Storytelling and Paradox in Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree

Master of Arts

In

Humanities

by

Kendra Lynne Pearson

San Francisco, California

December 2021
Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Storytelling and Paradox in Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* by Kendra Lynne Pearson, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Humanities at San Francisco State University.

________________________
Cristina Ruotolo Ph.D.
Professor,
Thesis Committee Chair

________________________
Laura Garcia-Moreno Ph.D.
Professor

________________________
Persis Karim Ph.D.
Professor
Intertextual connections abound in Tayeb Salih’s novel *Mawsim al-Hijrah ila ash-Shamal* (*Season of Migration to the North*). Most scholars have read *Season* through the lens of postcolonial theory, focusing on the novel’s reworking of western texts. Others have shown that the novel not only writes back to the west but also speaks to the historical context in the Arab-Islamic world. This thesis offers a new reading that highlights the novel’s debt to the Islamic literary tradition. Mapping out *Season*’s intertextual relationship with Attar’s *Mantiq al-Tayr* (*Conference of the Birds*) this thesis focuses on the novel’s attention to the power of language, its non-linear concept of time, and its demand upon the reader to participate in moments of contradiction and paradox. An Islamic text with special significance in the Sufi tradition, *Conference of the Birds* introduces the understanding of storytelling as an ethical practice. The multilayered significance of language suspends linear thought and thrusts the reader into a place of chaos and possibility. By incorporating these themes *Season* deconstructs binary oppositions and reveals their integral relationship.
Acknowledgements

I am truly grateful to each of the faculty who have shaped my experience in the Humanities MA program. I would especially like to thank my wonderful committee: Dr. Cristina Ruotolo, Dr. Laura Garcia-Moreno, and Dr. Persis Karim for their time, energy, and support. I would never have made these connections, known about Attar’s beautiful stories, nor pursued a master’s degree had my path not crossed with Dr. Amir Sabzevary. I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Amir for his endless compassion and generosity. My husband encouraged me to go back to school and has kept me sane throughout the process. Thank you, Madjid, for sharing this life with me. Lastly, I thank my family for putting up with my absences, for their unconditional love, and for being the foundation that taught me openness, acceptance, hospitality, and to always acknowledge the humanity in others.
# Table of Contents

Introduction: Deconstructing Binaries ....................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: Salih’s Historical Context............................................................................................ 6

Chapter 2: Intertextual Relationships in *Season of Migration to the North* ......................... 13

Chapter 3: Attar’s “Parable of Sheikh San’an” ........................................................................ 28
   Connecting the Parable to *Season* ...................................................................................... 37
   Reading Deeply .................................................................................................................... 41

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................... 48

Works Cited ................................................................................................................................ 49
Introduction: Deconstructing Binaries

“I am going to tell a story” begins a Sudanese elder; “Yes” replies his audience. “It is a lie” he proclaims; “Yes” they rejoin yet again, “But not everything in it is false.” In this exchange the storyteller and his audience take a moment to set up an agreement before proceeding into the uncertain realm of narrative. Acknowledging that the story is not a statement of pure and simple fact informs the audience of their role as listeners. Because the story is a lie they will not take it at face value, and because not everything in it is false they will not dismiss it outright. The audience is tasked with developing a sensitivity to metaphor and to the subtle meaning that transcends language.

The narrator’s voice in Tayeb Salih’s *Mawsim al-Hijrah ila ash-Shamal* (*Season of Migration to the North*) sets up the groundbreaking novel as an oral storytelling event. He tells of his return home to a small village in Sudan after seven years studying in England, and of his encounter with Mustafa Sa’eed. Mustafa is a stranger taken in by the village during the narrator’s absence and the two men share an unusual interest in one another. When the narrator, Meheimeed, hears Mustafa reciting poetry in English his suspicions reach their peak. Mustafa tells his own life story to Meheimeed and mysteriously disappears in the first half of the novel, but his words haunt the entire text:

Mustafa Sa’eed has, against my will, become a part of my world, a thought in my brain, a phantom that does not want to take itself off. And thus too I experience a remote feeling of fear, fear that it is just conceivable that simplicity is not everything. (Salih, 42)

1 This account is taken from the chapter “Sacred Stories” in *Exploring Religion* by Robert Schmidt.
Fragments of Mustafa’s story interrupt the narration allowing readers access to the other-worldly sensation described by Meheimeed in this passage. As Meheimeed’s story unfolds and pieces of Mustafa’s story come together the reader is never allowed to feel that they are standing on solid ground. At the end of the novel we are left floating, suspended between various oppositions, not knowing what happens next.

