

Modern Migration in Two Arabic Novels

Ikram Masmoudi  
*University of Delaware*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, **Purdue University Press** selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

**Recommended Citation**

Masmoudi, Ikram. "Modern Migration in Two Arabic Novels." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.2 (2010): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1600>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1600)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 12 Issue 2 (June 2010) Article 10**  
**Ikram Masmoudi,**  
**"Modern Migration in Two Arabic Novels"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss2/10>>

---

**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.2 (2010)**  
**Thematic Issue *New Modernities and the "Third World"***  
**Edited by Valerian DeSousa, Jennifer E. Henton, and Geetha Ramanathan**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss2/>>

---

**Abstract:** In her article "Modern Migration in Two Arabic Novels" Ikram Masmoudi proposes that twentieth-century Arab fiction is marked by the theme of the journey in literal and figurative ways. This motif features the theme of departure and arrival through characters crossings borders from East to West and from the periphery to the center (i.e., the metropolis) in order to acquire knowledge, understanding, and empowerment and to get a sense of Western modernity. The departure and arrival of the main characters becomes the central aesthetic preoccupying with a focus on their arrival back home and their rediscovery of their own idea of a negotiated modernity. *The Saint's Lamp* by Yahya Haqqi and *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih depict two different kinds of enigmatic arrivals. Their arrival is the opportunity to adjust and assess their positions and their cultural differences. Although the two arriving protagonists in these novels have different attitudes vis-à-vis the West and their local culture, the structure of arrival in both novels is not straightforward and immediate, but instead reflects a negotiation between two attitudes and a transition from an immediate, physical arrival to an inner, mental arrival. This leads to a new understanding of and an adjustment to a fuller sense of arrival.

**Ikram MASMOUDI****Modern Migration in Two Arabic Novels**

In the middle of his life and experience as a writer living and writing in England, the main character and narrator of V.S. Naipaul's autobiographical novel *The Enigma of Arrival*, an Indian from colonial Trinidad retires to the English countryside to heal and reflect on a series of aspects of his life: his metropolitan encounters, his career, and his early attempts at writing. In the cottage he rents he stumbles upon a few books left there by previous tenants. Among them was a booklet with reproductions of famous paintings. One of these catches his attention because of what sounds to him like a poetical title: *The Enigma of Arrival*: "I felt that in an indirect, poetical way the title referred to something in my own experience; and later I was to learn that the titles of these surrealist paintings of Chirico's hadn't been given by the painter but by the poet Apollinaire" (98). Intrigued by this title, the narrator/writer soon begins an attempt to verbalize the visual representation and to fantasize about the situation depicted in the painting: "A classical scene, Mediterranean, ancient Roman or so I saw it. A wharf; in the background beyond walls and gateways (like cutouts) there is the top of the mast of an antique vessel; on an otherwise deserted street in the foreground there are two figures, both muffled ... The scene is of desolation and mystery: it speaks of the mystery of the arrival. It spoke to me of that as it had spoken to Apollinaire" (98). Feeling unanchored and out of place in the rural English countryside, the Trinidadian narrator relates the scene to his own experience, as a man who arrived from colonial Trinidad and to his aesthetic ambition to become a writer in England. He soon identifies with the character in the painting.

Naipaul's description of the painting is brief compared with the length of the novel, but its relevance to his story and his borrowing of the title are indicative of its importance to his plot and the situation of his Trinidadian character/narrator, who, like the two muffled human figures lost on the wharf of the painting, felt out of place in the English countryside and out of place in the metropolis with his abstract knowledge of England and the world and what it meant to be a writer. His first attempts at writing alienated him from his memory and his experience which he muted for the sake of outdated imperial literary ideas and trends: "The idea of ruin and dereliction, of out-of-placeness was something I felt about myself, attached to myself: a man from another hemisphere, another background, coming to rest in middle life in the cottage of a half neglected estate, an estate full of reminders of its Edwardian past with few connections with the present. An oddity among the estate and big houses of the valley, and I a further oddity in its grounds. I felt unanchored and strange. .. I felt that presence in that old valley was part of something like an upheaval, a change in the course of the history of that country" (15). Naipaul tried to break the silence of the scene by trying to establish a link and a parallel between two different art forms through the human experience of arrival. Although the scene on the painting does not evoke the countryside but a realistic, metropolitan atmosphere, there seem to be a clear disconnect between the space and the subjects it represents, i.e., the imposing buildings, their style and architecture, and the two human figures. These two figures look out of place, and unanchored amidst this décor.

