



The feminism elements in Al Tayeb Salih's novel (*The Season of Migration to the North*)

Abdelrahim Omer Abdelrahman Eldaw¹, Dr. Mahmoud Ali Ahmed²

¹ College of Graduate Studies, Sudan University of Science and Technology, Khartoum, Sudan

² Supervised, College of Graduate Studies, Sudan University of Science and Technology, Khartoum, Sudan

Abstract

The Season of Migration to the North usually is touched as a novel that bears conflicts between West and East, and the matter of colonization. This paper explores the social conflicts in this novel regarding feminism movement's involvement. The paper aims to find out how Salih portrays his women characters in the selected novel. Moreover, what are the influential feminists' elements in his novel and how far he carries out some related problems that are found in the Sudanese society. This study results in that Salih is affected by feminists' ideas in showing his women characters and his dealings with serious problems in the Sudanese society.

Keywords: feminism, gender role, women rights, genital mutilation

1. Introduction

Al Tayeb Salih, a Sudanese writer, was born in 1929 in a village at the North of Sudan. He studied agriculture at Khartoum University. After that he left to London for higher education. He stayed there for ten years. His village life time and the period he experienced in Europe shaped his literary career. Resulting from that, he wrote many works including *The Season of Migration to the North* in 1969. Salih was died in 2009.

Regarding feminism and its affections on Salih, he paid great attention to the matter of "equality" which is a central part of the feminists' ideology. In an interview, Salih said: "I believe in harmony and I look for it". He continued to announce that: "violence against women is violence against civilization, and against life" (Constance and Ahmed, 1982, pp: 18, 21) [5].

The Season of Migration to the North is a story that goes around Mustafa Sa'eed, the main character, who is brought up by his mother after his father death. Mustafa goes to school as fewer do at that time. For his great intelligence, Mustafa gets a scholarship to Europe. Through his whole life, Mustafa shows fine eagerness for "free life".

Mustafa returns again to Sudan, marries Hosna and becomes a helpful farmer. After his death, his wife is unwillingly forced to marry an old man in the village, Wad Raayes. The story end with horrible death of Wad Raayes and Hosna.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Feminism movement prevailed 1960s-1970s and became time issue at that time. However, it still attracts notified considerations. Since Salih lived that period, the intention goes to see how far Salih is affected by this unavoidable movement. Moreover, what is resulted on his writing from these feminists' ideas, and how characters, the components of society, are dealt with. Also, this study quests how this writer

confront the misdealing found in the Sudanese society through feminism perspectives.

1.2 Objectives of the study

In Sudan, an ambiguity runs after the matter of feminism or it is not perceived wisely. Precisely, some consider it negatively, thus, the main objective of this paper is to highlight knowledge of feminism. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to recognize problems that are touched by Salih sensing feminism. Finally, the paper aims to estimate the new situations that Salih seeks for women in *Season of Migration to the North*.

1.3 Questions of the study

The paper attempts to examine Al Tayeb Salih's novel: (*The Season of Migration to the North*) to find out if Salih deals with some feminisms' ideas in his nominated novel. To handle this problem, the paper postulates the following questions:

1. To what extent does Salih manage to describe his women characters away from the traditional gender roles?
2. Regarding feminists' ideas, what issues does Salih remark in his novels?

1.4 Hypotheses

The paper assumes the following out coming hypotheses:

1. In his novels, Salih portrays his women characters following new modern trends.
2. Salih unfolds some feminists' ideas in his novels.

1.5 Significance of the study

Many researches and scientific papers are set to discuss Salih's novel *The Season of Migration to the North* but they do not approach it from the side of feminism. So, the significance of this study comes on examining feminists' ideas and their

occurrence in a great novel as *The Season of Migration to the North*. Mostly, this paper initiates an opportunity to cast new themes in Salih writings.

1.6 Methodology

This paper employs descriptive and analytical methods to investigate the questions raised. These methodologies will explore the assumed problems through analyzing: (*The Season of Migration to the North*) by Al Tayeb Salih. Therefore, data will be obtained mainly from the selected novel.

