Season of Migration to the North

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TAYEB SALIH

Born in Sudan at a time when it was still ruled jointly by the British and the Egyptians under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, Tayeb Salih grew up in a small rural community made up mostly of farmers in northern Sudan. He distinguished himself at school and went on to pursue university studies in London. It was in England, where he settled, that he began publishing work in Arabic. *Season of Migration to the North*, published in 1966, became a huge success, and was followed by the collection of stories *The Wedding of Zein* in 1967, as well as the two volumes that make up the novel *Bandarshah*, published in 1971 and 1976, respectively. In addition to his writing, Salih led a parallel career in broadcasting, working for the BBC's Arabic service. In England, he met and married a Scottish woman and had three daughters. While he visited Sudan regularly, he never returned to live there, and died in his adopted home of England in 2009.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The key historical event with which *Season of Migration to the North* grapples is Anglo-Egyptian colonialism of Sudan, which lasted between 1899 and 1956. In 1898, the British conquered Sudan, and from that period on, ruled it jointly with Egypt—although the Egyptians were only nominally rulers, and real power rested with the British. The British imposed their own laws on the territory, transformed the educational system (mandating, for instance, the teaching of English in schools, in addition to Arabic), and exerted political power to benefit from Sudan's vast agricultural and other resources, thus enriching themselves in the process. As such, Anglo-Egyptian colonialism of Sudan led to massive political, cultural, and economic upheaval, as colonialism everywhere on the continent of Africa did. As a subject population, the Sudanese had little control over their own lives and destinies. Salih's novel, therefore, deals with the violence that framed the colonial encounter between Sudan and Britain. In *Season of Migration to the North*, the novel's protagonist, Mustafa Sa'eed, strives to repay the violence that has been done to him and to his people, in the name of the "civilizing mission" of British colonialism.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Two key texts of the English literary canon, William Shakespeare's play *Othello* (1604) and Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1902), inform and frame *Season of Migration to the North*. Salih explicitly sets his Arabic novel—which deals with the encounter between "east" and "west," between Europe and Africa/the Orient—in relation to, and in the context of, these two European texts. On one level, *Season of Migration to the North* can be understood as a rewriting of Shakespeare's famous play *Othello*. In fact, the protagonist of Salih's novel, Mustafa Sa'eed, likens himself to Shakespeare's tragic hero and describes himself in terms of Othello's ethnic identity, as an "Arab-African." Through these references to Othello, Salih's novel frames itself as a modern retelling of Shakespeare's tragedy, with the encounter between an "Arab-African" protagonist and western European culture set within the framework of colonialism. Likewise, Salih's novel recalls Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, which tells the story of a European colonial merchant who journeys down the Congo river into the "heart of darkness"—a problematic and derogatory reference to the "heart" of the African continent. Salih's novel tells the story of a reverse journey: of an Arab-African protagonist who journeys from Africa into the "heart of darkness" of Europe, where he confronts firsthand the colonial violence at the center of European civilization. As a postcolonial text, therefore, *Season of Migration to the North* can be seen as "writing back" to, and challenging, key literary works of European (and particularly British) culture, and it thereby inscribes a postcolonial counter-narrative to these colonial "master" narratives of Europe.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Season of Migration to the North*
- **When Written:** 1966
- **Where Written:** London, United Kingdom
- **When Published:** 1966
- **Literary Period:** Modern
- **Genre:** Literary fiction
- **Setting:** Wad Hamid (Sudan) and London (UK)
- **Climax:** Mustafa Sa'eed plunges a dagger into Jean Morris' chest
- **Point of View:** First person narration

EXTRA CREDIT

Award Man. The literary influence of Tayeb Salih is such that an award has been named in his honor: The Al-Tayeb Salih Creative Writing Award, established in 2010, is open to contestants writing in the Arabic language from anywhere in the world.

Lover of the Nile. Like the narrator of his novel *Season of*

Migration to the North, Salih grew up in a small village on the banks of the Nile in northern Sudan. In interviews, he mentions that the river has been an important source of inspiration in his literary work.

PLOT SUMMARY

After seven years pursuing graduate studies abroad in England, the unnamed narrator of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* returns to Wad Hamid, the small village on the banks of the **Nile river** in northern Sudan where he grew up. After his long estrangement, he is happy to be home amidst the familiar sights and people of his native country. But upon his return to the village, he encounters a stranger: a middle-aged man by the name of Mustafa Sa'eed, who had settled in the village five years previously. Little is known about the stranger. However, the villagers have accepted and welcomed him in the village, given that he has established himself as a good neighbor and village citizen.

One night, as he drinks together with some villagers, the narrator is shocked when Mustafa Sa'eed begins reciting poetry in English. It is then that he realizes that there is more to Sa'eed's identity than meets the eye. Indeed, soon, Sa'eed arrives at the narrator's house and, over the course of a long night, narrates his life story. He tells the narrator that he comes from near the capital, Khartoum. His father died when he was an infant, and he was raised by his mother. After distinguishing himself as a child prodigy in the colonial schools he attended in Sudan, he was sent off to study on scholarships in Cairo, and then in London. In London, he commenced a series of relationships with English women, many of whom were drawn to him because of his exotic, "Arab-African" roots. Mustafa Sa'eed himself had encouraged the women's fetishization of him, playing up his identity as a "noble savage," similar to Shakespeare's Othello, with roots in the jungles and deserts of Africa. Three of the English women with whom Sa'eed commences relationships eventually commit suicide.

His nemesis, however, is Jean Morris, an English woman who taunts and provokes him—refusing to submit to his power, even after she marries him. Their marriage is an endless war, pervaded by verbal and physical violence, sexual betrayal, and degradation. One cold February night, Sa'eed returns home to find Jean waiting for him, naked, in bed. As he makes love to her, he plunges a dagger into her chest, killing her—an act which Jean herself strangely seems to welcome. Sa'eed is then put on trial in London for the murder of Jean Morris; however, while the jury finds him guilty, he is sentenced only to seven years in prison. After his release, he wanders far and wide to many different places and countries, before finally returning to make a home in the small, remote village of Wad Hamid, where the narrator encounters him.

Mustafa Sa'eed's life story sets the narrator's world upside down. While the narrator, upon his return to Sudan, had felt rooted and connected to his country and his people, his encounter with Sa'eed leads him to experience a deep sense of alienation: suddenly, he wonders whether, like Sa'eed, he is also estranged and cut off from those around him as a result of his long migration abroad. Nonetheless, the narrator continues with his life, taking up a job in the capital Khartoum, and returning to the village only occasionally. Soon, news reaches him that Sa'eed, during a season of especially severe flooding in the village, has disappeared while out tilling his field one day: he has drowned in the flooded river, possibly by suicide. He leaves the narrator as guardian of his wife, Hosna bint Mahmoud, and his two young sons.

Even after his death, Sa'eed continues to haunt the narrator. The narrator is once again drawn into Sa'eed's affairs when, visitng the village one year, he learns that an old villager, Wad Rayyes, has set his eyes upon Sa'eed's widow Hosna. He is intent on marrying her, in spite of the 40 years' age difference between them, and in spite of the fact that Hosna herself does not want to marry. Although Hosna appeals to the narrator to help her, the narrator does not, and he returns to Khartoum. Within weeks, he rushes back to the village, upon receiving terrible news. Hosna's father had forcibly married her to Wad Rayyes. In the village, he learns that, shortly after the marriage, Wad Rayyes had attempted to rape Hosna and, in response, she murdered him and killed herself. This horrendous act of violence sends shockwaves through the sleepy, peaceful village, which had never experienced such an event before. The villagers simply attempt to cover up the murder-suicide, but it is clear that things will never be quite the same again.

The narrator, who had himself developed feelings for Sa'eed's widow, is devastated by this event. During his time in the village, he finally decides to enter **the secret room** in Mustafa Sa'eed's house, whose key Sa'eed had entrusted him with after his death. Upon entering the room, the narrator is shocked to find that it is a temple to Sa'eed's life in England: among the thousands of books that line the shelves, there is not one single volume in Arabic. Furthermore, the room contains a proper English fireplace—even though it is located in a small village in Sudan, on the equator, where there is no need of fireplaces. In the room, the narrator finds further traces and fragments of Sa'eed's life in England, including journal entries and photographs of the various women he had been involved with. He spends hours there, further piecing together Sa'eed's life abroad.

After leaving the room in the very early hours of the morning, the narrator, disturbed, decides to calm himself by going for a swim in the Nile river. He enters the river, and begins making his way to the other bank. However, he soon becomes disoriented and exhausted, and feels the current pulling him downwards, into its darkest depths. As the waters close over

his head, he feels overwhelmed by the desire to give himself up to the river, and to die, like Mustafa Sa'eed had done before him. Suddenly, however, he awakens: he decides that he wants to live, and, with a huge effort, begins swimming again while calling for help.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mustafa Sa'eed – Mustafa Sa'eed is the mysterious and charismatic protagonist of the novel. Born in the early 20th century in Sudan during British colonization, Sa'eed's is raised by a single mother after his father dies before Sa'eed's birth. A child prodigy at school, he is sent on scholarship to study in Cairo and then in England. Settling in England, Sa'eed further distinguishes himself as an economist. There, he also commences a series of destructive relationships with English women, playing up his "exotic" background to seduce them. He deploys his good looks, his intelligence, his seductive charm, and his powers of manipulation to the utmost in ensnaring these women. Three of his lovers commit suicide; he murders the fourth, his wife, Jean Morris. He is tried for the murder and given seven years in prison, after which he returns to his native land of Sudan, where he settles in the small village of Wad Hamid, on the banks of the **Nile river**. There, he meets the narrator of the novel, who has also lived in England. While brilliant, Sa'eed is also twisted—he frames his exploitation and deceit of English women in terms of "revenge" for the colonial wrongs done to the Sudanese people under British colonial rule. He is, furthermore, alienated and trapped between his native Sudanese culture and the culture of England, the country where he spent many of his formative years. The extent to which he is caught between the two cultures is reflected in his two rooms—**the London apartment**, which represents a fetishized version of his native culture, and his **secret room** in Sudan, which is an homage to English culture. In spite of his attempts to settle down and lead an ordinary life in a Sudanese village, where he also marries Hosna bint Mahmoud and has two children, Sa'eed's alienation is such that he ultimately ends up drowning—quite possibly intentionally, by suicide—one night during floods. His death seems to reflect his inability to come to terms with the contradictions of his identity and his experience.

The Narrator – The narrator is from the small village of Wad Hamid in northern Sudan. He goes abroad to England, where he spends seven years pursuing doctoral studies. After his studies he returns to the village on the **Nile river**, and while he initially feels deeply rooted in the village, his encounter with Mustafa Sa'eed, a stranger who has settled in the village during the narrator's absence, turns everything upside down. While Sa'eed maintains the appearance of a regular village farmer, the narrator learns that he has, in fact, lived abroad in England, too. Over a long night, Sa'eed confesses to the narrator the story of his turbulent life in England—which included the murder of his English wife, Jean Morris. Soon after confessing his life story, Sa'eed drowns—quite possibly by suicide—and leaves the narrator as guardian of his wife Hosna bint Mahmoud and their two young sons. Sa'eed also leaves a key to a **secret room** in his house to the narrator. The narrator takes a job with the ministry of education in the capital and moves away from the village. However, he continues to be haunted by Mustafa Sa'eed. Things reach a head when Hosna, for whom the narrator develops feelings, is forcibly married off to an older man in the village, Wad Rayyes. Things end in tragedy when, resisting rape by Wad Rayyes, Hosna murders him and kills herself. Upon returning to the village after the murder-suicide, the narrator decides to enter Sa'eed's secret room. There, he initially mistakes his own face in a mirror hanging on a wall for Sa'eed's—a misrecognition that reflects the extent to which the narrator's identity has been affected by Sa'eed's. Both have been alienated from themselves and their native cultures as a result of their migrations abroad. Shortly after the narrator leaves Sa'eed's secret room, he goes to swim in the Nile and almost drowns, but manages to save himself. The narrator's survival contrasts with Sa'eed's death, in that it indicates that the narrator is ultimately able to confront and overcome the crisis of identity that destroyed Sa'eed.

Jean Morris – Jean Morris is the first wife of Mustafa Sa'eed. He meets and marries her in London. She is violent, rebellious, and provocative, resisting all of Sa'eed's attempts to control and subjugate her. She makes Sa'eed pursue her for three years before she agrees to marry him, and once she does marry him, she torments him by carrying on flirtations with other men, as well as mocking and belittling him. Of all the women whom Sa'eed has relationships with, she is the one who most challenges him. She destroys many of his valuable possessions, including expensive and exotic artifacts that he keeps in his **London apartment**. She seems to play a part in provoking her own murder by constantly taunting Sa'eed and telling him that he is incapable of carrying out such a violent act. Indeed, on the night on which Sa'eed does murder her, she seems to welcome the dagger that Sa'eed plunges into her chest as he makes love to her. It seems that Jean Morris exhibits a certain affinity and desire for death and destruction—both towards herself and towards others.

Hosna bint Mahmoud – Hosna bint Mahmoud is the second wife of Mustafa Sa'eed. She is a young, beautiful Sudanese woman from the small village of Wad Hamid, located along the banks of the **Nile river** in northern Sudan. Like all the other villagers, Hosna knows nothing of her husband's previous life, including his time in England and his murder of his first wife, Jean Morris. She has two sons with Sa'eed, but she is left a widow when her husband drowns—possibly by suicide. Her marriage to Sa'eed seems to change her in some mysterious

way. She resists pressure by her family to marry Wad Rayyes, the much older villager who becomes obsessed with marrying her after Sa'eed's death. The narrator himself, who is designated as her guardian after Sa'eed's death, develops deep feelings for her. In spite of her resistance, her father forces her to marry Wad Rayyes against her will, even though she seeks the narrator's help in avoiding the marriage. The marriage culminates in tragedy when, resisting rape by Wad Rayyes, Hosna murders him and kills herself shortly after their wedding. Hosna's murder-suicide is condemned by the villagers, and only the narrator—who is devastated by the tragedy—comes to her defense. Hosna's violent murder-suicide reveals the devastating costs of standing up for herself and defending her rights in the small, patriarchal village community.

Isabella Seymour – Isabella Seymour is one of the English women whom Mustafa Sa'eed seduces in England, after meeting her one summer's day in a London park. Sa'eed encourages her interest in him by referring to, and exaggerating, his "exotic" background and his roots in the east, likening himself to Shakespeare's Othello. A married woman with two children, and a church-goer, Seymour is completely captivated by Sa'eed, going so far as to refer to him as a "god." However, she commits suicide after commencing a relationship with him. In Sa'eed's trial for Jean Morris's murder, the prosecution suggests that Seymour committed suicide because of Sa'eed's emotional manipulation and abuse of her. However, Seymour's husband acknowledges in court that she had been suffering from cancer before her death, and that this may have been one of the reasons why she committed suicide. In her suicide note, Seymour wrote that she wished that Sa'eed would find as much happiness as he had given her.