It is this interplay between what looks realistic and known and what looks unexpected that creates the strange atmosphere of this scene as Fiona Bradley comments on De Chirico's style: "De Chirico was appreciated among surrealists for the dramas played out on his paintings: The world of such paintings is like that of dreams at once familiar and unfamiliar. Familiar because of de Chirico's minutely realist painting style which allows the viewer to recognize objects, unfamiliar because of the strange, dream-like contexts into which he paints them" (34-35). This scene has a mythological resonance and can be reminiscent of an Odyssean atmosphere. It is also fascinating in capturing the solitude of the human figures on the wharf and the emptiness surrounding them, perhaps alluding to the anxiety, the tensions and the choices they have to face after they arrived. Inspired by the loss and desolation the painting evoked for him with its high, metropolitan buildings, its wharf, and its muffled figures, the Trinidadian narrator imagined a character who would arrive for a mission but who would undergo a series of illusions, traps, and disenchantments to reach a certain awareness of the gap between his expectations and the adjustments his experience would bring about. Unfortunately it is too late for him to return to the place of his departure because the ship is gone; the only thing left is to face his responsibilities in the new place. The painting functions like a mirror where the Trinidadian narrator could see himself. It makes him aware of his own arrival to England and to English literature. Looking at the painting he could reflect on his experience and the transition he had undergone. He recognizes himself as a man who had come to England with the ambition to become a writer and with

an abstract knowledge of England. He arrives at the conclusion that being a writer is not as he puts it about recording and displaying an inward development, ideas from nineteenth-century aesthetics, but that for a man of his background it was about acknowledging his Hindu self and exploring the worlds he contained within himself (146).

In his attempt at verbalizing the painting, Naipaul translated elements from the silent scene into the written page. The scene where the subjects are disconnected from the space where they find themselves, its interplay of familiar and unfamiliar images, and its function in *Enigma of Arrival* as a paradigm for alienation is latent in many depictions of the arrival in Arabic fiction. Here, I attempt to shed some light on examples of dynamic verbalizations of this static alienating scene in modern Arabic fiction where we can find numerous depictions of unsettling arrivals. Most of these arrivals take place in the context of larger reflections and debates on the relations between Western modernity and the Arab world. Although the arrivals in these narratives are returns from the metropolis to the known, they are filled with uncertainty and anxiety, and wrapped in a riddle like the two cloaked figures of the painting. Perhaps their enigma resides also in the alienating accommodation and interplay of familiar and unfamiliar ideas, images, and attitudes and in their protagonists who find themselves challenged in their solitude and torn between different worlds and different sets of values, making readers also feel alienated and at a loss. Common parameters or ramifications of arrival may imply missions, encounters, illusions about the place and the mission, feelings of estrangement, disillusionment, and adjustment, turning points, understandings, and transitions from one way of seeing to another. Arrivals are central to two postcolonial texts: *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* (1944) by Egyptian author Yahya Haqqi and *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) by Tayeb Salih from Sudan. The arrival of the two main characters, Ismail in *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* and the narrator of *Season of Migration to the North* are rendered not as a point, or a stopping place, but as a dialogic process that is twofold: material or physical and inner or spiritual in which Ismail and the narrator of *Season*, like the Trinidadian narrator, reach a moment where they see and acknowledge the muted dimensions of their arrivals, a necessary step in achieving a negotiated movement between two views, and two different sets of values.