For the contextual analysis, the paper intends to use two critical approaches in order to analyze the novel under consideration, namely feminism and new historical approach.

2. Literature review [Feminism]

There are various attempts to define feminism or to give an idea about it. One of them is introduced by Mapuva (2013) [11] who applauds that feminism is a social movement that took place in Europe, Japan and America to commit equality between men and women since both of them have the same quality. For Harold (1990) [13], feminism comes to improve women's status in societies. Thus, feminism is to reform societies. Karik-Namiji (2016) [9] affirms that women should have political, economic and social rights equal to men. According to their contributions varieties, feminism is sorted into what is called "feminism waves".

The first wave of feminism is considered as a motivation for women all over the world. It contributes rights to vote, higher education, marriage and contract rights. This wave lets women to access public life (Handal, 2013) [7].

Ghorfati and Medini (2015) [6] declare that the second wave supports the first wave's contributions and continues on. The feminism first wave witnesses massive protests beside notable media writings of the issue. Women political and social rights are affirmed by this wave. Moreover, this wave changes the situation of feminism to become as an organization of all human rights.

The third wave comes, as if, to conclude what is began by the first and second waves. It emphasizes the use of the obtained rights to confront social problems. On the other hand, this wave touches environment problems, peace, gays and lesbians rights (Ghorfati and Medini, 2015) [6].

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Women Depiction

Tyson (2006) [15] argues that if a woman behaves in accordance with the traditional patriarchal rules is regarded as "a good woman" and the vice versa if she manages against that patriarchal rules. So, a woman is admired when she shows her weakness and emotional behaviour (irrational).

De Beauvoir (1949) cited in Butler (1990, p: 1) says: "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one". She summarizes it all in that social relations and conventions set up the gender roles that stick to men and others for women but the matter has nothing to do with birth, by birth, men and women are equal.

Salih tries to oppose traditional gender roles by setting some women characters in his novel *The Season of Migration to the*

North in a way that is different from the image of women suiting traditional norms. According to the feminism received, Salih tries to prompt one of his women characters to throw aside the restricted traditional customs of marriage. Considering the traditional gender role, a woman is expected to stay at home waiting for the unexpected bridegroom to come. But Salih tries to introduce Hosna as one who acts freely away from these conventions without feeling shame of that as if she knows about her marriage rights as feminism comes to fulfill. Mahjoub says: "It was the woman herself who had the impudence to speak her mind. We've lived in an age when we've seen women wooing men." (p: 132).

Again Salih comes to oppose the patriarchal traditional rules in which a woman is to obey society rules and act under control of a man (her husband, brother, or her father). He creates Hosna differently, as a free woman. Hosna, according to the narrator belief, is a free woman to do whatever she want to do. The narrator in *The Season of Migration* says: "told him that while I was guardian of the children the wife was free to do as she pleased and she was not without relatives..." (p: 86).

Hosna's contradiction to traditional norms reaches its summit when she kills Wad Raayes. As it is assumed traditionally, a woman is a "weak" person who is not able to commit harmful things and hurt others. But Salih proves that is wrong and a new woman can do many things. Hosna rises again to say I am the different one in this village where local people never believe that a woman can kill. Bint Majzoub, says to the narrator: "The thing done by Bint Mahmoud is not easily spoken of. It is something we have never seen or heard of in times past or present...." (p: 124).

Through another women character, Salih confirms that a woman instead of being "emotional" or "irrational", a woman can be rational, strong and responsible since Mustafa's mother brought him up after his father death. This is unfolded within Mustafa Sa'eed's mother character. She behaves differently from normal women in that traditional society. In *The Season of Migration*, Mustafa describes his meeting with her after his first school day:

For a moment she glanced at me curiously as though she wanted to hug me to her, for I saw that her face had momentarily lit up, that her eyes were bright and her lips had softened as though she wished to smile or to say something. But she did not say anything....(p: 21).

Mustafa Sa'eed's mother shows the strength of a woman who is able to control her feeling when it is known that women are emotional. It appears as more "rational" because she is delighted that her son goes to school, and she knows that it is good for him.

