

Women's Dream of Modernity in the Fiction of Tayeb Salih☆☆☆

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Tayeb Salih is recognized as one of the best modern Arab writers.

Born in North Sudan in 1929, to a family of farmers and religious teachers, Tayeb Salih went to study at Khartoum and London universities. He worked first as a school master before becoming Head of Drama in BBC's Arabic Service in England. He is currently the Head of the Information Services in Qatar.

One way to look at the complex fiction of the Sudanese author Tayeb Salih is through a series of confrontations which carry history forward with its heavy load of injustice, suffering and death. Indeed, south and north, village and city, tradition and modern times, clash to create deep rifts in the souls of men and women who wonder who they are, and where they stand in a rapidly changing world.

The scope of this paper compels me to be brief, and will not allow me to draw the outline of the stories I shall mention. I would have succeeded, nevertheless, if I encouraged my reader to turn to Tayeb Salih, and react personally to the few ideas launched here.

Two generations of women are portrayed as they live in the village of Wad Hamid, in the northern part of the Sudan. The older generation of mothers for example, is typified by Amna in **The Wedding of Zein**:

She was a beautiful woman of noble features, and when you looked at her serene and dignified face you were made aware of the wealth of her seven brothers, the vast properties of her father, and the countless date palms, trees, cows and livestock that were owned by her husband. This woman had three sons who had studied at school and worked with the government, also a beautiful daughter... This woman who was over forty

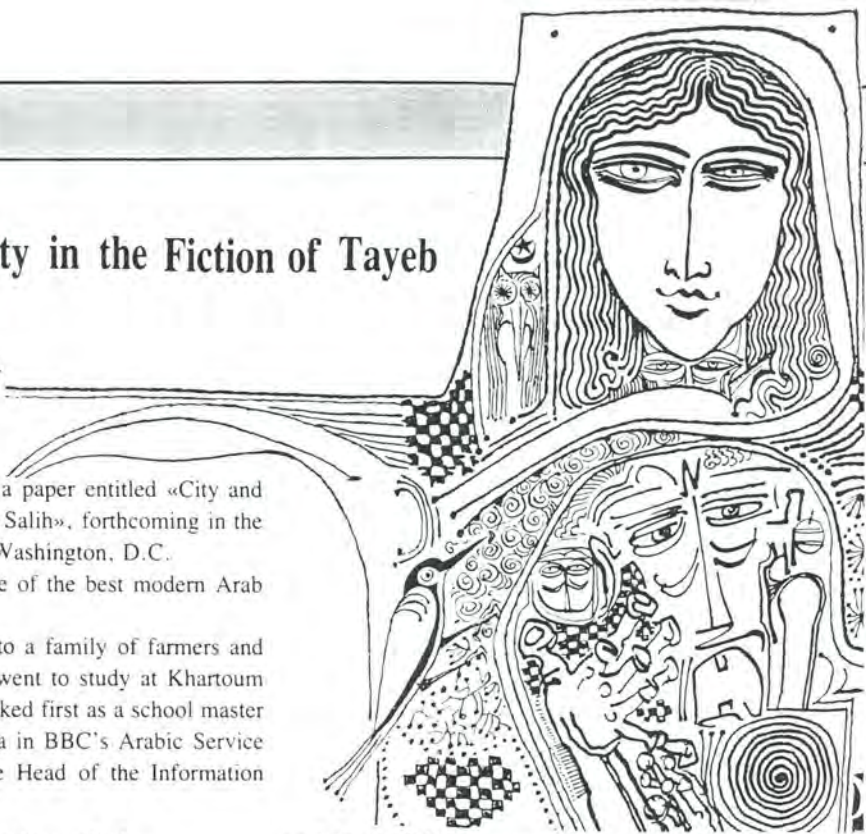
and looked like a young virgin girl, this woman of few words, why did she not say something?⁽¹⁾

Hosna, Mustafa Sa'eed's widow in **Season of Migration to the North** did not say much either. Yet, in contrast with the fertile and prosperous imagery which depicts Amna and her status in the village, young Hosna comes dramatically to life in **Season** in two brief scenes which fill the night with sobs instead of words:

She was silent for so long (says the narrator)... At last, though, I became aware of her voice in the darkness like the blade of a knife. «If they force me to marry, I'll kill him and kill myself»⁽²⁾.

Which actually happens a little later. No one understands her in the village. She had been «citified», we are told, since she married Mustafa Sa'eed, the foreigner to Wad Hamid. People later bury her in Wad Rayyes quickly, at night. One more page is turned in the history of Wad Hamid.

If the older generation is described as being well integrated in village life, as providers of life and warmth in a discreet, quiet fashion, things are certainly different with their daughters. Changes, though, are still hazy, as exemplified by the majority of the young girls who are types rather than individuals. In fact, they don't really come to life, and it is arresting to remark that there is no



fulfilled love between man and woman in the fiction of Tayeb Salih. Fatmah, the wife of Daww-il-Bayt in **Bandarshah**, or Ni'mah, her sister, who marries Zein, are idealized creatures who yearn for self-sacrifice and an all-embracing love within a very live Sufi tradition in the Sudan⁽³⁾.

On the other hand, the girl Mhaymeed loved in **Bandarshah** is forced to marry someone else, and she dies at an early age. Evil seeds are certainly infiltrating into village life, as Hosna and Maryam's tragedies show. These girls have not yet been exposed to the City, yet they do want to live their present differently from their mothers'. But they fall victims to the past.

It is striking to notice that these village girls stand out as intelligent, smart, outspoken. They are good playmates and schoolmates of the boys, and go with them to the Qoranic school so long as they are very young. They yearn to carry on with their schooling, and Maryam at the age of eleven wears boy's clothes for a while to be able to do so. She also wants to marry the man she loves, and live in Khartoum where she would have running water and electricity. Her sons and daughters would become a lawyer, a judge, a doctor, an engineer «**Bandarshah**, Vol. II, pp. 70 - 72).

These girls' growth is curbed, however, and the surrealistic scene in **Bandarshah** where two girls are whipped (Vol. I, pp. 73 - 76) is emblematic of the female plight in the Sudan, and perhaps in the Arab world at large, up to the 1970's. It is suggested that in an increasingly urbanized world, things are rapidly changing, even in village life. The girls Tayeb Salih draws dream of city life which lures them the way London had; with their male counterparts, its «secrets and raptures».

Therefore, if the older women are content and happy in Wad Hamid, their daughters are trying to learn to express different yearnings. Still caught between silence and half-voiced dreams, they may well embody their creator's hidden message in terms of the need to allow them to grow and share fully the responsibilities of the modern Arab individual. Maryam's dream of city life with her beloved man would then come true. They would bring to life

scores of boys and girls who would build up the new Arab city. A proper ruler - **shah** then, could be found for the city - **bandar**, and we would be able to cope with the city as symbol of modern times.

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- (1) **The Wedding of Zein and other stories**, trans. Denys Johnson - Davies (London: Heinemann, 1970) p. 49.
 - (2) **Season of Migration to the North**, trans. Denys Johnson - Davies (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 96.
 - (3) **Bandarshah** Vol. I, **Daww-il-Bayt**; Vol. II, **Maryoud**/(Beirut: Dar-il-Aoudah, 1971 and 1977).