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FORMAL IMAGINATION: ENCOUNTERING GENERIC DIFFERENCE IN *SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH*

Tayeb Salih's 1969 Arabic narrative, *Season of Migration to the North*, is often categorized as a novel or novella, forms familiar among Season's Western readers. While 'novel' is not an erroneous descriptive category for Salih's text[1], such a classification makes invisible the Sudanese and Arabic literary forms also present within *Season*. Both in its blend of First and Third world generic forms, and in its thematic engagement with colonial texts, Season challenges interpretive practices that rely solely on Western perspectives to understand world literature. Salih's text suggests that recognizing generic variability can release works from meanings constructed strictly according to one generic form. The text challenges us to question our reading strategies and the political and national incentives behind our use of genre as a protocol of critical reading. One of *Season's* main characters, Mustafa Sa'eed, wishes to construct "a system of economics based on love not figures"[2]. His mission parallels *Season's*, as both Mustafa and the novel attempt to

[1] Historian of the Arabic novel, Roger Allen, has commented that 'the [novel] genre has striven at the outset to live up to the element of ...'newness'...From the point of view of generic purposes...the novel may be viewed as the literary genre whose primary topic is the process of change' (2). He discusses Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* in his introduction to the Arabic novel, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*.

[2] T. Salih: *Season of Migration to the North*. Trans. D. Johnson-Davies (Portsmounth: Heinemann, 1970), p. 35.

transform dominant modes of meaning-making by introducing new perspectives from which to assess how we shape global discourses. Mustafa's aim to alter the terms of economic discourse begs the question: could we still consider economics the same formal system if the conventional units by which we assessed it were to change? This paper asks a similar question: what happens to genre in the reading of world literature when we consider how narrative conventions can be attributed to different national forms?

In this paper, I explore the correspondences between English and Arabic literary conventions in *Season*, focusing on how reading practices respond to the changes catalyzed by colonialism and globalization. Revealing the culturally constructed nature of both Western and Sudanese literary and social conventions, *Season* emphasizes how such constructions, while not fully "natural", still have the power to shape meanings and identities according to their interpretive codes. In other words, cultural conventions that have, in effect, become naturalized, make not only texts legible, but also the individual characters in both of *Season's* primary settings'-London and the unnamed "city on the Nile". While *Season* in no way champions colonial and capitalist influence over the Third World, it does suggest how the cultural clash that results may facilitate the recognition in both the First and Third worlds that fictional texts and social institutions have an at times dangerous hold over the structuring of daily realities and ways of knowing.

In her work *Travels of a Genre*, Mary N. Layoun argues that the novel is a "colonizing" form[3] which, like the individual protagonist through which its narrative is organized, offers "an organizing view...-modulated and modified though it is, that does distinguish the modern novel from earlier narrative forms"[4]. Timothy Brennan also positions the novel against local, traditional forms, arguing that it is a "naturally cosmopolitan" genre "through which a thin, foreign-educated stratum..." - has communicated to metropolitan reading publics, often in translation"[5]. Originally written in Arabic, Salih's text reaches Western audiences primarily in translation, yet *Season* addresses a cosmopolitan readership

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[3] M. N. Layoun: 'Fictional Genealogies'. *Travels of a Genre: Yhe Modern Novel and Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 10-11.

[4] Ibid., p. 7-8.

[5] T. Brennan: 'The National Longing for Form'. *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 56.

capable of recognizing 'allusions' to both Western and Arabic works and forms. *Season* reflects this linguistic and cultural doubleness through its two protagonists, Mustafa and the unnamed narrator, undercutting the conventional organization through the individual protagonist that Layoun identifies.

Season moves between the unnamed narrator's and Mustafa's stories. Both are cosmopolitan characters educated in British schools who receive university degrees in English and have lived abroad, but are now living in the "city on the Nile". Because of its original composition in Arabic, *Season* suggests that world literature need no longer orient itself towards the English-reading West. Though characters like the narrator and Mustafa were limited to an English education, *Season* expands the parameters for reading world literature, incorporating local cultural forms and references that, even in its English translation, may remain illegible to the Western reader. Though we cannot necessarily maintain an interpretation of *Season* that simultaneously reads the text through all of its literary and cultural forms, we can recognize that the multiple choices through which to make meaning offer us the imaginative freedom withheld from its characters. Indeed, the cosmopolitan reader has access to the text in ways that English and Arabic readers do not. Throughout *Season,* reading and interpretation are represented as performances that occur on multiple diegetic levels, especially given that Mustafa presents himself to English characters as constructed by other, Orientalist narratives[6]. He is neither English nor Sudanese; rather, he, like the text that we read, circulates through spaces wherein his meaning cannot be fixed by one interpretive community according to one generic identity.