Another type of different woman character is shown by Bit Majzoub who resemble real men instead of "real women" at that traditional society. She is strong woman who has men capacity as harsh, loud and strong laugh. Salih describes Bit Majzoub as following: "...strong, mannish laugh of Bint Majzoub...." (p: 70). Moreover, she sits with men, chats with them, smokes with them, swears on "divorce" as some men often do in Sudan, does whatever men do, and sometimes instructs them. It is cleared when Bit Majzoub says: "May I

divorce, Hajj Ahmed," said Bint Majzoub, lighting up a cigarette..." (p:75). *Salih confirms again when Bit Majzoub tells the narrator about Wad Raayes's murder:*

I said to Mahjoub. "Don't let any woman enter the house." Mahjoub went out and shouted at the people; when he returned your uncle Abdul Karim was with him, also Sa'eed, Tahir Rawwasi, and even your poor grandfather... (p: 126).

Knudsen (2012) ^[10] writes that traditionally women are believed to be weaker, and less intelligent than men. So, women are supposed to be less capable than men. However, Salih sets Hosna's character as a very intelligent as her husband's letter shows: "My wife knows about all my property and is free to do with it as she pleases. I have confidence in her judgment..." (p: 65).

As a result of some rights that women gain out of the feminism contributions, some women begin to act in a new different way compared with the traditional one. Salih fulfills this in Ann Hammond character. Ann lives "Alone" in her flat free from any man domination or a family guardian. Mustafa says about Ann Hammond: "She owned a flat in Hampstead overlooking the Heath which she would go to from Oxford at weekends..." (p: 142).

Traditionally, the normal women's work is the house work. But public work is kept for men. Comparatively, Salih introduces a woman character who works out side home. She is Sheila. *Mustafa Sa'eed says about her:* "She used to work as a waitress by day and pursue her studies in the evening at the Polytechnic..." (p: 139).

One women character who extracts power from feminism movement and women's rights to act against men expectations is Jean Morris who fears nothing. Moreover, she opposes men using actions and harsh responses. *The Narrator says:*

When I wanted to dance with her, she would say "I wouldn't dance with you if you were the only man in the world." When I slapped her cheek, she kicked me and bit into my arm with teeth like those of a lioness...(p: 155).

The remarkable point that Salih uses to express that his women characters are different from the traditional ones is women intelligence. All the time, tradition norms examine women's intelligence and remark them as less intelligent than men. However, Salih introduces Sheila as a woman who defends that. Sheila, a full feminists, has a bright mind to question things, but more, to expect what will result in future precisely. She generates a remarkable expectation about "racism". that the future is for "working classes", at the end people become "brothers" and "racism" will vanish. The narrator says about Sheila Green Wood:

She was intelligent and believed that the future lay with the working class, that a day would come when class differences would be non-existent and all people would be brothers....(p: 139).

Salih comes to conclude the list of his women character with Isabella Seymour who acts freely, laughs freely, talks to anyone freely, walk freely and does whatever freely announcing her usual excuse is "why not". Salih states that Europe is full of such free women who fear nothing and expose to any kind of life:

.... "Yes, why not?"a city of secrets and rapture. I was pleased she laughed so freely. Such a woman — there are

many of her type in Europe — knows no fear; they accept life with gaiety and curiosity.... (p: 37).

3.2 Feminism Issues

3.2.1 Feminism Changes

Hooks (2000) ^[8] estimates the role of feminists to make changes in the realm of traditional life and the goodness of this influencing changes upon everyone's life. Thus, Salih explains the villagers' curiosity about free life in Europe and how women expose to men openly compared with the local traditional life where women are not allowed to get in sight of men. The narrator says: "They say that the women are unveiled and dance openly with men. 'Is it true,' Wad Rayyes asked me,....." (p: 3). Moreover, eagerness of free life is shown from the beginning by Salih throughout Mustafa Sa'eed character who is boundless to local traditional beliefs. In *The Season of Migration*, Mustafa says:

I used to have — you may be surprised — a warm feeling of being free, that there was not a human being, by father or mother, to tie me down as a tent peg to a particular spot, a particular domain. I would read and sleep, go out and come in, play outside the house, loaf around the streets, and there would be no one to order me about...(p: 19).