The loneliness and responsibilities of the characters in the novels are more heightened than the vulnerability of the two figures of the painting because they are making their arrivals alone and facing their future choices alone. The two muffled figures in the setting of the port are intriguing in their silence and secretiveness. Shadows and bright light clash in the background of the scene where they stand. Their cloaks are dark and there are no signs of happiness on their faces, perhaps alluding as Robert Hamner suggests to the gravity of their situation and their tasks (48). They are static and have different postures. One is tall, straight, and his head held high while the other is shorter, in a darker garb, with his head cast down. Who are they and how do they define themselves? What are their challenges arriving there? What do they bring with them? The port with its realistic representation and its ship is behind them and they look as though they are facing a city. Their size is contrasted with the intimidating size of the imposing buildings behind them. We don't know if they know each other, if they arrived together or if they might just symbolize two sides or two complementary aspects of a "divided individual" as in the case of Naipaul's arrival, as Hamner fantasizes, "They might well be opposed aspects of the same person: Naipaul's ambitious writer standing beside the image of his socially inept youth" (47-48). *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* and *Season of Migration to the North* share the position of classics in modern Arab literature. They are "third world" texts of arrivals and Arab homecoming written at a moment when the cultural debate in the Arab world was dominated by the question of modernity versus tradition, by authors who travelled to the West. These texts offer possible visions and verbalizations to fill the blankness of the scene of De Chirico's painting. This scene can be looked upon as a trope for a decisive moment in post colonial cultures pondering challenges and questions of identity and modernity.

Haqqi's *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* started the tradition in Modern Arabic literature of the return home of the Arab student after completing his studies in Europe. Like Odysseus when he returns to Ithaca, Ismael finds everything unfamiliar upon his return. Ismail, an Egyptian from Cairo, finds himself at the crossroads of civilizations: brought up on traditional Muslim values he was subjected to modern Western culture while completing his studies of medicine in England. The text deals in detail with what Ismail is to make of his return dominated by two moments: first his rebellion on the night of his arrival against his people, his culture, his environment, and his rejection of everything followed by a revision of this attitude which leads him to a dynamic rearrangement and a reconciliation of two sets of values: his native values based on faith and tradition and the modern principles he acquired in Europe based on science and reason. Reaching this decision takes him from one way of seeing to another.

er. This second arrival becomes a new, symbolic departure in his life and career as a physician living and working in Egypt.

Ismail returns to his homeland with practical knowledge his country and people need badly: ophthalmology. He is an eye doctor who will have to treat his cousin and bride to be and who symbolize his ailing country. As his English professor used to tell him "Your country has a great need of you, for it is the land of the blind" (62). Egypt was fighting colonialism and corruption. His arrival is compared to the arrival of the rain on a thirsty land. Central to the structure of the text is its setting in one of the traditional and religious neighborhoods of Cairo, the district of Umm Hashim, named after the granddaughter of the prophet. This is where the character as a child and a teenager was immersed in traditional religious values. After seven years of estrangement from his native milieu he feels an alien and a *deraciné* no longer sharing the beliefs and the practices of his people. Numerous details of his physical arrival back from Scotland to the port of Alexandria are given as preliminary signs of his disconnection and alienation. His arrival is marked by a mixture of feelings: idealism, solitude, impatience, and awkwardness. Ismail puts an end to his exile without telling his people of the date of his arrival. Thinking to save his family the burden of a trip to Alexandria he decides to inform them of the time of the train which will take him to Cairo. He is described on his arrival as "a smart, tall upstanding young man with a radiant face and head held high" (62). Feelings of security and peace inundate the character as he approaches and muses on the open coast of Egypt. Full of Odyssean love and longing for his homeland Ismail feels indebted to his people and his country; he doesn't want to miss the first glimpse of its coast. So impatient to arrive, he complains about the ships and their slow pace when they approach the shore: "Why do ships deliberately dawdle on arriving and yet how speedy is their departure! She was now taking her time, caring not at all for the feelings of her passengers" (63).