This paper traces two conventional structures repeated throughout the text. First, the address "dear sirs" and "you will recall, gentlemen", which are generically recognizable framing conventions in the English courtroom, the Western novel, and the Sudanese oral genre, *hakawati.* Second, the repetition of the same line throughout the text - 'The train carried me to Victoria Station and the world of Jean Morris'[7]

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[6] Mustafa presents himself consciously as the Orientalist 'other.' He often introduces himself with false names -'You adopted a different name with each one. You were Hassan and Charles and Amin and Mustafa and Richard' (35) - depending upon which kind of identity-either assimilated foreigner or exotic African-those he meets expect of him.

[7] Ibif., p. 33.

- which is generically recognizable as a convention of Western poetry and the Arabic *mu'aradah* form. For Western readers, these conventions not only signal literary devices ordinarily found in the novel or the poem, but may also suggests particular Western literary works. As Jacques Derrida's "The Law of Genre" argues, the individual text's proper name often overshadows the generic category into which we imagine that text belongs[8]. Derrida's figure of invagination explains the law of genre as a "principle of contamination" in which the particular work participates in a genre without belonging[9]. Ultimately, the works we read may always perform the double movement of participating in generic categories while standing outside of the genre we assign to them. Season enacts this double procedure, presenting readers with multiple recognizable generic conventions while simultaneously resisting a satisfying generic category. This may be due, in part, to the different cultural intertexts to which *Season* alludes. As Linda Hutcheon has suggested, "Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present for the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context"[10]. While *Season's* intertexts reveal the novel's interest in rewriting a colonial past from the perspective of the post-colonized subject, that the reader's recognition of either exemplary English or Arabic texts within *Season* also calls into question the genres of those older texts. *Season* destabilizes canonical Western texts about the colonial project - notably *Othello* and *Heart of Darkness*, among others - by recasting both their themes and their generic conventions within a frame that necessitates an engagement with local Arabic traditions and literary forms in order to understand how *Season* reconstructs a colonial history through a hybrid genre.

By bringing these older texts into *Season's* present, the narrative asks us to rethink the way literary history has understood the canonical texts to which it alludes. Imagining a strictly English or strictly Arabic canon of historical works is complicated by the realization that these canons have always been formed in relation to one another. National canons and national forms screen out the otherness that the nation's

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[8] J. Derrida: 'The Law of Genre' (*Critical Inquiry*. 7.1. (1980): 55-81, p. 59.

[9] Ibid., p. 59.

[10] L. Hutcheon: 'The Partime of Past Time': Fiction, History, Historiographic Metafiction'. *Postmodern Genres*. Ed. M. Perloff (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), p. 67.

entanglement in a global order presents. Season's allusions to two particular texts - Shakespeare's *Othello* and Ford Maddox Ford's poem 'Antwerp' - help us understand the impact of fictional constructions on readings of both Third World texts and subjects. Significantly, Shakespeare's and Ford's texts, a play and a poem, respectively, reinforce *Season's* insistence that the novel, as a genre, accommodates other narrative traditions and forms while assimilating them within the conventions of novel reading. The novel's representation of other literary genres is familiar to readers of Mikhael Bakhtin's work on the "novelization" of genre. Drawing on oral, theatrical, and poetic genres, *Season* shows how the post-colonial novel is always already a hybrid genre that resists classifications according to fixed narrative conventions. The novel is ultimately an imaginary construct that we recognize as a single genre despite its incorporation of other literary forms. In *Season*, not only must Sudanese narrative forms change when they meet the Western novel, moving from oral performance to text, so too must our understanding of the novel as a narrative form.

From its opening sentences - 'It was, gentlemen, after a long absence... that I returned to my people'[11] - *Season* emphasizes the reader's relation to the text as addressee and interpreter. The opening evocation of the court room implies that our interpretation is already mediated by the official channels of legal discourse, suggesting that reading is also never free from the cultural and institutional practices that such conventions normalize. The narrator later addresses readers as "dear sirs"[12], yet this particular device is further complicated when Mustafa repeats it in his embedded narrative recounting the thirty years he spent in London. In these flashbacks, Mustafa recalls his trial for the murder of his English wife, Jean Morris. Here, Mustafa echoes the narrator's "dear sirs" in his account of the courtroom: "Yes, my dear sirs, I came in as an invader to your very homes. A drop of the poison which you have injected into the veins of history"[13].

While Arabic literary historian Roger Allen places this conventional address within the "story-performance" context[14], Mona Takied-

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[11] Ibid., p. 1.

[12] Ibid., p. 61.

[13] Ibid., p. 95.