Mustafa Sa'eed's mother who from the beginning is depicted differently, instructs Mustafa directly about his free life. A life without any restrictions, so, he is able to do whatever he wants to do. Mustafa's mother says to him: "Do as you wish, depart or stay it's up to you. It's your life and you're free to do with it as you will...." (p:23).

3.2.2 Voice who are voiceless

Additionally, feminists try to explain that whole world should be a room for everyone to have a share in it or, in other words, to have a voice in it equally (Berryman, 2012). Salih introduces Wad Bahseer who has no enough education but has a wide range of experiences that qualifies him to be an expert and a consultant who has the final words which are hardly ignored. Salih upgrades Wad Bahseer to be a useful one to his society. In *The Season of Migration*, Salih says about him:

Wad Basheer, the village engineer who, though he had not even learnt carpentry at school, had yet made the wheels and rings of the waterwheels, had set bones, had cauterized people and bled with cupping glasses. He was also so knowledgeable about judging donkeys that seldom did anyone from the village buy one without consulting him...(p: 70).

3.2.3 Brotherhood

Considering everyone in the society leads to a sort of concept known as "brother hood". Tong (2009) ^[14] emphasizes that society should care of everyone in it, comparatively, everyone has to care of society willingly, and without this willingness, peaceful society disappears.

Assuring these feelings of society solidity and brother hood, Mustafa Sa'eed gets great helps from people who almost he does not know perfectly just they feel it's their duty towards others in the society and in the world as general. Mustafa says: This is a fact in my life: the way chance has placed in my path people who gave me a helping hand at every stage, people for whom I had no feelings of gratitude; I used to take their help

as though it were some duty they were performing for me...(p: 23).

In the same novel, Sheila Green Wood evokes this idea clearly and directly when she says: "...that a day would come when class differences would be non-existent and all people would be brothers..." (p: 139).

Salih expresses the global feeling of brotherhood through Mrs. Robinson letter to the narrator when she knows about Mustafa's death. Mrs. Robinson is Christian, belongs to different class and nationality, but she "willingly" wants to help Mrs. Sa'eed and her children. She politely asks Mrs. Sa'eed to consider her as "her mother" and not to "hesitate" to ask about everything she needs from her. Mrs. Robinson says: What slightly lightens the pain of losing him is the knowledge that he spent the last years of his life happily amongst you and that he married a good wife and had two sons. Please give my love to Mrs. Sa'eed. Let her think of me as a mother and if there's anything I can do for her and her two dear children, tell her not to hesitate to write to me...(p: 147).

3.2.4 Society Caring

Ritzer (2007) cited in Bingham (2009, p: 2) ^[3] highlights issues of cooperation in society.

Salih confirms that people in society are to worry about each other to get a "healthy" society. If villagers carefully lead their children—all children in the society—, they get qualified future citizens which benefits the whole society. Thus, the narrator tells about his responsibility towards Mustafa Sa'eed's children: "...The two boysThey are my responsibility; and one of the reasons that brings me here each year is to see how they are getting on..." (p: 88).

At the end of the novel, Salih states clearly his scarifications to society and his devoting for other people. He puts down good words that one should live for the sake of others instead of satisfying his own needs. The narrator says:

Now I am making a decision. I choose life. I shall live because there are a few people I want to stay with for the longest possible time and because I have duties to discharge. It is not my concern whether or not life has meaning. If I am unable to forgive, then I shall try to forget...(p: 168).

3.2.5 Women Health

In his novel *The Season of Migration to the North*, Salih approaches women health.

As feminists manage to do, Salih explains how women suffer from medical care shortage and some women die as a result of it. Mahjoub says:

The whole of the country's budget is spent in Khartoum. One single hospital in Merawi, and it takes us three days to get there. The women die in childbirth — there's not a single qualified midwife in this place (p: 118).