Ann Hammond – Ann Hammond is a young English woman, a student, whom Sa'eed meets after giving a lecture at the University of Oxford. Hammond is completely taken by Sa'eed's exotic background and she immediately enters into a sexual relationship with him in which she plays his slave girl, "Sausan." She spends more and more time in London at **his apartment**, neglecting her studies in Oxford. She is devastated when, one day, Jean Morris arrives at Sa'eed's apartment while she is there. Hammond ultimately kills herself. During Sa'eed's trial for Jean Morris's murder, the prosecuting attorney suggests that Hammond, like Sheila Greenwood and Isabella Seymour, committed suicide as a consequence of Sa'eed's emotional manipulation and abuse, but Hammond's father, who testifies in the trial, also notes that his daughter was undergoing a spiritual crisis at the time of her suicide, and that this may have played a role in her decision to take her own life.

Sheila Greenwood – Sheila Greenwood is a young English woman from a humble background in northern England. Greenwood worked as a waitress in a café in Soho, London, where Sa'eed first met her. Like Isabella Seymour and Ann Hammond, Sheila Greenwood falls prey to Sa'eed's dangerous seductive charms, in spite of the fact that her parents would completely disapprove of their daughter having an affair with a black man. Like Seymour and Hammond, Greenwood also commits suicide after her encounter with Sa'eed. In Sa'eed's trial for his murder of Jean Morris, the prosecution suggests that Greenwood committed suicide as a result of Sa'eed's emotional manipulation and abuse.

Wad Rayyes – Wad Rayyes is an elderly man nearing 70 and a citizen of the small Sudanese village of Wad Hamid. He is good friends with the narrator's grandfather, Bint Majzoub, and Bakri. Handsome and vain, Wad Rayyes is renowned in the village for his sexual exploits and his many wives, and he takes pleasure in telling stories of his romantic conquests. He becomes obsessed with Hosna bint Mahmoud, Mustafa Sa'eed's widow, and insists on marrying her after Sa'eed's death, in spite of Hosna's refusal (and the fact that she is forty years his junior). Hosna's father forces her to marry Wad Rayyes. When Hosna refuses to sleep with him, Wad Rayyes attempts to rape her, and Hosna responds by fatally stabbing him and killing herself. Wad Rayyes's murder and Hosna's suicide are the most violent and shocking act that the sleepy village on the banks of **the Nile river** has ever witnessed.

Mahjoub – Mahjoub is the narrator's oldest and closest friend. He is a resident of Wad Hamid, the village where the narrator has roots. Mahmoud and the narrator attended elementary school together. However, while the narrator continues on with his education and eventually goes abroad to study, Mahjoub learns only enough arithmetic and writing to help him carry out farming work in the village. In spite of his limited education, he distinguishes himself as a village citizen, taking on a leading role in a village cooperative project that improves farmers' and villagers' lives. Through this project, he also becomes acquainted with Mustafa Sa'eed, the stranger who settles in the village, and whose secret history the narrator slowly uncovers. Mahjoub's pragmatic ability to effect change in the village is contrasted with the narrator's own more prestigious—yet emptier—work for the ministry of education in the capital, Khartoum. While the two friends are very close, their friendship is threatened after Hosna's murder of Wad Rayyes. The two take a different view of the murder-suicide: while Mahjoub condemns Hosna's actions, the narrator defends her, and this causes a break in their friendship.

The narrator's grandfather – The narrator's grandfather is a man nearing 90. He is a role model for the narrator, who looks up to him as a pillar of strength and endurance and as an example of how to live simply and happily. In spite of his age, the narrator's grandfather is in full possession of his mental and physical powers. A religious man, he constantly carries a rosary in his hand and goes regularly to the mosque to attend prayers. He is good friends with Bint Majzoub, Wad Rayyes, and Bakri, with whom he spends his free time chatting and laughing. The murder of Wad Rayyes by Hosna Bint Mahmoud, however,

devastates him, and sets the familiar world of the village of Wad Hamid—where he has spent his entire life—upside down.

Bint Majzoub – Bint Majzoub is an elderly citizen of the village of Wad Hamid. Bint Majzoub is an example of an outspoken, independent woman in a deeply patriarchal and conservative community. She has had several husbands, and, as a result, a wide sexual experience that speaks openly about—something very unusual for a woman to do in that community. She also exhibits other unusual habits for a woman, such as smoking and drinking. She is good friends with the narrator's grandfather, as well as with Wad Rayyes. Like everyone else in the village, she is devastated by Hosna's murder of her good friend Wad Rayyes. However, she is the only one in the village who agrees to disclose to the narrator the full details of the murder-suicide. While Bint Majzoub's uninhibited actions and behavior as a woman cast her as a free-thinking figure on one level, she, like the rest of the villagers, condemns Hosna's actions, even though she acted in self-defense.

Mustafa Sa'eed's mother – Mustafa Sa'eed's mother raises her son Mustafa Sa'eed alone, after his father's death while she was still pregnant. The relationship between herself and her son is rather cold and distant: she never expresses much emotion or affection towards Sa'eed when he is a child. However, when Sa'eed decides to attend school as a child, and when he wins scholarships to study abroad in Cairo and in England, she seems happy and supports her son's independence. Sa'eed never sees her again after he leaves Sudan to study; he receives news of her death years later in England.

Mrs. Robinson – Mrs. Robinson is the wife of Mr. Robinson, the principal of the school in Cairo to which Mustafa Sa'eed is sent to study on scholarship. Sa'eed has his first experience of sexual arousal when the full-figured Mrs. Robinson hugs him upon his arrival in Cairo. Mrs. Robinson and Mr. Robinson act as parent figures to Sa'eed during his stay in Egypt, and the relationship continues in England, where, after Mr. Robinson's death, Mrs. Robinson continues act as Sa'eed's guardian and protector. It is on her bosom that he rests his head after he is sentenced during his trial for the murder of Jean Morris. The narrator contacts Mrs. Robinson after Sa'eed's death to learn more about Sa'eed's life in England.

Mr. Robinson – Mr. Robinson is the husband of Mrs. Robinson. He is the principal of the school in Cairo to which Mustafa Sa'eed is sent to study on scholarship. He, along with his wife, acts as a parent figure to Sa'eed during his time in Egypt. An expert in Arabic and Islamic culture and architecture, Mr. Robinson converts to Islam before his death and is buried in a Muslim cemetery in Cairo.

The Mamur – The Mamur is a government official whom the narrator encounters one day on a train ride in Sudan. The Mamur had been in the same class as Mustafa Sa'eed in school, during the period of British colonialism. On the train ride, he recalls Sa'eed's genius and precocity to the narrator. The Mamur's unsolicited memories of Sa'eed represent one of several instances in the novel when Sa'eed, through the memories of others, suddenly appears to haunt the narrator.

Wad Baseer – Wad Baseer is a traditional "village engineer" in the village of Wad Hamid in Sudan. He has never attended school. Before the arrival of water pumps, he was charged with constructing water wheels along the banks of the **Nile river** that irrigated villagers' farm fields. He goes out of business once the new, modern water pumps arrive in the village.

Mahmoud – Mahmoud is eight years old. He is the eldest son to Mustafa Sa'eed and Hosna bint Mahmoud, and is also the older brother to Sa'eed. He is named after his maternal grandfather. Right before his death, Mustafa Sa'eed designates the narrator as guardian of Mahmoud and his brother and asks the narrator to spare his sons the pangs of "wanderlust." Mahmoud and his brother end up as orphans after their mother dies of suicide after killing Wad Rayyes.

Sa'eed (junior) – Sa'eed is seven years old. He is the youngest son to Mustafa Sa'eed and Hosna bint Mahmoud, and the younger brother to Mahmoud. He is named after his paternal grandfather. Right before his death, Mustafa Sa'eed designates the narrator as guardian of Sa'eed and his brother and asks the narrator to spare his sons the pangs of "wanderlust." Sa'eed and his brother end up as orphans after their mother dies of suicide after killing Wad Rayyes.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Bakri – Bakri is an elder resident of the village of Wad Hamid, on the banks of the **Nile river**. He is good friends with the narrator's grandfather, Wad Rayyes and Bint Majzoub.

THEMES

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GENDER AND VIOLENCE

In Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, relations between men and women are characterized by violence. During his time in England, the Sudanese protagonist of the novel, Mustafa Sa'eed, has a number of relationships with English women that end in death or murder. And in the small village of Wad Hamid in Sudan, where the novel's unnamed narrator encounters Sa'eed, tragedy strikes when Sa'eed's widow Hosna is forced to marry a man much older than herself. In its portrayal of relationships between men and women, the novel suggests

that—whether in Sudan or England—women everywhere are the frequently victims of violent misogyny.

Mustafa Sa'eed's relationships with his various mistresses in England are characterized by misogyny and violence. Sa'eed describes these women as his "prey," as targets which he deviously and intentionally seduces in order to wield power over them. He consistently deceives the women, lying about his true identity (by giving false names, for instance) and by cheating on them with other women. A number of the women he seduces end up taking their own lives, partly, it is suggested, as a result of Sa'eed's emotional manipulation of them. His lovers Ann Hammond, Sheila Greenwood, and Isabella Seymour all commit suicide after being in relationships with him. In the court case in which Sa'eed is tried for murder, it is suggested that these women end their lives partly because of Sa'eed's betrayal of them. During one year in London, for instance, Sa'eed lived with five different women simultaneously, deceiving each about his commitment to her. The misogyny and uneven power dynamic that characterizes Sa'eed's relationships with these women is exemplified most clearly in his relationship with Ann Hammond. In their intimate life, Ann Hammond plays the role of Sa'eed's "slave girl" "Sausan," and Sa'eed plays the role of her master. The master-slave roleplay that Sa'eed engages in with Ann suggests that the relationship may unequal in a broader sense, and that it is Sa'eed who wields the ability to dominate and subjugate Ann Hammond.

Sa'eed's relationship with his English wife Jean Morris is the most explicitly violent of his intimate relationships. Sa'eed characterizes his marriage to Jean as a "war," full of battles, which he invariably loses. His description of his marriage in this way suggests that the relationship between the genders is inherently one of conflict and violence. Indeed, unlike the other English women, Jean Morris refuses to let Sa'eed control her. Of all the women, she is the one who challenges Sa'eed the most, by refusing to allow him to subjugate her in the way that he subjugates other women. She behaves however she wants—flirting with other men, for instance—and often provokes Sa'eed in the process. This leads to scenes of violent conflict between the two. Sa'eed speaks of how, when provoked by Jean, he would often slap her. She, in turn, would answer his violence by also physically attacking him. The violence that characterizes the marriage between the two reaches its climax when Sa'eed murders Jean one February night in his **London apartment**. On that night, Sa'eed finds Jean waiting naked for him in bed. As he makes love to her, he plunges a knife into her chest, killing her. Although Jean herself seems to welcome her death, this violent ending to their relationship ultimately confirms that violence is central to it.

Violence doesn't just show up in the relationships between Sa'eed and English women in the novel. It also characterizes the relationships between Sudanese men and women in the small village of Wad Hamid on the banks of the **Nile river** in Sudan.

Signs of the violence to which women are subjected in that village are suggested in a conversation between the narrator's grandfather and his friends, Bint Majzoub, Wad Rayyes, and Bakri. The friends' conversation reveals that female circumcision is a widespread practice in the village, and also throughout Sudan. This deeply violent practice of removing parts of a woman's genitals shows the violence to which women are subject in that culture.

Sudanese women are also subjected to violence in other ways throughout the novel—particularly when it comes to their marital relationships to men. For instance, when Sa'eed's widow, Hosna Bint Mahmoud, refuses to marry Wad Rayyes, a man forty years older than her, she is subjected to violence by her father, who assaults her physically and beats her because she has dared to contradict his wishes. Furthermore, after being forcibly married off to Wad Rayyes, Hosna is subjected to rape. The village is awoken one night by screams coming from Wad Rayyes's house, and when the villagers break down the door to the house, they find that Hosna has been physically violated—she has bite marks and scratches all over her body. In defending herself against her husband's sexual violence, she kills him and stabs herself. The terribly violent end to which Hosna and Wad Rayyes come again emphasizes the conflict that characterizes relations between the genders in the novel. Certainly, Hosna perpetrates violence against Wad Rayyes, but this is only in response to the misogynistic sexual violence that has been perpetrated against her. In the process, she ends up destroying herself as well.

Throughout, *Season of Migration to the North* depicts relations between men and women as fundamentally conflict-ridden and fraught with violence. In these relationships, both genders suffer, but it is women who bear the brunt of the violence—as suggested in the tragic ends that many of Mustafa Sa'eed's lovers meet in England, as well as Hosna's own violation by her husband Wad Rayyes in the small village of Wad Hamid in Sudan. The novel, in other words, suggests that patriarchy and misogyny afflict women across the world in ways that lead to death and destruction. Women are consistently the targets of male violence, and they suffer tragic consequences as a result.

CONQUEST AND COLONIALISM

In *Season of Migration to the North*, the protagonist, Mustafa Sa'eed, thinks of himself as an avenger of the wrongs done to him and his people under British colonization of his native land, Sudan. During his time in England, he seeks to get revenge on white women, whom he approaches as embodiments of the European culture that subjugates his people. The novel suggests that the experience of colonization—an experience characterized by conquest and exploitation—corrodes relations between cultures and people. Colonialism, the novel suggests, not only corrupts the colonizer's view of the colonized, but it also distorts the

colonized's attitude towards the oppressor.

Colonization of Sudan by the British was fundamentally a relationship of conquest and exploitation. As Mustafa Sa'eed notes, the British ships that sailed down the **Nile river** during colonialism at first brought "guns not bread." Furthermore, schools were established by the British in order to teach the Sudanese people to "say 'Yes' in their language." British colonization also sowed seeds of discord amongst the Sudanese themselves. As a retired Mamur—a petty government official—tells the narrator on a train journey one day, the British "sowed hatred in the hearts of the people for us, their kinsmen, and love for their colonizers." The British did this by pursuing a policy of 'divide and rule'—by creating conflicts between different groups of Sudanese. British colonialism also continues to foster conflict even after the official end of colonial rule. Although Sudan has achieved its independence from colonial rule, as the Mamur notes, the British continue to direct the country's "affairs from afar." As a Western global power, the British are interested in maintaining their grip over the affairs of Sudan. In other words, the British still try to influence their former colonies, demonstrating that the effects of colonialism are profound and far-reaching.