[14] R. Allen: *The Arabic Novel: A Historical and Critical Introduction, Second Edition* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 164.

dine Amyuni reads this as the narrator's attempt to "draw[...] us out of our passivism and challenge[...] us, the gentlemen he addresses all the time, to be witnesses at his own court trial"[15]. Allen's 'story-performance' mode is indebted to the hieratic oral style of *hakawati*, in which a public storyteller traditionally opens with the same "You will recall, gentlemen" as *Season's* narrator employs[16]. For Western readers, this narrative framing device may evoke canonical Western texts like Albert Camus's *The Fall* or Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita,* which themselves import the convention from the more "realistic" and institutionalized genre of the legal trial or testimonial[17]. As Raymond Williams argues, such conventions, in both literature and culture, "become in effect naturalized within a particular cultural tradition"[18]. This particular convention of address, imported from the English legal context, as well as from the Arabic oral genre, make the traditional authority of the courtroom a transparently conventional structure, no longer easily normalized as the only way of understanding the persecuted individual or the role of law. The law is a human, cultural construction that in turn has created ideas of the human and the citizen, both in England and its colonies. While we can read the courtroom framing in the context of Mustafa's murder as the English legal system's attempt to regularize his crime within an official narrative, the fact that the conventions signaling courtroom ritual are shared by Arabic fictional forms undercuts the court's power to frame either Mustafa or the nature of his case.

In turn, the similarities between legal discourse and narrative performance suggest that literary forms are themselves able to shape realities as powerfully as can law. Later in the text, Mustafa recites a passage of Ford Maddox Ford's *Antwerp*. This moment both suggests and

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[15] M. T. Amyuni: *Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North: A Casebook*. Ed. M. T. Amyuni (Beirut: American University of Beitut Press, 1985), p. 11.

[16] B. Parry: 'Reflections on the Excess of Empire in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*'. (*Paragraph*. 28.2 (2005): 72-90, p. 74.

[17] From *The Fall*: 'Gentlemen of the jury, consider, I should say, how venial it is to get angry when one sees one's natural goodness put to the test by the malignity of the fair sex'. From Lolita: 'Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the majority of sex offen- ders that hanker for some throbbing, sweet-moaning, physical but not necessarily coital, relation with a girl-child, are innocuous...' V. Nabokov. *Lolita* (New York: Vintage International, 1997), p. 87-88.

[18] R. Williams: *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 174.

undercuts the power of English discourse to construct Mustafa's identity as British-educated cosmopolitan. His recitation occurs during a "drinking session" in the village at which the narrator is present. Mustafa's English is alarming to his auditors; until this moment, neither the narrator nor the reader knows that Mustafa has spent time abroad or can speak English. Significantly, the lines of Ford's poem appear as English in the original Arabic text, making them as incongruous within *Season* as Mustafa's English recitation appears in the middle of a Sudanese drinking parlor. After Mustafa's recitation, the narrator remarks that "there came to me the nightmarish...feeling that we... were not a reality but merely some illusion"[19]. The narrator, who holds a PhD in English literature, continually describes Mustafa as "ghostly" or "shadowy", yet when the narrator reflects on Mustafa's bizarre use of English, he decides that the Ford poem, and not Mustafa, is "real enough"[20].

Here, Ford's poem is more tangible to the narrator than Mustafa is. Adding to the poem's power to upstage Mustafa, *Antwerp* later structures Mustafa's narrative flashback. This section of the novel reflects its indebtedness to poetic traditions, but also suggests that the poem's genre is more recognizable, legible, and perhaps more "real", to the narrator and Western readers than the experimental narrative form that conveys Mustafa's experience. As seen above, Mustafa's ability to switch between languages and cultures makes him harder to "know" than this familiar English poem. Though the stories that Mustafa narrates are not written in verse or in stanzas, they repeat lines and are broken into sections, borrowing from Ford's *Antwerp*. When Mustafa tells the narrator about his life in London, his first mention of Jean Morris comes as an abrupt and perplexing conclusion to the story of his transition from Cairo to London: "And the train carried me to Victoria Station and the world of Jean Morris"[21]. At this point, neither the narrator nor the reader has heard of Jean Morris. A physical page break, similar to the division between Ford's stanzas, follows Mustafa's unexpected statement before we read, "Everything that happened before my meeting her was a premonition; everything I did after I killed her was an apology, not for killing her, but for the lie that was my life"[22]. *Season*

[19] Ibid., p. 14.

[20] Ibid., p. 16.

[21] Ibid., p. 29.

[22] Ibid., p. 29.

defers the explanation of Jean Morris's murder until the penultimate chapter, though Mustafa's refrain - "The train carried me to Victoria Station and the world of Jean Morris"[23] - repeats three times throughout his story, just as the section of Ford's poem that Mustafa recites at the drinking parlour - "This is Charing Cross Station" - repeats three times. Mustafa's abrupt recitation of English poetry is mirrored in his sudden mention of Jean Morris. Both of Mustafa's references to England are unexpected this early in Season's narrative, but they signal the ways in which Mustafa's experience is shaped by literature, just as our reading of Mustafa alters our reflection on the original Ford poem.

