



Tayeb Salih (1929–2009), a native of Sudan, was one of the most acclaimed of contemporary Arab writers. His other books in English include *The Wedding of Zein* (NYRB Classics) and *Bandarshah*.

#### OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

##### **Tropic Moon,**

Georges Simenon  
(Translated from the French by Marc Romano, Introduction by Norman Rush)

##### **The Radiance of the King,**

Camara Laye  
(Translated from the French by James Kirkup, Introduction by Toni Morrison)

##### **English, August:**

##### **An Indian Story,**

Upamanyu Chatterjee  
(Introduction by Akhil Sharma)

##### **The Siege of Krishnapur,**

J.G. Farrell  
(Introduction by Pankaj Mishra)

##### **School for Love,**

Olivia Manning  
(Introduction by Jane Smiley)

# SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH

by Tayeb Salih

Introduction by Laila Lalami

Translated from the Arabic by Denys Johnson-Davies

\$14.00 / NCR / 978-1-59017-302-2

*“Season of Migration to the North is remarkably compact, really a novella rather than a novel. But woven into the brief text is a dense tracery of allusions to Arabic and European fiction, Islamic history, Shakespeare, Freud, and classical Arabic poetry—a corpus that haunts all his writing. Salih...packed an entire library into this slim masterpiece. It is literature to the second degree. And yet it is anything but labored. Rather, it is alive with drama and incident: crimes of passion, sadomasochism, suicide. It is a novel of ideas wrapped in the veils of romance.”* —*Harper’s Magazine*

*“An Arabian Nights in reverse, enclosing a pithy moral about international misconceptions and delusions...Powerfully and poetically written and splendidly translated by Denys Johnson-Davies.”* —*The Observer* (London)

#### ABOUT THIS BOOK

The postcolonial condition is probed with stunning insight and candor in Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*, first published in Arabic in 1966 and since translated into more than twenty languages. Returning to his home village in Sudan after seven years of study in Europe, the novel’s young narrator becomes fascinated by a new member of the community, the brilliant but mysterious Mustafa Sa’eed.

On a sweltering summer night Mustafa tells the young man the story of his own European sojourn many years earlier, during which he was a celebrated lecturer in economics at the University of London, as well as a cruel and voracious philanderer, responsible, in one way or another, for the deaths of several British women.

Mustafa suddenly disappears during a time of severe flooding, but the young man’s obsession with him, and his enigmatic life story, only grows. Soon an aged villager obstinately fulfills his determination to marry Mustafa’s widow, whom the narrator had been asked to care for. The marriage has horrifying consequences that change life in the village forever.

Set in the 1960s shortly after the end of British rule, Salih’s brutal novel tells the story of a man torn between two worlds, longing for the community and traditions of a homeland that has suddenly grown strange and forbidding.

#### FOR DISCUSSION

1. “They were surprised when I told them that Europeans were, with minor differences, exactly like them, marrying and bringing up their children in accordance with principles and traditions, that they had good morals and were in general good people” [p. 5]. This is what the narrator tells the villagers after his return from Europe. Does the rest of the novel corroborate his statement? What does Salih suggest are the differences between Africans and Europeans, minor or otherwise? What does he suggest are the virtues and failings of each? Compare this statement with the final paragraph of Chapter 3 [pp. 49–50].
2. The narrator claims that the Sudanese people think of schools “as being a great evil that had come to them with the armies of occupation” [p. 19]. How does the novel treat the theme of education? What do the narrator and Mustafa gain and what do they lose from their time spent studying in Britain?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

J.M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K.*

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Aimé Césaire, *A Tempest*

V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men*

Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*

---

NYRB Classics is an innovative list of outstanding books from many eras and all around the world. It includes both acknowledged masterpieces and hidden gems of literature with introductions by distinguished contemporary authors. NYRB Classics offers a wide-ranging and endlessly surprising selection of books including novels, short fiction, mystery, suspense, history, autobiography and memoir, and poetry. Visit [www.nyrb.com](http://www.nyrb.com) to learn more about NYRB Classics and to discover, or rediscover, a host of wonderful books.

3. "It's your life and you're free to do with it as you will" [p. 21]. Does the novel present personal freedom and moral choice as more of an opportunity or a burden? How do Mustafa and the narrator use their freedom?
4. "Has not the country become independent? Have we not become free men in our own country? Be sure, though, that they will direct our affairs from afar. This is because they have left behind them people who think as they do" [p. 45]. To what extent does the novel endorse this opinion about the fate of Sudan after the end of British colonial rule? Are the effects of this rule presented as entirely negative? Does the novel suggest that power—political or otherwise—can ever be used for good?
5. "They may feel pity for me or they may, in their imagination, transform me into a hero" [p. 55]. Discuss the presentation of Mustafa's character. Other than what he tells the narrator about himself in Chapter 2 [pp.18-37], where else do we learn significant details about Mustafa's life and personality? Is any of it contradictory? What might make us skeptical of what he says about himself? (See, for example, the conversation between Mustafa and Isabella Seymour on p. 33.) What does the narrator mean when he says Mustafa is "a lie"? What is the significance of the novel's allusions to *Othello*? How apt is the comparison between Mustafa and Shakespeare's Moor?
6. How does Mustafa manipulate European attitudes toward Africans for his own advantage? What does this reveal about Mustafa? About the Europeans? Why is he given such a lenient sentence?
7. "She gazed hard and long at me as though seeing me as a symbol rather than reality" [p. 37]. How does the narrator's situation mirror that of Sudan—and other postcolonial nations—at large? How effectively do you feel Salih handles this correspondence? Is the narrator a fully rounded character or simply a representative type? What about Mustafa?
8. "This is not Mustafa Sa'eed—it's a picture of me frowning at my face from a mirror" [p. 112]. In what ways is the narrator's situation mirrored by that of Mustafa? In what ways is it different? What does the narrator learn about himself by studying Mustafa's life and character? What other mirrorings occur in the novel? What is the connection between the murders of Jean Morris and Wad Rayyes?
9. Compare the description of the narrator's grandfather's house [p.60] with that of Independence Hall [p.98]. How do these, and other descriptive passages, function in the novel, beyond simply establishing a sense of place?
10. "By the standards of the European industrial world we are poor peasants, but when I embrace my grandfather I experience a sense of richness as though I am a note in the heartbeats of the very universe" [p. 61]. How does the narrator's relationship with his grandfather change throughout the course of the novel? How is this indicative of his changing relationship to the village and his country as a whole? Do you get the sense the narrator wishes he had never traveled to Europe? Is European culture presented simply as a corrupting force in the book? Or is it also a means by which the narrator is able to look more critically at his own country?
11. "You know how life is run here [...] Women belong to men, and a man's a man even if he's decrepit" [p. 83]. How does the novel address the treatment of women in Sudanese society? Is the murder of Wad Rayyes presented as a result of this treatment?
12. "When he had his climax he'd shout like an ox being slaughtered, and always when moving from on top of me he would say, 'Praise be to God, Bint Majzoub'" [p. 63]. Discuss the connection drawn throughout the novel between sex and death.
13. "All my life I had not chosen, had not decided. Now I am making a decision" [p. 139]. How would you characterize the ending of the book? Is it hopeful? Tragic? Both?
14. In 2001, *Season of Migration to the North* was selected by a panel of Arab writers and critics as the most important Arab novel of the twentieth century. How does it differ from the significant European and American novels of the same period?