This large-scale relationship of conquest and exploitation leads similarly corrupt relationships between individual people. Many of the English women Sa'eed encounters during his time in England view him in a simplistic way that echoes the stereotypes and images of the "other" made prevalent through colonialism. Ann Hammond, for instance, views Sa'eed as a symbol of "tropical climes, cruel suns, purple horizons." To her, the smell of his sweat evokes "the jungles of Africa" and "rains in the deserts of Arabia." Ann Hammond, in other words, views Sa'eed only in terms of stereotypical depictions of his native land. Sheila Greenwood, too, fetishizes Sa'eed as the exotic "other." She is fascinated by his black skin, telling him that it is "the colour of magic and mystery and obscenities." As the narrator notes, colonial relations lead Europeans to view those from the colonized world in terms of unrealistic extremes. He states: "Just because a man has been created on the Equator some mad people regard him as a slave, others as a god.'" Europeans—including Sa'eed's lovers such as Ann Hammond and Sheila Greenwood—can only view people from colonized regions in stereotypical terms, which are reductive and simplistic. It is true that Sa'eed himself encourages these stereotypes, but he is not the one who creates them—rather, they are the product of the exploitative and reductive colonial relations between England and Sudan.

Colonialism also twists and corrupts the perspectives of colonized people in the novel, rendering them unable to escape the framework of conquest and subjugation on which the entire colonial enterprise is built. Mustafa Sa'eed, for example, is critical of the subjugation that has been imposed on him and his people as a result of British colonialism, but he nonetheless repeats the same attitude of exploitation and conquest in his relations with the British women with whom he becomes romantically involved. With Ann Hammond, in particular, he plays the role of "slave master" to her "slave," thus repeating—in reverse—the same relationship of subjugation imposed by the British on many of the peoples—including the Sudanese—whom they conquered.

Likewise, Sa'eed approaches Isabella Seymour as if he is a conqueror. He imagines himself as one of the Arab soldiers who invaded Spain as part of the Islamic Empire's conquest of Europe during the Middle Ages. Sa'eed takes great pleasure in likening his romantic and sexual "conquest" of Isabella Seymour to the Arab soldiers' conquest of Spain. In this way, he merely reverses the terms of conquest and exploitation imposed on him by the British, by exploiting and "conquering" a British woman. Sa'eed also frames his murder of Jean Morris in terms of (reverse) colonialism and re-conquest. Describing the night he kills her, he tells the narrator: "I was the invader who had come from the South, and this was the icy battlefield from which I would not make a safe return." Again, rather than rejecting the terms of conquest and exploitation implicit to colonialism, Sa'eed simply attempts to reverse them, thus corrupting his own view of those over whom he has power .

Thus, in *Season of Migration to the North*, colonialism is depicted as a framework of exploitation and conquest that leads to the corruption of relations between people and cultures. The English women whom Sa'eed becomes involved with view him in reductive, stereotypical terms that evoke colonial clichés of the 'noble savage.' Likewise, Sa'eed's own attitude towards these English women is corrupted, as he views them as representatives of their European culture on which he can seek revenge.

MIGRATION AND IDENTITY

Both the narrator of *Season of Migration to the North* and the protagonist, Mustafa Sa'eed, leave their native land of Sudan to undertake long migrations to England, where they travel to study and ultimately live for many years. Upon encountering each other in the small village of Wad Hamid in Sudan after their travels abroad, the narrator and Sa'eed must confront the extent to which they have become alienated both from themselves and from those around them—their native countrymen. Through the example of these two men, the novel suggests that migration creates a loss of identity and a sense of displacement which can, if not confronted directly, lead to destruction.

Both Sa'eed and the narrator migrate to England to study, and thereby spend many of their formative years in a culture other than the one in which they have roots. As a child in Sudan, Sa'eed proves to be something of prodigy, and so he is sent abroad to study, first in Cairo and then in England. He then settles in England for thirty years. While the narrator of the

novel doesn't spend quite as much time abroad, he also migrates to England to study. There, he spends seven years pursuing a doctorate researching the life of an obscure English poet. After their long migrations, both the narrator and Sa'eed return to Wad Hamid, where the narrator has roots, and where Sa'eed hopes to build a new life as a farmer on the banks of the **Nile river**.

Although Sa'eed tries to settle down again in Sudan, he finds that, as a result of his time in England, he is caught between two worlds that he has trouble reconciling. Sa'eed's sense of being lost between two worlds is most acutely illustrated in his two rooms—the one in England and the one in Sudan. In England, he decorates his **London apartment** to suggest his 'exotic' origins, and he uses the room to lure English women.

In the small village of Wad Hamid in Sudan, however, Sa'eed has a **secret room**. This room recalls his life in England and the culture he left behind. The room is filled with English books—there are no Arabic books whatsoever. There is also an English fireplace in the room, something of an absurdity considering that the room is located in a on the equator, where there is no need for heating. Sa'eed feels that he belongs neither in England nor Sudan. Indeed, in the letter he leaves the narrator before his death, he suggests that his "wanderlust"—his inability to remain in one place and feel a sense of belonging there—leads to his death. It is quite possible that Sa'eed commits suicide as a result of his inability to be at 'home' either in England or in Sudan.

At first, the narrator of the novel—in contrast to Sa'eed— seems to be much more connected to his native land of Sudan, but he also begins to experience a loss of identity and a strong sense of displacement shortly after his return from England. While at first the narrator believes that his links to his native village have held fast in spite of his time abroad, he soon begins to realize this is not the case. When Sa'eed recites English poetry to the narrator one night as they are drinking together, the narrator suddenly feels completely out of place and alien in his environment. Additionally, the narrator begins to realize that his values no longer align with those of the villagers with whom he has grown up. This becomes especially clear when he defends Hosna, Sa'eed's widow, after she kills Wad Rayyes following her forced marriage to him. While many of the villagers—including Mahjoub, the narrator's good friend—condemn Hosna, the narrator defends her, and this leads to major conflict between him and other villagers. While the narrator can see the injustice to which Hosna has been subjected as a woman, the other villagers cannot.

Over time, the narrator realizes that Sa'eed's cultural alienation in fact reflects his own. He begins to feel estranged from the villagers and his surroundings as a result of connecting with Sa'eed and reliving their shared experience of living abroad. This is most acutely reflected in the scene in which the narrator enters Sa'eed's secret room, shortly after Hosna's murder of Wad Rayyes. In the room, the narrator mistakes his own face in the mirror for Sa'eed's. This moment of misrecognition suggests how much the narrator has in common with Sa'eed. Like Sa'eed, the narrator experiences a sense of alienation as a result of his migration to the north. In this scene, he is unable even to recognize his own face, which suggests a radical loss of identity. Nonetheless, unlike Sa'eed, the narrator survives his identity crisis. Whereas Sa'eed drowns (either by accident or by suicide) during floods in the village, the narrator exhibits a will to live, as reflected when he escapes the flood at the end of the novel. Ultimately, Sa'eed is destroyed by his loss of identity, whereas the narrator survives—literally and metaphorically—his loss of identity.

Season of Migration to the North suggests all the ways in which migration can lead to a sense of cultural confusion, loss of identity, and disconnection. Stuck between England and Sudan, both the narrator and Sa'eed find that they are unable to belong fully in either place. However, the narrator, unlike Sa'eed, is able to confront and assimilate his loss of identity in such a way so that it does not destroy him. Through their contrasting stories, the novel suggests that only actively confronting this kind of identity crisis can prevent it from becoming destructive.

MODERNITY AND CHANGE

Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* depicts the small village of Wad Hamid—as well as the country of Sudan in which it is located—undergoing major transformations as a result of modernization. The novel's unnamed narrator witnesses many of these transformations, and ultimately takes an ambivalent view towards them. Many of these transformations lead to improvements in people's lives and livelihoods, but not all of these changes are for the better. The novel suggests that with modernity comes a loss of tradition and ancient ways of life. Furthermore, most of the privileges of modernity are monopolized by the corrupt rulers who come to power after the end of British colonialism, demonstrating that the benefits of these changes are not equally distributed in a society like Sudan's.

Both technology and education are modern transformations that influence the village of Wad Hamid, as well as the wider country of Sudan, in important ways. Early on in the novel, the narrator notes how, over time, he watched the traditional water wheels that brought water to the farm fields along the banks of the **Nile river** be replaced by water pumps. The narrator's friend Mahjoub also notes other technological changes that affect the country and the village, such as the introduction of cars and radios. Furthermore, standardized education is another major element of modernity that reaches the villagers and other Sudanese people. The narrator himself, as well as Mustafa Sa'eed, benefits from the standardized schooling that is introduced initially during British colonial rule. Both go on to pursue advanced educational degrees in Europe.

The narrator's friend Mahjoub, while not pursuing an advanced degree, also attends school. Furthermore, as a result of this education, girls and women are given access to learning that they did not have before.

The technological and educational opportunities offered by modernity lead to improvements in people's lives. The lorries that are owned by the village cooperative that Mahjoub leads, for instance, allow for a quick and steady supply of goods from the capital, Khartoum, to the villagers. This allows the villagers to access the things that they want more quickly and cheaply, as Mahjoub notes to the narrator. Likewise, the new water pumps are more efficient in distributing water to the farms that line the village, which allows farmers to grow more consistent crops. Furthermore, more prevalent education not only allows villagers (especially girls) more extensive access to learning, but it also helps them better organize and plan their livelihoods and affairs. Mahjoub, for instance, uses the writing and arithmetic skills he learned in elementary school to help run the village cooperative project, which leads to improvements in other villagers' lives.

But the changes brought about by modernity are not always positive. In cataloguing these changes, the narrator suggests that they may also cause a loss of valuable traditions. The narrator notes, for instance, how Wad Baseer, the "village engineer" who had never gone to school and yet knew how to build doors and water wheels, goes out of business as a result of the coming of the water pumps. This, the narrator suggests, is a loss, as the water wheels represent an ancient, traditional way of life that is lost with the arrival of modern technology.

Furthermore, the fruits of modernity primarily benefit the corrupt rulers of the country and the continent. Foe example, the narrator recalls hearing the speech of an African Minister of Education at a conference in the capital, Khartoum. While this Minister talked about the necessity of being in touch with the African "people," the narrator notes how he owned a massive, expensive villa in Switzerland, and how his wife went shopping in Harrod's in London. The narrator's opinions of the corrupt new rulers of the continent point to the ways in which these rulers—like their colonial forbearers—have simply co-opted the privileges of modernity (including mobility and wealth) for themselves. Instead of passing on these benefits to the people, they monopolize the benefits of modernity to lead lives of luxury and comfort.

Presented through the narrator's point of view, the novel's depiction of modernity and change is ambivalent. On the one hand, the narrator's comments throughout the novel suggest that modernity does indeed bring about some positive changes to people's lives. Both technological and educational innovations bring opportunities to the villagers of Wad Hamid to which they would not otherwise have had access. On the other hand, a sense of loss is also associated with these drastic changes, as the narrator notes how traditional skills, crafts, and knowledge are lost as a result. Finally, the novel suggests that whatever positive changes modernity enables, its privileges are largely monopolized by the post-independence ruling elite, who behave like their colonial forbearers in hoarding vast wealth for themselves rather than passing on benefits to people like the villagers.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE NILE RIVER

The Nile river, on whose banks the Sudanese village of Wad Hamid sits, represents the great forces of nature, which are capable of both sustaining life and destroying it. The Nile's symbolic value as a force of nature capable of sustaining life is suggested by the fact that it is this river on which the villagers of Wad Hamid depend for their livelihoods. It is the waters of the Nile that irrigate their fields, and allow them to cultivate the crops that enable their survival in the otherwise hostile environment of northern Sudan, which is mostly desert. On the other hand, as a symbol of nature, the Nile is also depicted as potentially menacing and destructive. When the river overflows one year as a result of floods, it claims people's lives—most notably Mustafa Sa'eed's, who disappears into the waters, never to be found again. Likewise, the narrator almost loses his life when, at the end of the novel, he attempts to swim from one bank of the river to the other, and almost drowns in the process, as a result of the strong currents pulling him down into their depths. In its depiction as a force both capable of giving life and taking life, therefore, the Nile represents the contradictory, and awesome, powers of nature.

SA'EED'S LONDON APARTMENT

Mustafa Sa'eed's apartment in London, where he consummates his relationships with the English women whom he seduces, represents a fetishized version of his native Sudanese culture. Mustafa Sa'eed fills the room with the smell of incense, with small sparkling lights, and with rugs and paintings that all evoke a sense of the "exotic east." As such, the room reflects a European colonial view of the "east" as a place that embodies the foreign, the savage, and the magical. In embodying many of the stereotypes that Europeans hold about the east, Mustafa Sa'eed's apartment thus represents a reductive, fetishized, stereotypical version of his native culture. Sa'eed deploys this fetishized representation in order to lure English women such as Isabella Seymour, Sheila Greenwood, and Ann Hammond to him, knowing that his exotic roots are a

major source of their attraction to him. The London apartment, moreover, stands in direct contrast to Sa'eed's **secret room** in Sudan, which fetishizes his life in London.

SA'EED'S SECRET ROOM IN SUDAN

The secret room which Sa'eed builds in his house in the small village of Wad Hamid in Sudan represents his link to western culture. The room is lined from floor to ceiling with books in English (none of the texts are in Sa'eed's native language of Arabic). Furthermore, the room contains a real English fireplace—a symbol of British culture, which is a strange artifact to maintain in a small village on the banks of the **Nile river** in Sudan, located close to the equator, where there is no need of fireplaces. The pictures, paintings, and documents from Sa'eed's life in England, also contained in the room, further attest to his links to the western culture in which he has spent many of the formative years of his life. Sa'eed's secret room in Sudan stands in contrast to his **London apartment**. While the apartment in London embodies a fetishized version of his "eastern" roots, the room in Sudan represents his links to the west. Taken together, the two rooms suggest the extent to which Sa'eed is caught between these two cultures—western, English culture on the one hand, and his native eastern culture on the other.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the NYRB Classics edition of *Season of Migration to the North* published in 2009.

Chapter 1 Quotes

I hear a bird sing or a dog bark or the sound of an axe on wood—and I feel a sense of stability, I feel that I am important, that I am continuous and integral. No, I am not a stone thrown into the water but seed sown in a field.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: Book Page 6

Explanation and Analysis

After seven years spent pursuing doctoral studies in England, the narrator returns to Wad Hamid, the small village on the banks of the Nile in northern Sudan. He is from Wad Hamid, and his family and friends still live there. In the days immediately following his arrival, he reflects on his life in the village.

The narrator's statement suggests the extent to which he feels rooted in Wad Hamid at this point in the story. The familiar sounds of the village affirm to him his connection to the place; these are sounds, presumably, that he has been hearing since his childhood in the village. As such, the narrator's long migration abroad doesn't seem to affect his link to the village. The village is an integral part of his identity, and this is further affirmed in the metaphor he uses, in which he likens himself to a "seed sown in a field"—he is someone who is rooted and connected to his native soil, rather than like a "stone" thrown in the water that can have no roots, and which cannot grow. The narrator's identity, in other words, grows out of, and is anchored in, his native village.

I tell you that had the ground suddenly spit open and revealed an afreet standing before me, his eyes shooting out flames, I wouldn't have been more terrified. All of a sudden there came to me the ghastly, nightmarish feeling that we—the men grouped together in that room—were not a reality but merely some illusion.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mustafa Sa'eed

Related Themes:

Page Number: Book Page 14

Explanation and Analysis

One night, not long after his return to the village of Wad Hamid after his years living abroad, the narrator and Mustafa Sa'eed join a drinking gathering at Mahjoub's house. Mustafa Sa'eed gets quite drunk. Out of the blue, he begins reciting a poem in English. This shocks the narrator.

