’ English translation that reveals a unique set of linguistic migrations, or linguistic hybridity. Engaging in an intertextual and linguistic analysis of the novel I argued that one cannot regard the Arabic text as THE original and English as the secondary. Rather, both English and Arabic are co-originary languages of this novel, which in itself seems the most natural way of expressing the postcolonial nervous conditions of the ambivalent characters of the narrator and Mustafa Sa’eed. I employed the translator use of the phrase “hackneyed phrases” as a metaphor for such linguistic migrations which are sometimes presented as deliberate postcolonial strategies of Mustafa Sa’eed, while also being something that could be considered as part and parcel of the postcolonial unconscious, the eerie sense of the Freudian uncanny. For this reason, I have argued that this unique feature of the novel, this restless migration between dichotomies produced by the colonial history, constitutes the core of the novel.

Furthermore, I have shown the importance of this feature as being part and parcel of what one would call the language of the colonised, rather than the typical creolisation of the colonial language prevalent in modern postcolonial “writing back” to the colonial centres. In other words, the “writing back” is not a simple vector, an arrow targeted at the former coloniser. Rather it is multidirectional, moving simultaneously between different targets/locations. This is why, to repeat one of the used examples, both the Arabic and the English texts contain not only strong features of both languages and direct translations, but also long passages which may or may not be translations. In other words, certain speeches and letters remain ambiguous as to which languages are being used in some scenes. The interpretative choice is left open to the readers and as such this rather unique technique forces the readers to engage more actively with the abovementioned linguistic migration.

More broadly, this analysis opens new possibilities of reading not only postcolonial literature, but also new forms of world literature that is increasingly shaped by globalisation and in particular by the world’s largest lingua franca, English.
Works Cited

Primary Sources

Theory

Scholarship on *Season of Migration to the North*


