

Season of Migration to the North: Paper 1

Jocelyn R. Weiss

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Christopher Livanos

February 13th, 2022

Chosen passage of dialogue:

Mustafa: I hope I didn't wake you. I just thought I'd bring some

of the first fruit from my field for you to try. I'd also

like to get to know you. Noon is not the time for calling- for-

give me [...]

You're most likely the only person in the vil-

lage I haven't already had the good fortune of getting to know. [...]

I have heard a lot about you from your family and friends. [...]

They said you gained a high certificate- what do you call

it? A doctorate? [...]

They said you were remarkable from childhood.

Narrator: Not at all.

Mustafa: "We have no need of

poetry here. It would have been better if you'd studied agricul-

ture, engineering, or medicine" (8-9).

Oscar Wilde once wrote, “Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation” (Wilde). While the meaning is up for interpretation, Wilde sheds light on one of the most essential aspects of human life: identity. He makes an important point– that many people’s identities overlap with others– but what happens when this overlap diminishes one’s sense of identity entirely? Throughout the novel *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih, the narrator grapples with his sense of identity and alienation from himself and others as his relationship with Mustafa Sa’eed grows. The Narrator and Sa’eed are linked by their shared experience of migrating to England to study as they both spent several formative years immersed in a culture quite different than that of their own. Regardless of the narrator’s pre-existing roots in the village and Sa’eed’s hopes to grow them, their post-migrational arrival in Wad Hamid (Sudan) sparks the beginning of their unique journeys with alienation and identity. Within the text, early dialogue between the narrator and Mustafa Sa’eed serves as a method of foreshadowing the ways in which their identities become intertwined and their future alienation from themselves and others.

The chosen passage of dialogue not only plays a role in revealing aspects of both characters' “identities” at the time, but acts as a breadcrumb left by the author that hints at the future developments and past experiences of both men. This dialogue serves as a vehicle for foreshadowing how the narrator and Sa’eed’s realization of their similarities will intertwine their identities, but ultimately lead to severe alienation. Despite the difference in outcomes resulting from this alienation, the novel as a whole shows the reader that both the narrator and Sa’eed’s paths could have ended in identity destruction.

Towards the beginning of the dialogue, the overly and abnormally polite way Mustafa speaks to the narrator is one way that Mustafa fuels the narrator's sense of alienation. Mustafa's kindness and the formality of his speech, such as, "I hope I didn't wake you" (8) and "Noon is not the time for calling- forgive me" (8) is not lost on the narrator. The narrator knows that the men of his village do not address each other with such respect and eloquence, leaving him confused as to why Sa'eed is choosing to speak to him in this manner. Despite the fact that Mustafa is alienating himself through this stylistic language choice, he is also alienating the narrator. In a room of 100 people speaking the same Arabic dialect, for example, the two people speaking a different one might understandably feel like outsiders. The way men in this village speak to each other, like addressing each other as "You son of a bitch" as opposed to "I hope I didn't wake you" may not be a difference in language or dialect, but is an important part of the village's cultural identity. Therefore, when Mustafa chooses to speak with the narrator in this way, he may be using language style as a means of detaching the narrator from the roots of his culture.

This instance foreshadows the narrator's alienation from himself and others as we witness him mistake his reflection for Mustafa's in the mirror later on in the text. The notion of the narrator looking into a mirror and not seeing his own reflection may represent his lack of true identity. If he felt as though he belonged somewhere, to a group of people, or even a specific culture, perhaps he would not have made this mistake. This instance also raises questions about the ways in which the narrator's identity is intertwined with Sa'eed's. In sum, the opening lines of the chosen dialogue represent the start of the alienation that the narrator and Mustafa feel as well as foreshadows the way this alienation will negatively impact their senses of identity.