Sa'eed's recital of the English poem is shocking for several reasons. Firstly, it suggests to the narrator that there is much more to Sa'eed—the stranger who has recently settled in the village—than meets the eye. Sa'eed seems like a regular farmer and villager, similar to those around him, and yet his knowledge of English poetry, as revealed in this scene, alludes to the fact that he has deep links to western culture. Furthermore, Sa'eed's recital of the poem turns the narrator's world upside down, as it suggests that the village may not be what it seems—there are depths to it that lie hidden, just as there are depths to Sa'eed that are only revealed in his recitation. This, in turn, threatens the narrator's own sense of rootedness in the world of the

village: whereas, after his arrival in the village, he was comforted by a sense of connection and community, Sa'eed's English poetry makes him feel that he and those around him are mere "illusions," and that therefore his world, as well as his connection to it, is also mere illusion. This moment establishes the profound link between Sa'eed and the narrator's sense of identity, a connection that will continue to haunt the narrator throughout the novel.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"As we drank tea, she asked me about my home. I related to her fabricated stories about deserts of golden sands and jungles where non-existent animals called out to one another. I told her that the streets of my country teemed with elephants and lions and that during siesta time crocodiles crawled through it […]There came a moment when I felt I had been transformed in her eyes into a naked, primitive creature, a spear in one hand and arrows in the other, hunting elephants and lions in the jungles."

Related Characters: Mustafa Sa'eed (speaker), Isabella Seymour, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: Book Page 32-33

Explanation and Analysis

As Mustafa Sa'eed recounts to the narrator the story of his life in England over the course of a long night, he details his sexual conquests of English women. Among these women is Isabella Seymour, whom he meets in a London park one summer's day.

In seducing Isabella Seymour, Mustafa Sa'eed clearly feeds into, and exploits, western stereotypes about Africa and the Middle East, stereotypes which were made prevalent in the west through the enterprise of colonialism. He frames his homeland of Sudan as one "teeming" with wild, exotic animals—a notion that echoes the western/colonial conception of foreign lands as havens of exotic wildlife. Furthermore, his references to "deserts" and "jungles" also evoke extreme climates associated with the world of the 'colonized' other, worlds which are very different from that of England. Indeed, Sa'eed's exploitation of these stereotypes works to confirm Isabella Seymour's view of him as a "savage." Sa'eed's manipulation of Isabella Seymour in this scene suggests the extent to which he is ready and able to exploit stereotypes about himself and his culture in order to ensnare English women who are intrigued by his exotic roots and identity. In manipulating English women such as Isabella Seymour in this way, he demonstrates how the toxic power dynamics of colonialism can end up being reproduced in interpersonal relationships.

"For a moment I imagined to myself the Arab soldiers' first meeting with Spain; like me at this instant sitting opposite Isabella Seymour."

Related Characters: Mustafa Sa'eed (speaker), Isabella Seymour, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: Book Page 36

Explanation and Analysis

Over the course of a long evening in the village of Wad Hamid, Mustafa Sa'eed recounts to the narrator his life in England, as well as his various relationships with English women—most of which ended in death or violence. Here, he tells the narrator of his first encounter with the English woman Isabella Seymour in London.

In describing this first encounter with Seymour, the narrator frames it in terms of Arab conquest of Spain. In the 8th century, the Islamic empire had expanded northwards from the Middle East and Africa into Europe, conquering territory as far north as Spain. The narrator describes his approach to Seymour as a similar conquest: he wishes to conquer and subjugate her in the same way that the Arabs conquered and subjugated Spain, and in the same way that the English conquered and subjugated his native land of Sudan. This moment shows how Sa'eed is unable to escape the terms of conquest and subjugation that frame the colonial enterprise—even though he often frames himself to the narrator as a critic of colonialism.

Chapter 3 Quotes

Was it likely that what had happened to Mustafa Sa'eed could have happened to me? He had said that he was a lie, so was I also a lie?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mustafa Sa'eed

Related Themes:

Page Number: Book Page 41

Explanation and Analysis

After Sa'eed's death by drowning during a year of floods in the village of Wad Hamid, the narrator finds himself continuously haunted by Sa'eed, who had confessed to him his life story one night shortly before his death.

Like Sa'eed, the narrator also spent several years in England, and yet, unlike Sa'eed, he had initially felt very rooted and connected upon his return to his native land and village in Sudan. And yet, the narrator's questions here clearly indicate that the narrator's contact with Sa'eed has led him to question his sense of rootedness and connection—even his sense of identity. In England, Sa'eed had relationships with English women which all ended in violence or death, and upon his return to Sudan, his life also ends in a tragic death by drowning. Given that the narrator shares Sa'eed's experience of migration, he begins to wonder whether, like Sa'eed, he is also destined for tragedy. Sa'eed characterized himself as a "lie" to the narrator, and in wondering whether he himself is a lie, the narrator expresses a sense of uncertainty over his own identity—he seems to experience a kind of loss of identity as a result of his contact with Sa'eed. Through the narrator's doubts here, the novel suggests that some kind of identity crisis is an inherent part of migrations like his and Sa'eed's.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ "...mysterious things in my soul and in my blood impel me towards faraway parts that loom up before me and cannot be ignored. How sad it would be if either or both of my sons grew up with the germ of this infection in them, the wanderlust."

Related Characters: Mustafa Sa'eed (speaker), Sa'eed (junior), Mahmoud, The Narrator

Page Number: Book Page 56

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly before his death by drowning—either by suicide or accident—Mustafa Sa'eed writes a letter to the narrator, designating him as guardian of his wife and two sons. In the letter, he asks the narrator to guide his sons so as to spare them the pain of wanderlust.

Sa'eed's words in this letter suggest that he is ultimately destroyed by his inability to feel connected to any one place or people. The fact that he is impelled "towards faraway parts" reveals that he was unable to make a home in the small village of Wad Hamid in Sudan, where he had hoped to settle down and begin a new life after his time in England. Sa'eed is chronically alienated as a result of his wanderlust, and his history of migration. His insatiable desire to keep moving to new places quite likely leads him to take his own life by drowning, although this is never confirmed for certain. His desire that his sons should be protected from this "wanderlust" also suggests that Sa'eed recognizes that the need to keep moving is destructive, as it prohibits the ability to form roots or links to any one place or people. It seems that Sa'eed recognizes the need to confront his identity crisis, but the situation is so painful that he is ultimately unable to do so.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ Though Wad Baseer is still alive today, he no longer makes such doors as that of my grandfather's house, later generations of villagers having found out about zan wood doors and iron doors which they bring from Omdurman. The market for water-wheels, too, dried up with the coming of pumps.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Wad Baseer

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: Book Page 59

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator stands outside the traditional wooden door of his grandfather's house in the village of Wad Hamid in Sudan, he remembers Wad Baseer, the old "village engineer" who used to build the heavy wooden doors for village houses, as well as the water wheels that irrigated the farm fields along the Nile river.

The fact that Wad Baseer no longer makes traditional wooden doors and water wheels attests to the changes of modernization that have transformed the village. In the face of new technologies such as the water pumps, for instance, the villagers no longer need water wheels, thus rendering Wad Baseer's skill obsolete. Likewise, the villagers' recourse to the cheaper wood and iron doors shipped from Omdurman (near Khartoum, the capital) also point to the ways in which changes in industrial processes have transformed demand for traditional skills such as Wad Baseer's. While some of these changes of modernization improve the villagers' lives, they also sadly mark the passing of more ancient, traditional skills and arts, and the narrator suggests that these losses make increased modernization a mixed blessing.

❝ "The ships at first sailed down the Nile carrying guns not bread, and the railways were originally set up to transport troops; the schools were started so as to teach us how to say "Yes" in their language."

Related Characters: Mustafa Sa'eed (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 79

Explanation and Analysis

During a visit to Mustafa Sa'eed's widow Hosna, the narrator remembers her husband's words about British colonialism of Sudan, as he recounted the story of his life in England to the narrator.

Mustafa Sa'eed's comments to the narrator here point to the violence that underpinned the colonial enterprise as it unfolded in Sudan. Colonialism, in spite of British claims to the contrary, was not a "civilizing mission" so much as a mission of conquest: one which aimed at the subjugation of colonized peoples, such as the Sudanese. This is made explicit in the "guns" and the "troops" that Sa'eed mentions as integral to the colonial enterprise. Even the education that the British provided was offered in order to serve their own purposes: the Sudanese were educated so as to better understand the colonizer's orders, and to say "Yes" in their language. As such, the British colonial enterprise, as Sa'eed makes clear, was primarily an enterprise of subjugation. Since improved education is also a key aspect of increasing modernity in the region, Sa'eed's words here also suggest how modernization can be a force of oppression as well as liberation. That is, if schools are used to subjugate the people, then increased access to them may be of limited value to the people themselves.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ "You know how life is run here," [Mahjoub] interrupted me. "Women belong to men, and a man's a man even if he's decrepit."

Related Characters: Mahjoub (speaker), Wad Rayyes, Hosna bint Mahmoud, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: Book Page 83

Explanation and Analysis

After discovering that the old villager Wad Rayyes is intent on marrying Mustafa Sa'eed's widow Hosna, the narrator goes to speak to his old friend Mahjoub. The narrator finds Wad Rayyes's desire to marry Hosna perverse, particularly given that Wad Rayyes is forty years older than her, but Mahjoub disagrees.

Mahjoub's comments illuminate the deep patriarchy that frames relationships between men and women in the village of Wad Hamid, and in Sudan more generally. Mahjoub doesn't question "how life is run here;" he simply accepts as a given that women are men's property, and that "a man's a man even if he's decrepit." In other words, women such as Hosna have no say or control over their own affairs, including marriage, and men are regarded as women's masters irrespective of their own shortcomings—in this case, Wad Rayyes's old age. Mahjoub's seeming acceptance of this deeply unjust state of affairs, one which subjugates women to men, reflects the prevalent patriarchal values of the village.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ [Mahjoub] will not believe the facts about the new rulers of Africa, smooth of face, lupine of mouth, their hands gleaming with rings of precious stones, exuding perfume from their cheeks, in white, blue, black and green suits of fine mohair and expensive silk rippling on their shoulders like the fur of Siamese car, and with shoes that reflect the light from chandeliers and squeak as they tread on marble.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mahjoub

Related Themes:

Page Number: Book Page 98

Explanation and Analysis

When he returns to the village of Wad Hamid from the capital, Khartoum, after receiving the terrible news about Hosna bint Mahmoud and Wad Rayyes's deaths, the narrator is greeted by his friend Mahjoub. As they make their way into the village, the narrator thinks of telling his friend about a conference he has recently attended in Khartoum, where various ministers of education from all over Africa gathered to discuss educational policies.

The narrator's description of the opulence of these rulers' dress points to the corruption that defines their rule. The "rings of precious stones" glinting on their hands, their expensive suits made of fine materials, their gleaming shoes:

everything points to immense and limitless wealth. This wealth, in turn, suggests corruption—for no ordinary ruler would be able to afford the kind of luxuries that these rulers exhibit on their person. The narrator's description of this opulence, therefore, points to the ways in which much of the wealth of the African countries that gained their independence from European colonizers ended up in the pockets of a corrupt African ruling elite, who used it to enrich themselves. In this way, these new rulers behave as their colonial forbearers did, by exploiting the wealth of the countries over which they rule for their own gain. The narrator's words here also show how empty some aspects of the idea of modernity can be; the modern version of African success clearly works well for these rulers, but there's no sign that the benefits they enjoy ever extend to people in villages like Wad Hamid.

Chapter 8 Quotes

"A week or ten days after you went away [Hosna's] father said he had given Wad Rayyes a promise—and they married her off to him. Her father swore at her and beat her; he told her she'd marry him whether she liked it or not."

Related Characters: Mahjoub (speaker), Wad Rayyes, Hosna bint Mahmoud, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: Book Page 101

Explanation and Analysis

After he receives the terrible news that Hosna and Wad Rayyes have died, the narrator returns from Khartoum to the village of Wad Hamid. Mahjoub, his friend, fills him in on some of the events that have taken place after the narrator's previous departure from the village. He informs him that Hosna was forcibly married to Wad Rayyes.

That Hosna is forced to marry a man she does not want reflects the deeply unequal, and patriarchal, power relations that underpin relations between men and women in the village of Wad Hamid. Women have no control over their fates—men make all the decisions for them, as Hosna's father does in this case. Furthermore, the physical violence to which Hosna is subjected as a result of her resistance to her father's—and Wad Rayyes's—wishes further reinforces the idea that women are subject to severe punishment should they dare to contradict or challenge the power that men wield over them. Hosna's fate here mirrors that of the English women that Mustafa Sa'eed dominated and manipulated, which suggests that these power dynamics are not unique to Sudan—they may exist in various forms across the world.

"The red straw mat was swimming in blood. I raised the lamp and saw that every inch of Bint Mahmoud's body was covered in bites and scratches…Wad Rayyes had been stabbed more than ten times—in his stomach, chest, face, and between his thighs"

Related Characters: Bint Majzoub (speaker), Wad Rayyes, Hosna bint Mahmoud, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: Book Page 104-5

Explanation and Analysis

Upon returning to the village of Wad Hamid after receiving news of Hosna and Wad Rayyes's deaths, the narrator is confronted by silence when he tries to gather details about how, exactly, they died. Only the old lady Bint Majzoub tells him the details: after Wad Rayyes attempted to rape Hosna shortly after her forced marriage to him, she killed him and then herself in a murder-suicide.

The violence and the bloodiness of the scene that Bint Majzoub describes to the narrator underscore the deep conflict that characterizes relationships between men and women in the village. The "bites and scratches" that cover Hosna's body indicate that she was the victim of a rape attempt: after marrying her, Wad Rayyes attempted to force her to sleep with him. In self-defense, she kills her husband, before killing herself. The blood that covers the mat, as well as the wounds that cover both Hosna and Wad Rayyes's bodies, suggest that the ultimate consequence of patriarchal oppression is destruction—both for the female victim and the male perpetrator. In this way, patriarchal oppression only leads to terrible destruction, violence and loss, since even opposition to it ends up taking violent forms.

Chapter 9 Quotes

I struck a match. The light exploded in 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. […] I found myself standing face to face with myself.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mustafa Sa'eed

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 112

Explanation and Analysis

After learning from Bint Majzoub the details of Hosna bint Mahmoud's murder-suicide, in which she killed Wad Rayyes and then herself, the narrator enters Mustafa Sa'eed's secret room for the first time.