The ship is greeted by the crowd shouting, kissing, and embracing each other, while Ismail is alone amid this flood of people. No one is there to meet him. He takes a train from Alexandria to Cairo, still without informing his parents of the arrival of the train, postponing the moment of reunion with his family. Suddenly he realizes that he has not brought a single gift for his parents after seven years in England, but as he consoles himself: "What is there in the whole of Europe that is good enough for my father and mother?" (70). From the ship to the train, a horse carriage takes him through the narrow alleys of his neighborhood, but the enthusiastic feelings he had on the ship start shrinking as he comes upon the dirt, dust and dereliction of the countryside and its people. The sight of his aging parents is even worse and he is under the illusion that they would look the way they had when he had left them: "The absent man lives under an illusion expecting that he will return to his dear ones and find them as he left them many years before" (71). What was familiar to Ismail becomes unfamiliar: the people, the surroundings, and the attitudes. The reunion on the night of his arrival turns out to be very short and the supper meal is cold and quick. Ismail's shock and anger culminate when, as an eye doctor, he witnesses the superstitious practice of his mother treating his cousin's diseased eyes with burning oil from the lamp of the saint's mosque Umm Hashim. The gap between his mindset and his mother's values is complete when he rejects the use of the oil despite the plea of his mother: "My son, many people seek the blessings through the oil of Umm Hashim, the Mother of the Destitute ... All our life it is God and Umm Hashim that we put our trust in" (74). But, "As if bitten by a snake, Ismail jumped to his feet. Was it not extraordinary that on the very first night of his return he should be witnessing — he an eye doctor — the way diseases of the eye were treated in his home country?" (73). The text refers to Ismail in his anger as "an enraged bull ... and a strange spirit ... that had come from across the seas" (74). He shocks his father who raises doubts about what his son learned in Europe: "Is this what you learned abroad? Is all we have gained to have you return to us an infidel?" (74). Snatching the bottle of oil from his mother's hands Ismail throws it out of the window and rushes to the square where stood the shrine of the saint. There, he does not flinch from delivering a "coup de grace to the very heart of ignorance and superstition" breaking the lamp (75). He is possessed and instead of celebrating his return his family is mourning the loss of his faith.

Rejecting superstitious practices, Ismail decides to treat Fatima with his science, only to make her lose sight completely, a reflection of his own blindness. In despair he leaves the house and he even thinks of returning to Europe to take on a position and marry there. But he does not go beyond toying with the idea. He then goes through a contemplative period every night in the square, near the mosque until the twenty-seventh night of Ramadan — the night on which the Koran was sent to the prophet: according to Muslim belief it is said to be better than thousand months when angels descend and convey blessings to the believers — arrives. On the occasion of the sacred night Ismail comes to the conclusion that the science he acquired in Europe is of no avail if it is not coupled with faith.



Flooded by the light from the lamp of the Saint and head bent in veneration, he enters the mosque on the sacred night and seeks the blessed oil. After he applies it to Fatima's eyes, she recovers her sight. The turning point that makes Ismail adjust his attitude and experiment with both acquired western principles and elements of local tradition is placed under the mystery and the magic of the 27th night of Ramadan. The bottle of oil he smashed on the night of his arrival is what he seeks anew and reuses after he reaches an inner arrival embracing aspects of his culture he had first rejected and including them among possible remedies, thus helping his integration into the community as a successful doctor. The novel does not specify exactly how Ismail uses the oil in combination with the medical treatment. According to Wail Hassan "Haqqi does not see any need to change social attitudes and allows Ismail to concoct an absurd solution" (86). This solution is seen by some critics as an "irrevocable bow to superstition" and the "happy ending more specious than real and that it is an act of authorial will rather than the result of artistic necessity and that it is in fact much more problematic than appears on the surface" (Siddiq 127-44). But as M.M. Badawi argues, "Perhaps we are not meant to consider the matter so closely and we should be satisfied with the idea that science needs the support of religion ... to be truly effective it is essential for an imported remedy to be related somehow to local culture" (159). What is stressed here is the upheaval Ismail's arrival causes his community and the knowledge adjustment that is needed in these particular circumstances. What happened to the Trinidadian narrator and the awareness he gained about his alienation when he saw himself reflected in the painting of De Chirico is exemplified and magnified by the light of the lamp that moves Ismail to weigh his alienation and come to a nuanced understanding of his predicament. This is reflected in his exclamation by Ismail: "O light, where have you been all this time? Welcome back! The veil that had descended over my heart and eyes has been raised. Now I understand what had been hidden from me. There is no knowledge without faith" (84).

Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* is more disconcerting because of its puzzle like structure. It also absorbs a subtext of disguised Odyssean homecoming as Muhsin Al-Musawi argues and opposes two different conceptions of identity through the character of Mustafa Sa'eed and the nameless narrator who leaves Sudan to study in England and returns to the village with different ideas. Sa'eed, after "spreading his sails on the ocean in pursuit of a foreign mirage" (92) "returns to retrieve and assert identity through marriage, family, settlement, cooperation" (Al-Musawi, 197). But his sense of identity, developed against monolithic and essentialist conceptions, clashes with the vision of the narrator whose arrival is no less disturbing than Ismail's arrival despite its apparent celebration like a honeymoon. Through the arrivals of Sa'eed and the narrator who functions as his double, Salih dwells on the predicament of Arab African elites in the second half of the twentieth century by pointing at bankrupt attitudes towards modernity: it is not by taking revenge of (the case of Sa'eed) or resisting the West (the case of the narrator) that these elites can rise to the challenges of their present but by constant movements and negotiations, migration of ideas between north and south, east and west. The nameless narrator returns to his village in Sudan at the dawn of his country's independence and its grappling with various postcolonial issues. His arrival in *Season* is a celebration of identity, tradition, and past away from sources of fear or change which betrays deep feelings of alienation and anxiety. *Season of Migration to the North* starts where the *Lamp of Umm Hashim* ends. The happy ending in the resolution of Ismail's crisis, the harmonious atmosphere this creates between him and his community with the general optimism sensed in the end of the novella when the narrator describes Ismail's eyes as full of love and tolerance is echoed in the beginning of *Season of Migration to the North* (87). At the end Ismail felt secure, and the ground beneath his feet had become solid. He asserts his filiations to his countrymen "You are of me and I'm of you. I'm the son of this quarter, the son of this square" (85). These very feelings dominate the arrival of the protagonist of Salih's novel, making him start where Ismail stopped.

Like Ismail, the narrator of *Season* arrives to the village of his memories and fantasies homesick and yearning for his people after a journey of seven years in Europe. But unlike Ismail he did not study any kind of practical science or knowledge, but poetry, and has no particular ambition or determination for change other than to reconnect with the people and the culture of his community. His moral portrait is more of a dreamer, someone disconnected from the reality: "The important thing is that I returned with a great yearning for my people in that small village at the bend of the Nile" (1). He is happy, sitting around his family members, sipping tea, and satisfied to find his room and its walls, his bed, and all the landmarks of the village from the millenary palm tree to his old grandfather, giving him a safe and secure sense of who he is: "I looked through the window at the palm tree standing in the courtyard ... I looked at its strong straight trunk at its roots that strike down into the ground ... and I experienced a feeling of assurance, I felt not like a storm-swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose" (2). The two dimensions of his identity

are geography and biography, excluding other social or historical determinants. Not only does he not see any change around him, he has no project of making any. He is only looking for elements of continuity and stability: "I go to my grandfather and he talks to me of life forty years ago, fifty years ago, even eighty, and my feeling of security is strengthened" (5). He keeps to himself, so that we are not admitted into the story of his journey which he represses, thus negating a whole dimension of who he is. Answering in generic terms, and not without conceit, a few candid questions from his family members about people in Europe such as how they live and what they do in winter, the narrator mutes all differences between his people and the people he meets during his journey, thus denying all effects of the journey on him, and the effects of colonialism on his land and his people: "Over there is like here, neither better nor worse. But I'm 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. ... Sooner or later they (the English) will leave our country just as many people throughout history left many countries. The railways, ships, hospitals, factories and schools will be ours ... Once again we shall be as we were-ordinary people" (49-50)