The structural pattern of Mustafa's story also mirrors the Arabic mu'aradah genre, which Barbara Harlow identifies as "a formula whereby one person will write a poem, and another will retaliate by writing along the same lines, but reversing the meaning"[24]. The text's eclectic borrowing of generic structures makes the recognition of the text's allusions only fully legible to readers familiar with both its languages and cultures. As Western readers whose canons may include Ford, Conrad, and Shakespeare, it is hard not to notice Season's engagement with these authors, whereas readers schooled in Arabic literary traditions may attend to different allusions in *Season*. The important point is that the text complicates a non-cosmopolitan reader's ability to understand it in the same way that characters in Season are at pains to comprehend Mustafa.

Season represents the clash between English and Sudanese norms through Mustafa's relationships with English women. His murder of Jean Morris necessitates Mustafa's trial, during which he is interpolated by English law. Notably, it is his narration of Jean Morris that adheres to the poetic structuring borrowed from Ford's *Antwerp* and the *mu'aradah*, signifying that Mustafa and Jean Morris's violent relationship has an analogue in the narrative mode used to describe it. Much has been written about Mustafa and Jean Morris's relationship as a commentary on the violent encounter between the First and Third worlds, but focusing on how *Season* presents the reader with Mustafa's crime suggests not only the physical violence of this cultural clash, but the ideological

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[23] Ibid., p. 29, 30, 31.

[24] B. Harlow: 'Sentimental Orientalism: *Season of Migration to the Norht* and *Othello*'. *Taueb Salih's Season of Migration to the North: A Casebook*. Ed. M. T. Amyuni (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 1985), p. 75.

violence done by construing this clash through codified genres from both Arabic and English literature. Such violence adheres in the mu'aradah form itself, which is expressed as an act of retaliation between the two oral performers. The narrator's familiarity with English literature may explain why he considers Ford's poem more real than Mustafa, however. Like the narrator, it may be easy for Western audiences to read Mustafa's narrative as framed and made legible by English poetry. However, the deferral of Jean Morris's murder and the repetitions within Mustafa's story also emulate the suspense and crime novel genres and conventions of the oral narrative performance. Ultimately, even this generic borrowing has multiple inflections that shape a reader's understanding of what genres underpin *Season*.

Focusing on the forms that narrative takes in *Season* reveals how the presence of difference within and between traditional forms has the potential either to change the forms themselves, or to get reabsorbed by dominant structures. By defamiliarizing generic conventions, *Season* challenges the formal categories used to read world literature. The text's narrative complexity, embedded stories, and unresolved conclusion confront us with the desire to master textual meaning while challenging us to reconsider how channeling that desire through dominant discourses and genres necessarily reproduces the structural hierarchies imposed by colonial powers within and beyond the world of the text. Literary interpretation is ultimately a negotiation of complex power structures, of which genre is one. Recognizing the political stakes of reading or not reading in particular ways allows us to see how meaning-making is implicated in political hierarchies, both within and outside of the text.

ABSTRACT

Tayeb Saleh's 1969 narrative, *Season of Migration to the North*, is often categorized as a novel, a form that Mary Layoun considers a "colonizing genre", and which is more familiar among *Season's* global readership than some of its local, Sudanese narrative forms. *Season,* however, challenges the interpretive practices that rely on genre to inform the way we make meaning of texts. Mustafa and the narrator are the main characters of this tale that resists the logic of a singular protagonist. Mustafa wishes to construct "a system of economics based on love not figures" (Season 35), a mission that parallel's Saleh's narrative; both attempt to transform dominant modes of knowledge by introducing new perspectives from which to assess the Western forms that shape global discourses. Mustafa's quote begs the question of whether we could still formally consider economics the same system if the conventions by which we assess it - traditionally, figures and statistics - were to change.

Paying particular attention to Raymond Williams's conception of convention as that which is "in effect naturalized within...cultural tradition" (Marxism and Literature 174), I explore how and if generic forms transform in response to conventional change imposed from the outside - in the case of this text, globalization, empire, and migration. I investigate how desire is channeled in *Season* into socially recognized and codified forms of marriage in both of the narrative's settings - London and the city on the Nile. Both cultural traditions have marriage rituals in place before Mustafa disrupts the power dynamics that inform socially appropriate expression of desire through marriage. Focusing on the forms that desire and narrative take in *Season* reveals how the presence of difference within and between these traditional forms either changes the forms themselves, or gets reabsorbed by dominant structures of meaning-making. Exploring how social forms in the world of *Season* react to the revaluation of local conventions, I argue that *Season's* reworking of genrenallows for an investigation of how globalization, and world literature in particular, challenges the formal categories we use to interpret literature, and how we must consider the way we value certain protocols of our own reading practices when confronting our desire to master both meanings and the modes through which we arrive at them.