When he strikes a match upon entering the room, the narrator mistakes his own face in the mirror for that of Mustafa Sa'eed. This mistake is significant, for it alludes to the deep links that exist between the narrator's identity and Sa'eed's. On the one hand, the narrator thinks of Sa'eed as "his adversary"—the man who has turned his life upside down through his appearance in the village of Wad Hamid. On the other hand, the narrator has more in common with Sa'eed than he is willing to admit. Like Sa'eed, he has also spent time in England, and both Sa'eed and the narrator experience a loss of identity as a result of their migrations abroad. Indeed, the narrator's own loss of identity is encapsulated in this scene, as he mistakes his face for Sa'eed's. It's clear here that Sa'eed's own radical sense of displacement and alienation—which arguably lead to his death by drowning—reflects the narrator's. When the narrator mistakes his face in the mirror for Sa'eed's, he reveals his own loss of identity, as well as how much he has in common with his "adversary" Sa'eed.

> How ridiculous! A fireplace—imagine it! A real English fireplace with all the bits and pieces.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mustafa Sa'eed

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 113

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after the murder-suicide committed by Mustafa Sa'eed's widow Hosna bint Mahmoud, the narrator enters Sa'eed's secret room in the village of Wad Hamid. Sa'eed left the narrator the key to this room shortly before his own death by drowning. As he explores the room, the narrator is shocked to discover that Sa'eed has built an English fireplace against one wall.

The fireplace is shocking because the village of Wad Hamid is located close to the equator, and therefore the climate is such that there is no need of a fireplace to provide heating. In this regard the fireplace serves no functional purpose. And yet, the presence of the fireplace is significant because it reveals the extent to which Sa'eed is in thrall to English culture. Even though he relocated to a small village in Sudan, his native country, he clearly continued to feel a strong desire for the English life and culture he had left behind in England. This desire is reflected in the fireplace that he builds in his room. This "English" room with its fireplace recalls and contrasts with Sa'eed's "oriental" room in London, which reflected fetishized elements of his native culture. The two rooms, taken together, indicate the extent to which Sa'eed is trapped between two cultures and identities—he neither belongs to one nor the other. The "English" room in Sudan reflects his alienation from his native culture, and hints that this kind of destructive identity crisis is some ways a consequence of the British subjugation of Sudan under colonial rule.

> "How marvellous your black colour is!" she would say to me—"the colour of magic and mystery and obscenities."

Related Characters: Mustafa Sa'eed (speaker), The Narrator, Sheila Greenwood

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 115

Explanation and Analysis

As he explores Mustafa Sa'eed's secret room in Sudan—which contains a real English fireplace as well as a large collection of English language books—the narrator recalls Sa'eed's account of his life in England, including his various affairs with English women. Here, the narrator recalls Sa'eed telling him about Sheila Greenwood, who was enamored with his exotic appearance, especially his dark skin.

Sheila Greenwood's comments about Sa'eed's skin are

telling, for they suggest the extent to which she, as a white English woman, fetishizes his "exotic" identity. The "magic and mystery and obscenities" that she associates his dark skin with evoke a series of stereotypes and tropes associated with the non-western "other." People with dark skin, from "exotic" lands, are presumed to embody a magical, mysterious, and obscene identity; in other words, an identity that is set in opposition to the rational, logical, civilized identity of the western/European self. Such a reductive and stereotypical view of non-Europeans is largely the consequence of colonialism—an enterprise that was founded on the exploitation of non-European peoples by Europeans. Sheila Greenwood's comments about Sa'eed's skin, therefore, reflect the reductive and fetishized views that many Europeans hold towards non-Europeans and demonstrate how these views can play out on an individual, interpersonal level.

"In London I took her to my house, the den of lethal lies that I had deliberately built up, lie upon lie: the sandalwood and incense; the ostrich feathers and ivory and ebony figurines; the paintings and drawings of forests of palm trees along the shores of the Nile, boats with sails like doves' wings, suns setting over the mountains of the Red Sea, camel caravans wending their way along sand dunes on the borders of the Yemen, baobab tress in Kordofan, naked girls from the tribes of Zandi."

Related Characters: Mustafa Sa'eed (speaker), The Narrator, Ann Hammond

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 121

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator explores Mustafa Sa'eed's secret room in the village of Wad Hamid in Sudan, he remembers the story that Sa'eed told him about his life in England. Here, the narrator recalls Sa'eed's words about his London apartment, the place to which he would take his various English lovers, including, in this instance, Ann Hammond.

All of the elements with which Sa'eed decorates his apartment—the sandalwood and incense, the ostrich feathers, the paintings of exotic landscapes, the "naked girls" from indigenous African tribes, and so on—affirm the idea of his native land of Sudan as an exotic place full of "primitive" beauty. These decorations, in other words, recall widespread colonial stereotypes of colonized territories and peoples as primitive and exotic. That Sa'eed characterizes these decorations as "lies" indicates that he is well aware that these decorations recall stereotypes. By decorating his apartment in this way, Sa'eed plays into, and exploits, these ideas, knowing that English women are attracted to him largely because they associate him with these reductive and exotic stereotypes. Furthermore, Sa'eed's apartment in London is striking because it stands in stark contrast to the secret room that he builds in his house in Wad Hamid. While the room in Sudan is decorated to recall English culture and lifestyle, the room in London recalls an exoticized version of his native Sudanese culture. Taken together, the two rooms suggest the extent to which Sa'eed is trapped, and lost, between two identities and cultures. From recollections like these, it seems like this sense of fractured identity may be a cause of Sa'eed's destructive, manipulative relationships with women; just as colonial rule subjugated Sa'eed's people against their will, he seeks to get revenge by doing the same thing to women like Ann Hammond.

"The moments of ecstasy were in fact rare; the rest of the time we spent in a murderous war in which no quarter was given. The war invariably ended in my defeat. When I slapped her, she would slap me back and dig her nails into my face..."

Related Characters: Mustafa Sa'eed (speaker), The Narrator, Jean Morris

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 133

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator explores Mustafa Sa'eed's secret room in Sudan, he recalls Sa'eed's account of his life in England, including his marriage to the English woman Jean Morris.

Sa'eed describes his marriage to Jean Morris as a "murderous war." This indicates the extent to which the relationship between Sa'eed and Morris was framed by violence. Indeed, the two would often resort to physical violence, as confirmed in Sa'eed's assertion that they would assault one another. The brutality that characterizes the relationship between Sa'eed and Morris is significant, because it points to the way in which relationships between

men and women in the novel are invariably defined by violence, whether they take place in England or Sudan. In particular, Sa'eed's relationship to Morris in England mirrors Wad Rayyes's violent relationship with Hosna bint Mahmoud in Sudan. The novel repeatedly depicts relations between the sexes as inherently full of conflict and discord, conflict and discord that often ultimately spills into destruction and tragedy. The use of the word "war" here also gives a political character to these conflicts, which again links these interpersonal violences to the broader violence of colonialism.

❝ "I pressed down the dagger with my chest until it had all disappeared between her breasts. I could feel the hot blood gushing from her chest. I began crushing my chest against her as she called out imploringly: 'Come with me.'"

Related Characters: Mustafa Sa'eed (speaker), The Narrator, Jean Morris

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 136

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator explores Mustafa Sa'eed's secret room in his house in Sudan. As he does so, he recalls segments of Mustafa Sa'eed's story about his life in England, including his recounting of the murder of his wife, Jean Morris.

Sa'eed's murder of Jean Morris represents the culmination of the violent relationship between husband and wife. The murder also echoes the murder-suicide committed by Hosna bint Mahmoud, Sa'eed's widow, who kills her second husband Wad Rayyes by stabbing him, before killing herself. These two violent acts confirm the novel's depiction of relationships between men and women as inherently violent. And yet, Sa'eed's murder of Jean Morris is also depicted as an act of consummation or love: after all, Sa'eed kills Jean as he makes love to her on a bed, and Jean herself, in imploring Sa'eed to "come with [her]," seems to welcome her death. In other words, Sa'eed's description of Jean Morris's final words suggests that she herself sought destruction. Sa'eed himself, of course, goes on to die, quite possibly by suicide, and this suggests that he and Jean may share an impulse towards self-destruction. Ultimately, Sa'eed's murder of Jean points to how thin the line is between love, sex and violence in the novel—particularly as he and Jean seem to bond deeply in the moment of his killing her.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Was I asleep or awake? Was I alive or dead? Even so, I was still holding a thin, frail thread: the feeling that the goal was in front of me, not below me, and that I must move forwards and not downwards. But the thread was so frail it almost snapped and I reached a point where I felt that forces lying in the river-bed were pulling me down to them.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mustafa Sa'eed

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Book Page 138

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator finishes exploring Mustafa Sa'eed's secret room in his house in the village of Wad Hamid, he goes to swim in the Nile, as a means of calming himself after the emotional turbulence of the night. As he swims, he gets disoriented and begins to drown.

The danger that the narrator finds himself in here—on the brink of drowning—reflects the destruction he potentially faces as a result of his loss of identity. Like Mustafa Sa'eed, the narrator has lived abroad in England, and as a result he is caught between two cultures and identities: that of his native Sudan, and that of the country to which had migrated. Sa'eed himself dies by drowning, most likely by suicide, because he is unable to reconcile his English and Sudanese identities. Accordingly the narrator's near-drowning in this instance recalls Sa'eed's earlier drowning. It suggests that like Sa'eed, the narrator risks being destroyed by a loss of identity. Furthermore, the "forces" in the river that the narrator feels pulling him down allude to the fact that the Nile functions not only as a life-giving natural force, but also as a life-destroying natural force in the novel. As a river, the Nile has the ability to sustain life (by irrigating the villagers' farms that line its banks, for instance), and also to destroy life, as it nearly does the narrator's life here. Since the Nile is so closely linked to the village, it may act here as a symbolic representation of it; that is, the narrator both draws strength from the village and, at times, feels suffocated by it.

❝ Now I am making a decision. I choose life […] I moved my feet and arms, violently and with difficulty, until the upper part of my body was above water […] I screamed with all my remaining strength, "Help! Help!"

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mustafa Sa'eed

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: Book Page 139

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator swims in the Nile river shortly after exploring Mustafa Sa'eed's secret room, he finds himself drowning, the currents of the river pulling him down. However, just in the nick of time, he makes an effort to save himself.

The narrator's decision to "choose life" suggests his refusal to be destroyed. Indeed, his near-drowning parallels his near-destruction by the loss of identity that he experiences as a result of his migration to England. As was the case for Sa'eed, this time abroad leads to a deep sense of alienation—even in his home village of Wad Hamid. While Sa'eed himself dies by drowning, quite possibly by suicide motivated by this crisis of identity, the narrator survives. His survival suggests that unlike Sa'eed, he ultimately finds the strength in himself to overcome this confusion of identity, which is symbolized by the river Nile's dangerous currents. Thus, while the narrator has many similarities to Mustafa Sa'eed, especially his experience of migration, the narrator manages to break his bond to Sa'eed by confronting his fears directly and choosing to continue living in spite of them.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The narrator, addressing a group of "gentlemen," recounts his return to his home village on the banks of the **Nile river** in Sudan, after seven years of studying in Europe. The narrator is happy to be home—he had missed his people while abroad—and they welcome him back to the village with open arms. In his first day and night in the village, he feels a sense of rootedness and belonging. On his second day in the village, however, he recalls that, among those who had gathered to greet him on his arrival, there was a strange man. He asks his father about him, and his father tells him that the man is named Mustafa, a stranger about whom little is known. Mustafa arrived in Wad Hamid five years earlier and married a local woman, Hosna bint Mahmoud.

The narrator's arrival in the village marks his return to his native roots. The feeling of belonging that he instinctively experiences in the village suggests his deep sense of connection to his native land and its people. His identity—in spite of seven years spent studying abroad—seems to still be securely anchored in the village. And yet, the stranger Mustafa's appearance also alludes to the fact that there have been changes in the village since the narrator's departure: all is not entirely the same as he left it.

In his first days in the village, the narrator goes to his favorite place, under a tree by the **Nile river**, and, looking out at the water, he feels a sense of stability and rootedness. He thinks of the fact that his grandfather can tell him stories about the village as it was fifty—or even eighty—years ago. During a visit, the narrator asks his grandfather about Mustafa, but his grandfather cannot tell him anything about the stranger's roots. However, he praises Mustafa's good character.

The continued sense of ease and rootedness that the narrator experiences as he visits familiar places in the village suggest the extent to which he is connected to the place and its people, in spite of his time abroad. However, the mystery surrounding Mustafa foreshadows how this sense of connection will become more complicated as the novel continues.

Two days after the narrator's visit to his grandfather, Mustafa knocks on the narrator's door. The narrator is at home with his family during the quiet afternoon hours, and he invites Mustafa in. He is struck by Mustafa's excessive politeness, and by the mix of strength and weakness apparent on his handsome face. When he asks Mustafa where he is from, Mustafa answers that he is from the outskirts of Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, and that he had been in business there, but decided to come up north and settle in the village to farm.

The narrator's first impressions of Mustafa's face suggest that Mustafa may be a conflicted person: two opposing qualities—weakness and strength—are both present in his face. This instinctive perception hints at the identity crisis that both Mustafa and the narrator will come to experience.

Two months pass by in peace, during which the narrator occasionally encounters Mustafa. One evening, he is at a drinking gathering at his friend Mahjoub's house, and Mustafa stops by to ask Mahjoub something about the agricultural project they both participate in. Mahjoub insists that Mustafa join them in drinking. Mustafa is clearly reluctant, but he is pressured and finally agrees. The narrator watches as Mustafa becomes more and more inebriated. Suddenly, to the narrator's shock, Mustafa begins reciting a poem in English. The narrator jumps up, confronting Mustafa, wanting to know where he has learned the poem, but Mustafa leaves.

Mustafa's drunk recital of English poetry is shocking to the narrator because it suggests that Mustafa is in fact not who he claims to be. While Mustafa previously told the narrator that he was a businessman from Khartoum, his recital of English poetry here suggests that he has been deeply immersed in English culture and language. In other words, he is not just an ordinary Sudanese farmer. He is a man with a secret identity, one with links to England. His previous reluctance to reveal this identity, as well as the narrator's strong reaction to discovering it, suggests that English identity is an emotionally charged topic for both of them.

The next day, the narrator goes to find Mustafa in his fields. He again confronts him about speaking in English the previous night. Mustafa tells him he can't remember what he had said or done the night before; he was drunk. The narrator, nonetheless, implicitly threatens Mustafa, telling him it's best if he shares the truth about who he is.

Mustafa's attempts at evading the narrator's demands to reveal who he truly is—by claiming he can't remember what he had done or said the night before—reaffirm the sense that there is something about his identity that he wants to hide, hinting that this secret may be painful for him.

The narrator doesn't have to wait long. Mustafa appears at his house later that day and invites him to come over the next evening. The narrator goes to Mustafa's house as arranged. There, Mustafa makes him swear that the narrator will keep what he is about to share to himself; the narrator agrees. Mustafa then proceeds to show him two passports—Sudanese and British—that reveal that he was born in Khartoum. The British passport is stamped with many foreign visas, which further intrigue the narrator.