The narrator enjoys the company of his grandfather and his circle of friends and witnesses passively their traditional joking about sex and local customs of the village such as polygamy and excision. Unlike Ismail who rebels against local superstitious practices of his community, the narrator of *Season of Migration to the North* does not object to any of the practices in his village. Indulging in these feelings of osmosis with his people and his surroundings, the narrator stumbles upon an unfamiliar face that will disturb the equation of stability and assurance he wants to establish. The narrative redirects us from the story of the narrator's arrival to the story of the unfamiliar face of Mustafa Saeed who functions as the double of the narrator and a reflection of the hidden dimension in his profile: he had also studied in England a few years before the narrator. As a newcomer from Khartoum, Mustafa's arrival and settlement are mysterious. The narrative unravels the story of the many journeys Mustafa had taken in the early twentieth century from Sudan to Cairo to England where he became an economist and took part in his epoch and its historical and political preoccupations as an intellectual and an anti-colonial militant. The narrative of Mustafa's adventures, especially his violent colonial encounters in Europe, his conceptions of identity and history which were the opposite of the narrator's ideas disturbs and shakes the certitudes and platitudes of the latter. It is this experience in the "icy fields" of Europe that the narrator censors and mutes from his narrative that Sa'eed brings to the surface. Musa Al-Halool argues that Sa'eed represents to the narrator the uncanny as not something new or alien but something familiar and established but which has been alienated from the mind through the process of repression (37).

The sudden disappearance of Mustafa from the village taking his secrets with him, leaves the narrator alone with his questions, adding to the mystery occupying him. He becomes obsessed with the phantom of Mustafa, seeing him everywhere and hearing bits and pieces about him from contradictory versions of random people. But in his frustration, the narrator goes about his business and takes on the responsibility of looking after the widow of Mustafa and her kids. He is tried in this capacity and fails to bring support or to stand for social change. The change he much fears hits suddenly and violently the village, destabilizing the narrator's idealized idea of it, and his static conception of identity. The widow of Mustafa who resists local practices and refuses to be bartered in a marriage; thus, change comes from inside the village. She kills the man and takes her own life. It takes a double murder for the narrator to realize that the village to which he returned is no longer the same and that he needs to take an active role as an intellectual and stand for change. The destruction of his fantasies of a static sense of identity finally sets him in motion. In his passivity and illusions the narrator failed to support change and to save the widow of Mustafa from a forced marriage and a double murder: "His indecisiveness and failure to take action can be seen as Salih's indictment of the Arab Intelligentsia's failure to struggle for the implementation of a vital part of the *Nahda's* (Arab Renaissance) social project" (Hassan 115). The change comes from within the village and the narrator decides he should support it. His choice for change and for life is shown in the final scene of the novel when swimming up the Nile and almost toying with suicide he chooses life and continues swimming northwards as if reenacting his departure for England: "All my life I had not chosen, had not decided. Now I'm 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" (168).

*Season of Migration to the North* is the narrative of a puzzling arrival woven with craft and subtlety where the two characters Mustafa and the narrator function as one. The revelation to the narrator of his alienated face under the traits of Mustafa reflected in the light of a match struck in the darkness of Mustafa's room is an important moment. It makes the narrator aware of his shortcomings and understand the muted dimensions of his identity: "For a long time I stood in front of the iron door [of Mustafa's room]. Now I'm on my own: there is no escape, no place of refuge, no safeguard ... I turned

the key in the door ... I struck a match. The light exploded on my eyes and out of the darkness there emerged a frowning face with pursed lips that I knew but could not place. I moved towards it with hate in my heart. It was my adversary Mustafa Sa'eed. The face grew a neck, the neck two shoulders and a chest, then a trunk and two legs, and I found myself standing face to face with myself. This is not Mustafa Sa'eed — it's a picture of me frowning at my face from a mirror. ... I lit another match ... looked around me and saw there was an old lamp on the table ... I shook it and found there was oil in it. How extraordinary!" (135). In this scene and in the light of yet another lamp the narrator of *Season* stands face to face with himself and re-discovers the silenced, violent worlds he was entangled with in Europe. Like the Trinidadian narrator who saw himself on the wharf of the De Chirico's painting and discovered the fissure in his being as a man and as writer, like Ismail who rediscovered a repressed dimension of his identity in the light of the night of Power and the lamp of Umm Hashim, the narrator of *Season* confronts his muted world in the room of Mustafa where was stored the quintessence of his experience in Europe. This scene functions as an illuminating moment that makes the narrator aware of his shortcomings.