With reference to the narrator's sense of identity, when Mustafa mentions to the narrator that "They said you were remarkable from childhood," (9) it is foreshadowing the way in which their identities become intertwined. While this statement may initially seem meaningless, knowing Mustafa's childhood and past adds a deeper level of understanding. Throughout the text, it is revealed that Mustafa was nothing short of a child prodigy and flourished academically. Therefore, when commenting that the narrator was remarkable from childhood, he is not only projecting a piece of his identity onto the narrator, but hinting to the reader that their senses of identity will become meshed. Despite the narrator's response of, "Not at all," he admits that he did in fact think highly of himself at the time.

Although the scene where the narrator looks into the mirror and sees Mustafa could be analyzed with focus on alienation, it can also be looked at in terms of their identities being intertwined. Perhaps the narrator has come to believe (on his own and/or through Mustafa's manipulation) how similar they are in their shared experiences of migration- subsequently blurring the lines between himself and Sa'eed. Further, in pondering how much of an outsider to all places, cultures, and people Sa'eed was and knowing how similar he is to himself, he may transitively believe he also has nowhere to belong. This theme of alienation continues to arise as the dialogue continues.

In this regard, in the final line of dialogue, "We have no need for poetry here. It would have been better if you'd studied agriculture, engineering, or medicine," (9) Mustafa's use of the word "we" exacerbates his and the narrator's alienation. Firstly, it points out to the narrator that he (Mustafa) is a part of the village and the narrator is an outsider, looking in. Mustafa asserts that he is a part of the village, culture, and perhaps even a valued friend and member amongst their community. Whether or not Mustafa actually believes this, his decision to present the matter

in this way causes the narrator to question his standing in the village. The narrator follows Sa'eed's statement by reminding himself (and the reader) that "this is my village and that it is he– not I– who is the stranger" (9). While this reminder can be interpreted as the narrator simply maintaining his stance, it can also be seen as a statement that comes from a place of severe insecurity as he knows he is more of a stranger to his village now than ever before.

Further, when Sa'eed claims they "have no need for poetry" in the village, he is not only claiming that he knows what's best for the village and insulting the narrator's field of study, but he is insulting his own identity too. The reader soon gets hints that poetry (English in particular) is actually a part of Sa'eed's identity. Even later in the text, Sa'eed's secret room filled with English poetry books reveals that poetry is not just a part, but a large component of his identity. Therefore, Mustafa's statement serves a dual purpose: to lightly attack the narrator and expose his own insecurities surrounding his identity. Given that Sa'eed sees so much of himself in the narrator, insulting the narrator is perhaps insulting himself. In this moment, Sa'eed's words cause further alienation from himself as he pretends to not have a personal relationship to poetry, while simultaneously alienating the narrator from his village and people. Lastly, Mustafa declaring that there is "no need for poetry here" could also be him admitting to himself and others that there is no need for *him* there, or maybe anywhere. As a whole, this last piece of the chosen dialogue furthers both characters' alienation from themselves and others as well as reveals Mustafa's own struggles with identity.

Overall, *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih sheds light on the monumental effects that migration away from one's home, family, and culture can have on one's sense of identity, connection to themselves and others, as well as cultural confusion. Both the narrator and Sa'eed became stuck between two worlds- not knowing which was their home or if either were

truly “home” at all. Not knowing where they belonged, their struggles with identity led them to see themselves in each other and consequently alienate themselves from their true identities. As previously stated, the two men handled this loss of identity and discrepancy between where they truly belonged in very different ways- leading them down different paths of potential destruction. Nevertheless, this early passage of dialogue serves as a major vehicle in foreshadowing the ways in which both characters’ struggles with identity and alienation escalate and grow more severe. As Tayeb Salih continued to highlight Sa’eed’s and the narrator’s similarities and compare their differences, a crucial theme became evident; the ways they each individually addressed their lack of identity ultimately determined whether or not their struggles would lead to destruction. This realization serves as a potential answer to the question Oscar Wilde’s words raised; what happens when the overlapping of identities diminishes one’s sense of identity entirely? Perhaps the short or “easy” answer is destruction. However, the longer answer may be that destruction may only take place when there is nothing of one’s authentic identity left to hold onto.