In making the narrator swear that he will keep this secret, Mustafa suggests that the story he is about to tell is explosive in some way. His further revelation of the much-stamped British passport (in addition to the Sudanese passport) affirms that there is much more to Mustafa's identity than meets the eye. The two passports also suggest that Mustafa's identity may be similarly split in two; he is neither entirely English nor entirely Sudanese.

CHAPTER 2

Mustafa begins telling his story, informing the narrator that he was born in Khartoum, as his passports show, but that his father died a few months before his birth. He had no siblings, and he had a distant relationship with his mother. One day, a British colonial officer asks Mustafa, still a young child, whether he wants to go to school, and Mustafa says he does. When he does begin school, it immediately becomes apparent that Mustafa is something of a child prodigy: he is so ahead of his classmates that, by the age of 12, the headmaster—a British man—tells him that he should go abroad to study. Mustafa himself, though still young, feels a deep need to move on to bigger things.

The British colonial officer reveals that Mustafa grew up under British colonialization of Sudan. At the time of his childhood, the Sudanese were a subject people to the British, who oversaw the country's affairs, including the education of Sudanese. This incident also hints at the complicated realities of colonialism; Mustafa was subjugated under British rule, but British people were also the ones who gave him opportunities to excel. Mustafa's prodigal talents as a school student indicate how, even at a young age, his identity was unique amongst those that surrounded him.

A scholarship is arranged for Mustafa to attend high school in Cairo. His mother seems happy when he tells her that he is going, although they never say good-bye properly. Mustafa arrives in Cairo, where he is looked after by the headmaster of the school there, Mr. Robinson, and his wife, Mrs. Robinson. Mustafa is attracted to Mrs. Robinson and feels the stirrings of sexual desire when she hugs him upon arrival. He associates the city of Cairo with her, and he remains there studying for three years, during which time he continues to greatly impress his teachers with his intellectual achievements. He is so brilliant that, at fifteen, he secures a government scholarship to continue his studies in London.

Mustafa's travels to Cairo to study mark the beginning of his migration out of his native land of Sudan. This migration is also associated with the awakening of his sexual identity, which will become central to his experiences as an adult in England. His continued academic brilliance in Cairo again marks him out as unique—as a young man with exceptional talents, and therefore exceptional opportunities. At this point, this unique identity seems purely beneficial; Mustafa doesn't yet experience the conflicting identities that will torment him later in life.

Mustafa arrives in London, which he finds to be incredibly green and orderly. It is interesting to hear the English language (which he had mastered at a phenomenal speed in school) actually spoken by the English people around him. In London, he enters the world of a woman named Jean Morris. He says that everything that had happened before his encounter with her was a "premonition," and that "everything I did after I killed her was an apology, not for killing her, but for the lie that was my life."

As Mustafa begins to recount to the narrator his arrival in England, he almost immediately jumps forward to his encounter with the English woman Jean Morris. His confession that he has killed her is shocking—indeed, it confirms that Mustafa's past, and therefore his identity, is framed by violence, specifically violence toward women. It also begins to explain why Mustafa might want to keep his past a secret.

Mustafa goes on to recount to the narrator the moment of his meeting with Jean Morris at a party in London, when he was twenty-five. The second time he met her, she told him that he was ugly, and he had sworn then and there that one day he would make her pay. The next morning, he had woken up with Ann Hammond in his bed in his **London apartment**—a young, intelligent, pretty woman from an upper-middle class family. Mustafa had slept with her—as he had with other women—in his bed, in a room decorated with mirrors, which gave the impression of him sleeping with a harem. Shortly after her relationship with Mustafa, Ann Hammond committed suicide by gassing herself. She had left a note behind saying, "God damn you, Mustafa Sa'eed."

Clearly, from the beginning, Mustafa's relationship Jean is full of conflict: she insults him and he wants to make her pay. His mention of his lover Ann Hammond's suicide note, in which she 'damns' him, suggests that she blames him for the misery that led her to take her own life. Mustafa's relationships to women, it seems, are full of violence and conflict. His description of the mirrors he put up on his bedroom walls also suggests that he seeks experience stereotypically masculine, even misogynistic power over women.

Mustafa skips from the memory of Ann Hammond's suicide to his trial in a British courtroom. There, he remembers being cross-examined by the prosecutor, who asked him whether he had caused the suicides of Ann Hammond, Isabella Seymour and Sheila Greenwood. Mustafa replied, "I don't know." However, to the prosecutor's question of whether he had killed Jean Morris, he answered, "Yes."

That three women Mustafa has had relationships with commit suicide indicates that something was terribly awry in Mustafa's relationships to these women—even if in his trial he says he 'doesn't know' if it was because of him that they killed themselves. And his acknowledgment that he had, in fact, killed Jean Morris affirms that violence—whether physical or emotional—was integral to his relationships with these women.

Mustafa pursued Jean Morris for three years. One day, she gave in to him, telling him that she was tired of him chasing her. They then married. But Mustafa tells the narrator that their bedroom was a "theater of war," one which always left him defeated, after his days spent working as a lecturer of economics at the University of London.

In characterizing his marriage to Jean Morris as a war, Mustafa affirms that his relationship to her was full of conflict and suggests that violence is a key aspect of how he relates to women.

Mustafa then recalls another of his lovers, Sheila Greenwood, wondering aloud how she had found the courage to commit suicide. A girl from a humble background, she had worked as a waitress in a Soho restaurant, where Mustafa had first met her. After her relationship with Mustafa, she also committed suicide. Mustafa remembers that, during his trial for the murder of Jean Morris, the prosecutor pointed out that Mustafa, in the period between 1922 and 1923, lived with five different women simultaneously, going by a false name with each one and making promises of marriage to each.

That Mustafa lived with five different women over the span of a year, and went by a different name with each one, shows that he consistently deceived and manipulated his lovers. Though the reader doesn't yet know why Mustafa treats women this way, the shocking story of his actions (and the tragic consequences for Sheila) makes it clear that Mustafa's relationships are examples of toxic gender dynamics.

Mustafa then recalls his encounter with Isabella Seymour—another of his victims. He met her in a London park on a summer's day, quickly seducing her with his exotic descriptions of the **Nile river** and the wild animals in the jungles of his homeland. When she asked him what his race was—whether he was African or Arab—Mustafa had replied that he was "like Othello," "Arab-African." Playing on her desire to fetishize him, Mustafa seduced her, and a month after their meeting, brought her to his **London apartment**—to his room evocative of the oriental "East"—to sleep with her.

Mustafa clearly exploits English women's desire to fetishize him as an 'exotic' other. This works on Isabella Seymour, who is captured by the colonial stereotypes and tropes that Mustafa evokes, including his likening of his racial identity to that of the famed Shakespearean tragic hero, Othello. In manipulating Isabella's impressions of him in this way, Mustafa seeks to gain power over her by playing on the very colonial power dynamics that oppress Sudanese people like him.

CHAPTER 3

On a July night, during a summer season when the **Nile river** floods, Mustafa Sa'eed disappears. The village men search for him along the riverbank, but they cannot find his body—it seems that he has drowned. The narrator, who has returned to Khartoum for work, hears of Sa'eed's death in the capital. Since the night of Sa'eed's long narration, the narrator has been seized by strange feelings. He wonders, especially after Sa'eed's death, whether Sa'eed had even existed, or whether he was simply a figment of the narrator's imagination.

Mustafa Sa'eed's death is as mysterious as his life: he simply disappears without a trace in the floods. Clearly, the narrator's encounter with Sa'eed leaves the narrator feeling destabilized. That their relatively brief interaction is enough to make the narrator question even his own perception of reality shows how fragile the narrator's seemingly strong identity may actually be.

The narrator recalls that, after Mustafa finished narrating his life story on that night, he left Mustafa's house and wandered through the deserted village. Although the village was deeply familiar to him, he had never walked through it at such a late hour. As he walked, he heard one of the villagers, Wad Rayyes, making love to his wife, and he remembered Mustafa Sa'eed's description of "two thighs, opened wide and white" in London.

The narrator's recollection of wandering the village after listening to Mustafa suggests that he is seeing the village in a new light—literally, because he has never wandered through the village at such a late hour, but also metaphorically, because Sa'eed's narration somehow changes his perception of things. Indeed, his association of the sounds of Wad Rayyes' lovemaking with Mustafa's narration suggests that the narrator's observations of the village are now being filtered through Mustafa's life story.

The narrator then went to his grandfather's house, where he found him already preparing for his morning prayers. In the presence of his grandfather, the narrator felt a sense of stability and rootedness, feeling connected to the village again after missing it during his time abroad. He thought of the colonizers—the British—ruling over Sudan, and mused that, sooner or later, they will leave. With these thoughts, he left his grandfather's house and finally went to bed. Soon after that evening of Mustafa Sa'eed's narration, the narrator relocated to Khartoum to take up a job working for the ministry of education.

As in other instances in the novel, the narrator's relationship to, and contact with, his grandfather helps to re-affirm his sense of connection to the village, and therefore his sense of his own identity as tied to it. His thoughts on British colonialism suggest that he takes a rather matter-of-fact attitude towards colonial rule. He does not seem to be disturbed by it, but views it rather as a passing phase. This attitude shows how even something has oppressive as colonialism can become normalized over time.

Although Mustafa Sa'eed died two years earlier, the narrator continues to think of him while living in Khartoum. Sa'eed has become a "phantom" in the narrator's mind. At strange occasions, Sa'eed comes up. On a train journey one day, the narrator begins a conversation with a retired civil servant, a Mamur, who, reminiscing about his school days, suddenly mentions Sa'eed. The Mamur had been in the same class as Sa'eed in school, and he tells the narrator that Mustafa had been the most brilliant of the students—especially in the English language. He was so brilliant that he had been sent on scholarships to study in Cairo and London. But nothing was heard of him again.

The fact that Mustafa Sa'eed continues to haunt the narrator even after his death indicates the depth of the effect that Sa'eed has on him. This haunting also implicitly suggests that the narrator has more in common with Sa'eed than he might be willing to admit. Their shared experience of migration links them, while the fact that the narrator keeps encountering people who knew Sa'eed suggests that some fateful links the two men.

The narrator listens to the Mamur, without mentioning that he himself had known Mustafa Sa'eed, and that he has died by drowning (quite possibly a suicide). When he died, Mustafa left the narrator as the guardian of his two sons.

The narrator's suspicion that Sa'eed has in fact committed suicide alludes to the way that Sa'eed was ultimately unable to settle down and make a new life in Wad Hamid. A suicide would suggest that some sense of loss and rootlessness motivated him to take his life. By leaving the narrator as guardian of his two sons, Sa'eed also solidifies the link between him and the narrator.

Mustafa again appears to the narrator unexpectedly, less than a month after the encounter with the Mamur. At a party in Khartoum, a group of guests begins discussing who was the first Sudanese to marry an English woman. Someone identifies Mustafa Sa'eed as the first.

The news that Sa'eed was the first to marry an English woman confirms another way in which Sa'eed's life was exceptional: not only was he an academic prodigy, but he was the first to break cultural and social barriers by marrying a British woman. However, the reader already knows at this point that this marriage was full of terrible conflict, suggesting that colonialism creates inherently violent relationships between cultures and individuals.

The man who identifies Sa'eed says that Sa'eed had settled in England and had worked for the British in the 1930s, helping them to keep a hold on the colony of Sudan. Mustafa Sa'eed, he says, was one of the most loyal supporters of the British—and of their colonial enterprise in Sudan. Now, the man says, Mustafa is a millionaire living in the British countryside. The narrator corrects him. He tells him that, at the time of his death, Mustafa Sa'eed owned very little and lived in a small, obscure village in northern Sudan.

The man's assertion that Sa'eed was a supporter of the British brings up the question of where, in fact, Sa'eed's loyalties lay. Sa'eed, after all, benefitted immensely from British rule—it was under this rule that he found the opportunity to pursue his education and to migrate to England. However, it's also clear that Sa'eed's fury over colonialism was, in part, the reason that he chose to inflict such violence on English women. Again, the overall effects of colonialism seem to remain uncertain and complex.

An Englishman at the party goes on to recount what he heard about Mustafa Sa'eed: that he had become a darling of the British aristocracy in England, as well as of the leftists, who used their relations with him to show how liberal they were. In England, Sa'eed had developed a reputation for being a great ladies' man.

The Englishman's further comment that Sa'eed was beloved both by aristocrats and leftists reaffirms the mystery of Sa'eed's true loyalties and identity. In England, it seems he was embraced by very different groups of people, whom he may well have been manipulating in the same way he manipulated the women he met in England.

CHAPTER 4

Speaking to the "gentlemen" directly, the narrator states that he does not want them to think that he became obsessed with Mustafa Sa'eed after his death, although he continues to return to the village every year from Khartoum to visit Mustafa's sons. The narrator, along with his own wife and child, are always greeted warmly by the village people.

The narrator's assertion that he does not want the reader to think that he became obsessed with Sa'eed is somewhat ironic, given that, up until this point, he has spoken almost exclusively about Sa'eed. Clearly, in spite of his assertions to the contrary, the narrator is in fact obsessed with Sa'eed—the latter has affected his sense of identity in some deep way.

On one such visit to the village, the narrator's mind wanders back to Mustafa Sa'eed, especially since Sa'eed had left him a letter before his death, designating the narrator as guardian of his wife Hosna, his children, and his belongings and property. In the letter, Sa'eed notes that he is also leaving the narrator the keys to enter a **secret room** in his house, which contains notes, diaries, and mementoes from his time in England. Sa'eed hopes that perusing these might help the narrator quench his curiosity about Sa'eed's life.

By appointing the narrator as guardian of his wife and children, and leaving him the key to his secret room, Mustafa Sa'eed seems to weave a web of connection between himself and the narrator. By taking Mustafa's place as the guardian of his family and prized possessions, the narrator embodies the conflicted sense of personal and cultural identity that the two men share.

In the letter, Mustafa Sa'eed asks the narrator to spare Mustafa's two sons Mahmoud and Sa'eed the "pangs of wanderlust." He himself had settled in the village in the hope of sparing himself from wanderlust, but he writes in the letter that a part of him still yearns to move on to "faraway parts that loom up before [him] and cannot be ignored."

In asking the narrator to spare his sons wanderlust, Sa'eed suggests that this is what has led him to feel so unsettled and rootless, and, perhaps, this is what led him to suicide, given that he could not give up the yearning for "faraway parts." Sa'eed's history of migration, in other words, has led him to feel rootless and alienated, even in the peaceful, pleasant village of Wad Hamid. Because the influence of colonialism is what led Sa'eed to migrate away from Sudanm it also seems that colonial power structures are at least partly to blame for this sense of alienation.

The narrator reflects that, if Mustafa Sa'eed has committed suicide, then he has undertaken the most "melodramatic" act of his life. He considers, however, that perhaps the **Nile river** claimed him naturally—that Mustafa Sa'eed did not kill himself but rather drowned accidentally. He muses on the death, wondering whether Sa'eed would not have preferred to die in the far north, on an icy field, rather than in a small, hot village on the equator.