The failed arrival in *Season* is the opportunity for the narrator to renounce his illusions and break with a static notion of identity and to stand for change. It stands for the symbol of the failure of a vision of Arab modernity dominated by nationalist and traditionalist discourses. The narrator's final movements in the river and the disappearance of Mustafa from the village into the realm of adventure bespeak the necessity of revising traditional ideas and attitudes. *Lamp's* Ismail's arrival from Europe was full of promise for action and change revealing the optimism that characterized the idealism of the project of Arab renaissance (*Nahda*). He first undertook that in a violent way, rejecting the local tradition which he had to compromise with later in order to accomplish change. After first being disconnected from his environment, he later achieved some kind of negotiation between his native culture and the ideas he had received in the West. The treatment of this theme is more problematized in *Season of Migration to the North*, a reflection of a deeper understanding and a dramatization of the questions and challenges of modernity in the context of the Arab world "without necessarily getting implicated in offers and solutions that may have been the pitfall of many committed and engaged narratives" as Mushin Al-Musawi points out (204).

In conclusion, the arrival scene on the painting of De Chirico functions like a paradigm for alienated arrivals. Like a mirror, it helped the Trinidadian narrator to project himself into the space of the painting and to see the muted worlds of his experience. This scene is also latent in the case of Ismail's arrival and the narrator of *Season*. Both had to step back, make adjustments, and realize the missing dimensions in their arrivals. This scene speaks to the arrival of all those "whose ships are gone and left on their own ... have to figure out their bearings and live a life different from that of their past. With the uncertainty that comes with freedom with the bitterness of betrayal and with the loneliness intensified by confusion and self-doubt, they will have no choice but to find a way to survive, and if fortunate, some fulfillment" (Jin 24). Once their ships leave both Ismail and the narrator face their responsibilities and make their choices; it is not by returning to the past with its old equation or by rejecting it. These two opposite attitudes of the arrival in the Arab World in the middle of the twentieth century with the angst and uncertainty that characterized them continue today to dominate and divide the cultural debate in a more complex and global context.

#### Works Cited

- Al-Halool, Musa. "The Nature of the Uncanny in *Season of Migration to the North*." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 30.1 (2008): 31-38.
- Al-Musawi, Muhsin Jassim. *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel Debating Ambivalence*. Leiden: Brill, 2003.
- Badawi, M.M. "The Lamp of Umm Hashim: The Egyptian Intellectual between East and West." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 1 (1970): 145-61.
- Bradley, Fiona. *Surrealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Jin, Ha. *The Writer as Migrant*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2008.
- Hamner, Robert. "Ekphrasis and V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*." *The Comparatist* 30 (2006): 37-51.
- Haqqi, Yahya. *The Lamp of Umm Hashim and Other Stories*. 1944. Trans. Denys Johnson-Davies. Cairo: The American UP, 2004.
- Hassan, Wail. *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2003.
- Naipaul, Vidiadhar Surajprasad. *The Enigma of Arrival*. New York: Knopf, 1987.
- Salih, Tayeb. *Season of Migration to the North*. 1969. Trans. Denys Johnson-Davies. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1997.
- Siddiq, Muhammad. "Deconstructing the Saint's Lamp." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 17 (1986): 126-45.



Author's profile: Ikram Masmoudi teaches Arabic studies at the University of Delaware. Her interests in research include the literature of Iraq and the literature of war. She is currently working on the translation of Iraqi short stories. Masmoudi is working on a book about representations of war in Iraqi fiction and published "Portraits of Iraqi Women: Between Testimony and Fiction," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* (2010). E-mail: <[masmoudi@udel.edu](mailto:masmoudi@udel.edu)>