Moreover, Salih claims bad traditional habits against girls and women in general when he touches the matter of women genital mutilation. He shows how people in society are fascinated by uncircumcised woman. Wad Rayyes is one of those who are touched by those kinds of women. The narrator says: "Wad Rayyes prodded me in the side with his elbow and said, 'They say the infidel women are something unbelievable.'" (p: 80). *Wad Rayyes goes on to introduce his*

justifications for his likeness to the uncircumcised women believing that they are completely perfect as they were born. He says: "The women abroad, they're the ones all right." (p: 81). Wrongly, some people think that it is part of Islam to circumcise their girls as equally as they do to their boys. Thus, they do not think that they do something wrong against women. However, some other people try to force back this rootless habit. Those wise people, in the society, try to convince others that it is not good to circumcise their girls showing some evidence that there are Muslims in some Islamic countries do not do the same with their girls because they know better about Islam and what is good for their women:

'Circumcision is one of the conditions of Islam,' said Bakri. 'What Islam are you talking about?' asked Wad Rayyes. 'It's your Islam and Hajj Ahmed's Islam, because you can't tell what's good for you from what's bad. The Nigerians, the Egyptians, and the Arabs of Syria, aren't they Moslems like us? But they're people who know what's what and leave their women as God created them. As for us, we dock them like you do animals.'(p: 81).

4. Conclusion

The paper explored Al Tayeb Salih's novel *The Season of Migration to the North* to investigate the hypotheses that "Salih unfolds some feminists' ideas in his novels" and "In his novels, Salih portrays his women characters following new modern trends". Throughout the discussion and the analysis maintained, the paper comes to conclude that: (1) There are clear notifications of feminists movement on Salih's writings which indicate his influence with feminist ideas. (2) The writer, Salih, conducts his women characters in a way that goes side by side with feminists' ideologies which declare that women characters in Salih's novels are deviated from traditional patriarchal norms to go with the ideas that suit "new women". (3) The discussion proved that Salih touches some sort of problems that feminists try to root out of societies as genital mutilation. Additionally, Salih highlights some problems that need remedies or to be looked after as women health and brotherhood.

5. References

1. Berryman A. Why feminist art matters now, 2012.
2. http://www.thefword.org.uk/2012/11/why_feminist_art_matters. [Accessed 6 January 2016]
3. Bingham, Julette, *et al.* Cultural Feminism in South Africa. Unpublished Thesis. Jackson State University. South Africa, 2009.
4. Butler Judith. Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity. New York: Routledge Chapman & Hall, Inc, 1990.
5. Constance E. Berkley and Osman Hassan Ahmed. 1982. *Tayed Salih Speaks: Four Interviews with the Sudanese Novelist*. Published by Office of the Cultural Counselor, Washington, D.C.
6. Ghorfati, Amina, Rabha Medini. Feminism and its Impact on Women in the Modern Society: A case study. Unpublished Master Thesis. University of Tlemcen, Algeria, 2014-2015.

7. Handal, Marte. What do women want? Writing the female self: A case study. Unpublished Master Thesis. University of Stavanger, 2013.
8. Hooks, Bell. Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics. Canada: South End Press.
9. Karik-Namiji, Olubukola. Feminism and Intra-Gender Relations in Africa: A Theoretical and Conceptual Framework. International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies (LALIGNS) Ethiopia. 2016; 5(1).
10. Knudsen, Louise Othello. Reading between the Lines: An analysis of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus, using Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto as an example of male discourse about women. A case study. Unpublished Master Thesis, 2012.
11. Mapuva, Jephias. The feminism discourse and development of a civic virtue in Zimbabwe: Case of Women of Zimbabwe Arise. Journal of African Studies and Development. 2013; 5(8)
12. Salih, Al Tayeb. The Season of Migration to the North. Oxford: Heineman, 1991.
13. Smith, Harold L. *et al.* British Feminism in the Twentieth Century. London: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 1990. Print.
14. Tong, Rosemarie. Feminist Thought: A more Comprehensive Introduction. U.S.A: Westview Press, 2009.
15. Tyson, Lois. Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide. U.S.A: Routledge, 2006.