Like much of Sa'eed's life, his death is also a mystery. The role that the Nile plays in his death by drowning alludes to how this ancient river has the power to take life. Symbolically, then, Sa'eed's geographical roots are, in part, what ultimately claims his life.

The narrator recalls Mustafa Sa'eed telling him that, at his trial, the jurors deprived him of the death that he so longed for. On that final night with Jean Morris, she had asked Mustafa to "come with her"—meaning, presumably, to die with her—but he had been too afraid. He hoped that the jury would impose on him the death that he himself had been too cowardly to seek.

Sa'eed's desire for death can be seen to reflect some desire for destruction—something he was not able to achieve with Jean Morris in spite of killing her. It's possible that this attraction to destruction is another way in which he seeks to act out the corrupting patterns of colonialism, just as he dominates women in order to avenge his own domination by the British.

However, even Ann Hammond's father, testifying in the trial, said that he could not be sure whether to blame Sa'eed for his daughter's suicide, or whether she had simply undergone a spiritual crisis. And so, rather than being given the death penalty, Sa'eed was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment only. After his release from prison, he moved from one place to the next, until he finally ended up in the small village of Wad Hamid by the **Nile river**. But the narrator says he has not returned to the village to think of Mustafa Sa'eed. Instead, he thinks of the river, flowing north.

Sa'eed's travels after his release from prison—a relatively light sentence for murder—indicate that he was unable to settle down and establish roots in one place. Indeed, in the letter he leaves to the narrator, he confesses that "wanderlust" continued to plague him even in Wad Hamid. Sa'eed's inability to set down roots in one place points to a loss of identity: he is alienated and rootless after his release from prison, and perhaps the pain of this identity crisis is what led him to wish for death.

CHAPTER 5

During his visit to the village, the narrator goes to his grandfather's house, standing outside a door built by the "village engineer" Wad Baseer. He notes, however, that Baseer is no longer in business in the village; he used to make traditional water wheels that have now been replaced by automated pumps. There, the narrator finds his grandfather with visitors: Wad Rayyes, Bakri, and Bint Majzoub. In the house, the narrator again feels a sense of rootedness and connection as he marvels at his grandfather's long life. The guests talk about their various sexual exploits as young people. Bint Majzoub, a woman nearing seventy, talks about her sex life with one of her husbands. In the village, she is notorious for her uninhibited talk. The elders discuss Wad Rayyes's desire to marry again and whether it is appropriate, given that he is growing old. A heated debate erupts about the merits and disadvantages of female circumcision, a widespread practice in the village and in the country. When the guests finally rise to leave, Wad Rayyes invites the narrator to lunch the next day.

The conversation between these village elders points to the complicated gender politics of the village of Wad Hamid. On the one hand, the social landscape of the village makes space for such strong and bold women as Bint Majzoub, who can hold her own with men, speaking openly and without shame about her own sexual exploits. On the other hand, the discussion around female circumcision, and the prevalence of the practice in the village, also shows how women are routinely subjected to violence under the guise of 'traditional practices.' This moment also hints at the questions surrounding modernity in the village, as it demonstrates how traditional ways of may have both positive and negative features. While more modern treatment of women seems like it would be a positive change, the valuable work of craftspeople like Wad Baseer is being made obsolete by the forces of increasing modernity.

After the guests leave, the narrator's grandfather informs the narrator that Wad Rayyes wants to marry Mustafa Sa'eed's widow, Hosna. Wad Rayyes has invited the narrator to lunch because the narrator, per Sa'eed's request, is now Hosna's guardian. His grandfather thinks it is time for the widow to marry—it has been three years since Mustafa Sa'eed's death. The narrator, however, is upset by this news. He is angry that people—including his own grandfather—want to force Hosna to marry Wad Rayyes, a man forty years her senior, even though she has rejected much younger men who have sought her hand.

The news that Wad Rayyes wants to marry Hosna—and that the narrator's grandfather expects the narrator to pressure her to do so—points to the precarious place women occupy in the social landscape of the village. Clearly, village men such as Wad Rayyes and the narrator's grandfather feel they have the authority to determine what is right for Hosna, rather than allowing her the freedom to determine this for herself. This moment creates a link between the women the village and the women that Sa'eed tried to dominate back in England; even in two such different settings, the novel suggests, women face similar kinds of danger and oppression.

CHAPTER 6

That very same day, the narrator visits Mustafa Sa'eed's house. He is greeted by Sa'eed's widow Hosna and her two sons, Mahmoud and Sa'eed. One of the boys is eight and the other is seven. One of the reasons the narrator returns every year to the village is to check on them, as he is officially their guardian—this time, he has specifically come for their circumcision celebrations. The narrator and the widow sit, and as darkness falls, they slowly grow more comfortable in their conversation. The narrator asks Hosna if she loved Mustafa Sa'eed, and whether she knew where he was from. She confesses that she thinks he was hiding something from her. She tells the narrator that Mustafa used to spend a lot of time inside his **secret room**, which she has never entered, and that in his sleep, he would sometimes mutter words in a foreign language that sounded like "Jeeny, Jeeny."

The narrator's conversation with Hosna reveals how, even in his most intimate relationships, Mustafa Sa'eed kept his deepest secrets to himself. This extreme secrecy suggests the extent to which Sa'eed chose to alienate himself from his family in Sudan. The word "Jeeny" also recalls Jean Morris' name. This suggests that Sa'eed continued to be deeply haunted by his life in England, and by Jean Morris specifically, even after his arrival in Wad Hamid. This ongoing pain shows how the deep conflicts created by colonial power dynamics—and that play out in toxic relationships between men and women—can have lasting negative consequences for everyone involved.

Hosna tells the narrator that it was as if, before his death, Mustafa Sa'eed knew his end was coming. He had arranged everything beforehand—paying off his debts, and even informing her that the narrator was to be her guardian. In the darkness, as the narrator listens to Hosna crying, he remembers Mustafa Sa'eed telling him about his trial—how the two lawyers for the defense and the prosecution had fought to save and to condemn him, respectively. Throughout the trial, Sa'eed had felt as though he were superior to those around him, "a colonizer" come to conquer, just as the British had come to Sudan to conquer.

The fact that Sa'eed made so many arrangements immediately before his death supports the narrator's suspicion that Sa'eed died by suicide. Sa'eed's feeling that he was a "colonizer" during his trial in England points to his deep desire to occupy the position of his British colonial master—even if doing so means committing the same kinds of atrocities. This twisted series of events shows how the lingering consequences of colonialism can reverberate through the relationships between individuals.

The narrator listens to Hosna weep, then tells her to think about the future—about marrying again. She says she will never marry after the death of Mustafa Sa'eed. When the narrator mentions Wad Rayyes's interest in her, she says she will kill him and herself if she is forced to marry him.

Hosna's absolute refusal to entertain the possibility of marrying Wad Rayyes suggests that she recognizes her own subjugation in this deeply patriarchal society and chooses to challenge it. However, it's notable that the only form of protest available to her is violence. That is, because Hosna is living in a violently oppressive society, her own resistance also comes in the form of violence. This dynamic mirrors Sa'eed's response to being violently subjugated by the British: he chose to inflict similar violence on others.

The next morning, Wad Rayyes comes to visit the narrator, unable to wait even until their appointed meeting time later that day. The narrator tells Wad Rayyes that Hosna doesn't want to marry him. Wad Rayyes is extremely upset, and he insists that he will marry no one but Hosna. Wad Rayyes accuses the narrator of having some kind of a relationship with Hosna, and this is the reason she is refusing to marry.

Wad Rayyes's insistence that he will marry Hosna, whether she likes it or not, reveals the deeply patriarchal and misogynistic nature of the relations between the sexes in the village of Wad Hamid. Wad Rayyes feels that he is entitled to Hosna, regardless of her own feelings towards him.

The narrator goes to see his friend Mahjoub, whom he finds working in his field, and they discuss the conflict over Hosna's potential marriage to Wad Rayyes. Mahjoub tells the narrator that if Hosna's family agrees to wed her to Wad Rayyes, there is nothing anyone can do about it. Women belong to men in the village.

Mahjoub's words that women belong to men further reaffirm the extremely unequal and patriarchal nature of village relations—one which subjugate women to men. Again, the situation of these women mirrors that of the English women whom Mustafa dominated and ultimately killed. Even if the subjugation of women in England is less explicit than that of women in Sudan, the novel demonstrates how it can be similarly lethal, hinting that such violent gender dynamics exist everywhere across the world.

The conversation turns to Hosna's dead husband, Mustafa Sa'eed, about whom the narrator questions Mahjoub. Mahjoub expresses admiration for Mustafa Sa'eed; he tells the narrator he had gotten to know him well when they worked together on the village cooperative project. Sa'eed, Mahjoub says, had really helped the villagers organize themselves economically. Mahjoub wonders why Mustafa Sa'eed made the narrator guardian of his wife and children, considering that the narrator knew him for much less time than the other villagers.

Mahjoub's praise of Mustafa Sa'eed suggests that Sa'eed worked hard to establish himself as a model citizen in the village. However, it is clear that he deceived villagers such as Mahjoub by withholding the facts of his past life. Nonetheless, it seems from this conversation that Sa'eed was a genuinely positive presence in the village, which suggests that even someone who has done terrible things may also have a good side. Again, the question of Sa'eed's true identity has no clear answer.

Suddenly, Mahjoub suggests that the narrator should marry Hosna himself, given that he is her legal guardian (even though the narrator himself already has a wife and child). When Mahjoub makes this proposal, it dawns on the narrator that he might, in fact, be in love with Hosna.

The narrator's realization that he might be in love with Hosna reveals another link between him and Sa'eed: not only is he the guardian of Sa'eed's widow, but he has developed romantic feelings for her, thus mirroring Sa'eed's own feelings and relationship to her.

CHAPTER 7

After the circumcision ceremony of Mustafa Sa'eed's two boys, the narrator leaves the village of Wad Hamid and returns to Khartoum, going by road over the desert. On the trip through the endless desert, he is haunted by thoughts of Mustafa Sa'eed, Hosna, and the **secret room** to which Mustafa has left him the keys. He thinks of how the various women Sa'eed encountered in England fetishized him. For example, Isabella Seymour had told Mustafa that he was a god. "How strange!" thinks the narrator, reflecting on this. "Just because a man has been created on the Equator, some mad people regard him as a slave, others as a god. Where lies the mean?"

The fact that the narrator is continually haunted by thoughts of Sa'eed suggests that, even after his death, Sa'eed's grip on the narrator's imagination continues to grow. The narrator's reflections on Seymour's fetishization of Sa'eed also alludes to the way in which colonialism—the relationship of subjugation between England and Sudan—corrupts Europeans' views of the colonized and leads to simplistic, stereotypical perceptions of oppressed peoples.

A Bedouin asking for cigarettes stops the lorry the narrator rides in, and then they come across a government car that has broken down; the soldiers and sergeant inform them that a woman from a local tribe has killed her husband, and they are on their way to arrest her. The narrator thinks that he will write to Mrs. Robinson, who, after Mr. Robinson's death, had gone to live on the Isle of Wight.

The soldiers' news that a woman has killed her husband is significant, because it alludes to the ways in which violence shapes relationships between men and women in the novel. Furthermore, the woman in this instance hasn't solved anything through this violence; she's being arrested and will presumably be harshly punished. The novel suggests that, though ubiquitous, the violence between men and women is ultimately pointless.

As the sun is setting, the lorry stops again for a break. The narrator is moved by a sense of peace, and he listens to the lorry driver as he sings to his vehicle. More and more cars on their way to or from Khartoum stop, their passengers joining in the gathering. Soon, the assembled passengers make "a festival to nothingness in the heart of the desert." People dance, drink, eat and smoke, until the dawn, when they part to go their separate ways.

This spontaneous festival that emerges in the heart of the desert represents one of the high points in the narrator's story—for once, he is distracted from thoughts of Mustafa Sa'eed, and immersed instead in the fellowship that develops between him and his fellow travelers. This brief instance of peace demonstrates how connections with others can bring genuine solace in the face of personal confusion and oppressive societies.

CHAPTER 8

The narrator descends from a steamer onto the quay of the village of Wad Hamid. Only his friend Mahjoub is there to meet him. The narrator asks how Mahjoub could have let "this" happen, and Mahjoub says what has happened has happened. Mustafa Sa'eed's two sons are with him. But Mahjoub refuses to explain to the narrator what, exactly, *has* happened. Instead, he expresses curiosity about a conference organized by the ministry of education, the department for which the narrator works in Khartoum.

The narrator's return to the village is shrouded by mystery. Clearly, something major has happened—as indicated in the narrator's reference to "this," and the fact that, except for Mahjoub, the usual crowd of family and friends aren't there to greet him. The sons' presence indicates that something related to Mustafa Sa'eed and his sons has drawn the narrator back; their identities are still intertwined.

The narrator doesn't want to talk about the conference. Under better circumstances, he would have shared details with Mahjoub, telling him about the corruption of the new rulers of Africa. There, the narrator had also met a minister who knew Mustafa Sa'eed in London. This minister told the narrator that Sa'eed used to half-jokingly say that he would "liberate Africa with [his] penis."

The narrator's thoughts on the corrupt new rulers of Africa suggest how independence has in fact not brought prosperity to most Africans. The fruits of modernity, which were supposed to be passed on to the people, have instead been monopolized by the ruling elite. Sa'eed's comment that he would "liberate Africa with [his] penis" alludes to this idea of a symbolic rape, in which both European colonizers and the post-independence ruling elite take what the want from African countries without regard for the destruction they're causing. Furthermore, the minister's memory of Sa'eed also makes it seem as if Sa'eed's sexual relationships in England were his way of violently resisting African oppression, by imposing that same domination on white European women. This link hints at a close tie between the inherent subjugation of colonialism and that of patriarchal gender dynamics.

As they pass the cemetery, Mahjoub tells the narrator that they have buried the bodies and asked the women of the village not to mourn the deaths. He tells the narrator that, about a week or ten days after the narrator's previous departure from the village, Hosna's father had forced her to marry Wad Rayyes. For two weeks after the wedding, Wad Rayyes kept complaining that Hosna refused to speak to him or let him touch her. Mahjoub doesn't divulge more about what has happened.

The news that Hosna was forcibly married off to Wad Rayyes points to the complete powerlessness of women in the village. Meanwhile, news of unmourned deaths and quick burials, suggests that something catastrophic has happened as a result of Hosna's forced marriage.

Hoping to learn more, the narrator asks around the village, but he is met with silence everywhere. His mother shares with him that Hosna had come to his father and asked that he tell the narrator to marry her. The narrator's grandfather, too, refuses to share any details about the recent events. He mourns the death of his good friend Wad Rayyes, and cries before the narrator; it occurs to the narrator that he has never seen his grandfather weep before. All his grandfather shares is that nothing of this magnitude has ever happened in the village before.

The silence that the narrator faces everywhere he turns alludes to the strict social taboos that govern village relations. Something clearly 'shameful' has happened, and so the villagers are unwilling to speak. That Hosna had asked that the narrator marry her suggests how desperate she was to escape her forced marriage to Wad Rayyes. It seems, then, that Hosna's desperation has in turn caused something that makes the entire village similarly desperate. This incident suggests that patriarchal oppression of women doesn't just harm individual women; here, Hosna's personal misery affects everyone.

On his third day in the village, facing walls everywhere, the narrator goes to see Bint Majzoub, taking a bottle of whiskey with him to offer her as a gift. Bint Majzoub, in fact, is the only one in the village who agrees to share with him, in detail, what has happened. She tells him that, one night, she woke up to the sound of Hosna screaming in Wad Rayyes's house. She thought that Wad Rayyes was finally getting his way with Hosna and having sex with her. But then Wad Rayyes also began bellowing, saying that Hosna Bint Mahmoud had killed him. Bint Majzoub had then rushed to Wad Rayyes's house, along with others, but found the door to the house locked.

In beginning to reveal the details of the cataclysmic events that occurred during the narrator's absence, Bint Majzoub's alludes to the ways in which sex and violence are intertwined. Clearly, the relationship between Wad Rayyes and Hosna ended in violence, even if this violence was first mistaken by Bint Majzoub for sex. Thus, her words point to the thin line that exists between love and brutality in the novel, particularly in relations between the sexes—recall that Mustafa Sa'eed's murder of Jean Morris occurred under similar circumstances.

Bint Majzoub and a few others broke down the door. Inside, they discovered Wad Rayyes's naked body, stabbed more than ten times in the torso, and Hosna Bint Mahmoud's almost naked body, covered in bite marks and scratches. After killing Wad Rayyes, Hosna had plunged the knife into her own heart. Bint Majzoub, Mahjoub, Bakri and a few others had buried the bodies quickly before sunrise. When Bint Majzoub and other women informed Wad Rayyes's elder first wife about the murder-suicide, she told Bint Majzoub and the other women that Wad Rayyes had deserved his death, and that Hosna had paid him out "in full." Bint Majzoub remembers that, in the aftermath of the murder-suicide, people in the village had fallen to fighting with one another, as if they had been visited by devils.

As Bint Majzoub further reveals the gory details of this event, it becomes apparent that the final encounter between Wad Rayyes and Hosna was one of extreme violence. As a woman, Hosna was subjected to rape by her husband—as the marks on her body attest. Her murder of Wad Rayyes can thus be read as an act of self-defense against her own violation. Her suicide, however, suggests how the patriarchal violence unleashed by Wad Rayyes destroys her as well as him. Bint Majzoub's comments that people had fallen to arguing with one another in the village after the murder-suicide allude to how this unimaginably violent event changes and affects the villagers, turning their world upside down. Again, patriarchal oppression doesn't just affect individuals; it sows widespread conflict in entire communities.

After his meeting with Bint Majzoub, the narrator goes to find Mahjoub out in his field, working. He shares with Mahjoub what he has learned from Bint Majzoub. Mahjoub is angry that the old lady has divulged the details of the murder-suicide to the narrator.

Mahjoub's anger over the fact that Bint Majzoub has revealed details of the violent event to the narrator suggest that the villagers simply wish to bury the murder-suicide in silence. This in turn implies an unwillingness to confront the misogynistic violence that led to the murder-suicide in the first place. Here, the novel seems to suggest that together, silence and violence form a vicious cycle that will continue to plague the village and, perhaps, the world more broadly.

Mahjoub says that before her marriage to Wad Rayyes, Hosna had approached him and asked him to ask the narrator to marry her, only platonically, to save her from Wad Rayyes. Mahjoub says Hosna was mad, but the narrator contradicts him. As he weeps, the narrator tells Mahjoub that Hosna was the sanest woman in the village. However, Mahjoub contradicts him and further insults Hosna, saying she was hardly worth burying, and that her corpse should have been thrown into the river or left out for the hawks instead. He makes fun of the narrator for going "soft." Enraged, the narrator attacks Mahjoub and they fight until the narrator is knocked out by his friend and loses consciousness.

Mahjoub's attitude toward Hosna shows how the patriarchal order of the village—an order that casts women as men's 'property'—condemns any woman who seeks to challenge it. In defending Hosna, the narrator reveals himself to be in conflict with the values of the village. For the first time, he is severely disconnected from his native village, and its people. This is exemplified in the physical fight that he ends up in with Mahjoub. The narrator's identity is no longer securely anchored in the village and its values. Just as the village is caught between its traditional modes of being and the ongoing changes of modernity, so too is the narrator stuck between his roots in the village and the broader perspective he has gained abroad.

CHAPTER 9

One night, shortly after learning of the details of Hosna's murder-suicide, the narrator stands outside of the **secret room** in Mustafa Sa'eed's house. He enters. Inside, he strikes a match and sees a face. He thinks it is the face of Mustafa Sa'eed, but as he approaches, he realizes that it is his own face. The narrator finds a lamp, lights it, and sees that the four walls of the room are covered in books. He is astonished to find that there is also a fireplace—a real English fireplace—in the room. The narrator begins to set fire to the rugs, but then puts it out.

In mistaking himself for Mustafa Sa'eed in the mirror, the narrator reveals the extent to which his own identity has become intertwined with Sa'eed's as a result of their shared experience of migration. The fireplace in the room is astonishing, primarily because it reveals Sa'eed's desire to maintain a memento of—and a link to—his former English life in England. Of course, the fireplace is completely unnecessary in a hot climate like Sudan's.

The books on the walls are on all topics; among them are Mustafa Sa'eed's own published books. None of the books is in Arabic. Above the mantelpiece is a painting of a woman. There are also photographs of Mustafa Sa'eed and a photo of Sheila Greenwood, which she signed. She told Sa'eed that her mother would go mad if she found out her daughter was romantically involved with a black man, and her father would kill her. She was completely engrossed by Sa'eed's exotic appearance and cultural roots before she committed suicide.

The fact that the books are all in English further reveals that Sa'eed's secret room is a kind of temple to his English life. Clearly, in spite of settling in Wad Hamid, he was unable to give up his connection to England, as well as to the many English women with whom he developed relationships that ended tragically. The secret room also exemplifies the complications of colonialism; Sa'eed drew meaning from the nation that oppressed his people, even as he was filled with violent rage over that very oppression.

Another signed photograph depicts Isabella Seymour. When she met Mustafa Sa'eed, she was a church-goer and a married woman, raising two children. In a letter she left Mustafa Sa'eed before her death, she wrote that she hoped that Sa'eed would find as much happiness as he had given her. In court, her husband took the stand, admitting that his wife had cancer before her death, and testifying that she had admitted the affair to him a few days before she died. Nonetheless, he said that he felt no bitterness towards her or the accused, Mustafa Sa'eed.

Clearly, Sa'eed's encounters with English women often turned their lives upside down. Seymour, however, seems to have been glad to have had her life shaken up by Sa'eed..Seymour's positive interpretation of their relationship, despite the fact that Sa'eed intentionally dominated her, seems to mirror the way that Sa'eed remembers Britain fondly, even as he hates its colonizing influence.

The narrator thinks that, after all these victims, Sa'eed still managed to crown his life with another—Hosna Bint Mahmoud. The narrator picks up a third photograph—this one of Ann Hammond. He remembers what Sa'eed told him about her: that she had begun spending more and more time in London, neglecting her studies at Oxford, in order to be with him. She would inhale the smell of his armpits and tell him how it was the smell of "rotting leaves in the jungles of Africa…the smell of rains in the deserts of Arabia." Sa'eed had met her in Oxford after giving a lecture on the Arabic poet Abu Nawas.

Hammond's comments about Sa'eed's smell reveal how, like many of his other English lovers, she fetishized him, taking him to be a symbol of his 'primitive' and 'exotic' native land. The associations she establishes evoke colonial stereotypes about the colonized 'other'—and Africa specifically. Her comments reveal how the colonial relationship leads people to view each other in reductive, essentialist ways that may even reproduce the dynamics of colonialism in interpersonal settings.

Sa'eed would quote Arabic poetry to Ann Hammond, and she would tell him that in his eyes she could see deserts. He took her to his "oriental" **London apartment**, where Ann would play his slave girl and he her master. She was found after she gassed herself in her flat, leaving behind a note that said: "Mr. Sa'eed, God damn you!"

The play-acting of Hammond and Sa'eed, in which she would play his slave girl, suggests how their relationship merely reversed the terms of the colonial oppression, rather than challenging it. Sa'eed becomes 'master' over Ann, in the same way that the British were 'masters' of Sudan. The gender dynamic of this 'slave-master' relationship demonstrates how women are subjugated across the globe, while also linking that oppression to the dehumanizing effects of colonization.

The narrator picks up a photo of Mustafa Sa'eed with Mrs. Robinson and Mr. Robinson in Cairo, in 1913, and remembers the letter he received from Mrs. Robinson recently, in which she spoke of Sa'eed as "dear Moozie," remembering her and her husband's love for him. She mentioned in the letter that she was writing a book about their life together.

Mrs. Robinson's love for Mustafa Sa'eed, though platonic, suggests that she—like the other English women—fell prey to his immense charms and talents.

The narrator opens a notebook entitled "My Life Story—by Mustafa Sa'eed." There is hardly anything in the notebook, except for a cryptic sentence. He finds sketchbooks with Mustafa's sketches, as well as scraps of notes and poetry. The narrator grows tired of putting these pieces together; he realizes that Sa'eed wanted to be "discovered;" he wanted the narrator to puzzle together these pieces of his life.

The fact that Sa'eed expects that the narrator will bring together these scraps reveals that Sa'eed understood that his and the narrator's identities were inextricably linked, as a result of their shared experience of migration. For the narrator, however, this challenge is an exhausting one; his desire to set aside this puzzle suggests that he would also like to be able to stop puzzling over his own identity.

The narrator turns to the painting of Jean Morris above the English mantelpiece. He recalls, again, Mustafa Sa'eed's story of his relationship with Jean Morris, how she would torment and humiliate him at parties. Sa'eed had fallen in love with her nonetheless. Once, he had kept away from her for two weeks, but she showed up at his house, driving away Ann Hammond in tears. She stripped naked before Sa'eed, but whenever he tried to touch her, she would demand to destroy his valuable belongings—which he allowed her to do. When he finally came near her, she hit him. Sa'eed pursued her for three years until she agreed to marry him.

The extremely conflicted relationship between Jean Morris and Sa'eed reveals how, in Jean Morris, Sa'eed met his match. Unlike his other English lovers, Jean Morris represented a challenge to Sa'eed, inflicting violence on him in ways that he had never confronted with other women. Of course, this reciprocal violence only ends in more tragedy; it's clear from Sa'eed and Jean's relationship that meeting violence with violence makes conflict worse rather than solving it.

After their marriage, Jean Morris refused to let Mustafa Sa'eed sleep with her. Two months into the marriage, he threatened her with a knife. She bared her chest to him then and told him to kill her, but he was too afraid. It was then that Sa'eed remembered that he had received news of his mother's death nine months earlier. He wept belatedly. One day, as they were sitting together in a park, Jean finally kissed him, and they made love right then and there, on the park bench. This sexual contact with Jean made Sa'eed feel like an "invader," a conqueror arriving from the south.

Jean Morris's refusal to sleep with Sa'eed echoes Hosna bint Mahmoud's refusal to sleep with Wad Rayyes. In both cases, women refuse men access to their bodies, thereby asserting their ownership over their own bodies. But like Hosna, Jean ultimately finds that her efforts are futile; both women escape oppression only through death. That Sa'eed feels like an "invader" when Jean Morris does finally allow him to sleep with her suggests that Sa'eed views his sexual relationship to her in terms of conquest, a dynamic that mirrors Britain's colonial domination over Sudan.

While Mustafa Sa'eed had his moments of ecstasy with Jean, most of the time they were at war, even resorting to physical fights. Jean would make him jealous by flirting with other men. One day, he found a handkerchief which didn't belong to him in the house and he questioned her about it, demanding to know whom it belonged to. However, whenever he questioned her about her lovers, she challenged and rebuffed him.

The war that characterizes the marriage between Jean and Sa'eed reveals how Sa'eed's relationships to women were framed by violence and conflict. The handkerchief that Sa'eed discovers is an allusion to William Shakespeare's play Othello, in which the eponymous hero—convinced that his wife Desdemona is betraying him—confronts her about a man's handkerchief he discovers.

One cold winter's night in February, Mustafa Sa'eed returned home to find Jean Morris stretched out naked on the bed in his **London apartment**, her thighs open. As his eyes roamed over her body, he took out a knife. On this night, he felt in control, and indeed, Jean seemed to have given herself up to his power. She had kissed the blade that he held in his hand and urged him to take her. It was then that Mustafa had pressed the dagger between her breasts, and then lay on top of her, pressing it down into her chest. She was ecstatic as he did so, telling him that she thought he wouldn't have had the courage to kill her. As she was dying, they told each other that they loved one another.

Sa'eed's description of murdering his wife suggests that Jean desired, indeed welcomed, her own death; it seems, in a way, to have been a suicide like those of the other English women and perhaps Mustafa himself. That this murder takes place in the context of sex—with Jean stretched out naked on the bed beneath Mustafa—reinforces how closely love, sex and violence are intertwined in the novel. Indeed, the three are indistinguishable from one another in this scene.

CHAPTER 10

The narrator enters the **Nile river**, naked. He has left Mustafa's **secret room**, without burning it. Instead, his feet led him to the river at dawn, hoping to calm himself after the disturbing night spent piecing together segments of Mustafa's life in the secret room. Once in the river, the narrator begins swimming towards the northern shore, but then, as he makes his way, he becomes disoriented. He feels forces deep in the darkness of the river pulling him down.

The narrator's disorientation in the river is significant, for it alludes to the emotional and psychological upheaval that he experiences as a result of his encounter with Mustafa Sa'eed—and, more broadly, as a result of their shared experience living abroad. His near-drowning here recalls Sa'eed's own drowning earlier in the novel, thus suggesting that the narrator—whose identity has become so deeply interlinked with Sa'eed's—risks suffering the same fate as Sa'eed: death by drowning.

The narrator is exactly in the middle of the river, between north and south. He begins to go down into the water, to drown, the darkness of the river closing over him. But then suddenly he feels a strong longing for a cigarette. He realizes that he does not want to die; he wants to choose life. He begins swimming again, until he is above water, and calls desperately for help.

The narrator's realization that he wants to live, rather than die, and his efforts to save himself represent the moment when he chooses a different fate than Sa'eed's. While the narrator is clearly almost destroyed by the identity crisis that he suffers—the same crisis that in fact destroys Sa'eed—here he decides that he will not be destroyed: unlike Sa'eed, the narrator will overcome his crisis and survive. In this regard, his survival can be seen to embody a break in his identity from Sa'eed's.

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