Scholarship on *Season of Migration to the North* has sought to explain the effects and purposes of placing readers in this suspended state. While a few have given psychological readings, most have approached Salih’s work through the lens of postcolonial theory. Like other postcolonial texts that “write back” to the colonizer, *Season* deconstructs binary oppositions: East and West, North and South, male and female, civilized and savage, sacred and secular, self and other. The novel addresses the colonizer by referencing, mimicking, and parodying colonial literature and discourse. In doing so, many scholars argue, stereotypes are dismantled, records are set straight, and the path forward is made clear. The optimistic interpretations that these scholars give simply do not match up with the intensity of the novel. Too concerned with dismantling the colonial lie, they have missed other important intertextual connections. Exploration of these overlooked relationships allows for a deeper appreciation of this novel and the unsettling effect it has on its readers.

The most useful scholarly work I have found broadens the perspective through which *Season* is read, adding layers of complexity to the more simplistic postcolonial readings

2 Examples of psychological readings include Abbas, John & Tarawneh, and Zeidanin. Postcolonial readings include Booker & Daraiseh, Geesey, Hassan, Ibrahim, Makdisi, Murad, Perry, Said, Samatar and Spivak. Most of these focus on Season’s relationship to *Othello* and *Heart of Darkness*.

3 *The Empire Writes Back* defines postcolonial literature and introduces the idea of writing back on p. 6
described above. Saree Makdisi’s article from 1992 “The Empire Renarrated” addresses connections to Salih’s other works and to the socio-political context in which he wrote. His article is the first to elucidate the elements of postcolonial political discourse from within the Arab world. Wail S. Hassan has written the only book devoted to Tayeb Salih’s entire corpus. *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction*, published in 2003, puts Salih’s novels and short stories in relation to one another and pays special attention to political and historical context as well. Hassan employs Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of multi-voiced discourse to highlight the many layers of postcolonial cultural discourse within *Season.* Hassan also compares and contrasts *Season* with other modern Arabic novels. Much of my discussion in chapters one (historical context) and two (intertextual relationships) summarizes and expands upon Hassan’s extensive work.

Recent scholarship has ventured deeper into *Season’s* intertextual relationship, to *Alif Laila wa-Laila (1001 Nights).* Thinking about this collection of stories, assembled in Arabic in the ninth century and translated into French in 1704, brings the “modern” into conversation with the “pre-modern” era. Sofia Samatar briefly explores the idea, common in medieval literature, that language holds an immense power and is capable of both harming and healing (Samatar V, 26). Unfortunately she only points to the power of language in *Season* and fails to fully draw out the connection to the *1001 Nights.* Elizabeth M. Holt also incorporates the *Nights* into her reading and emphasizes the pre-modern conception of cyclical time. Her article troubles the optimistic idea that liberation, justice, and decolonization naturally follow the independence of

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4 See Bakhtin’s *Discourse in the Novel.*
postcolonial nations. Quite the contrary, she explains through her reading, power has been handed off from one empire to the next. From this perspective time moves in a spiral, constantly changing and returning, rather than a linear progression onward and upward. Connections to pre-modern worldviews interest me because I have found another intertextual relationship from this era. Just before the end of the novel, Mustafa’s voice floats in to tell his story one last time. What follows is a tale that resembles “The Parable of Sheikh San’an,” an important section of the epic poem *Mantiq al-Tayr (The Conference of the Birds)*.

Though the title is Arabic the poem is Persian, written by Farid-Ud-Din Attar in 1187 CE. Attar’s work, like all medieval texts, is influenced by a pre-modern worldview. Besides the aforementioned themes (cyclical time and power of storytelling) another important aspect of Attar’s poem is the active role demanded of the reader. Rooted in practices of scriptural exegesis, medieval hermeneutics required that the meaning of a text be interpreted at multiple levels. With this understanding in place medieval writers “delighted in practices and forms that invite readers to grapple with obscurity” (Weaver, 44). More specifically, *Conference of the Birds* is a deeply religious allegory of the search for Truth and self-knowledge and it is an especially important text in the Sufi tradition. Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, is an esoteric system of knowledge. A person must be initiated into the Sufi wisdom tradition by a teacher and

5 The title references a verse from the Qur’an that tells the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Solomon proclaims, “People, we have been taught the speech of the birds, and we have been given a share of everything: this is clearly a great favor.” 27:16 (Abdel Haleem, 240). The word mantiq, here translated as “speech,” and in Attar’s title as “conference,” was also used by Arabic speaking philosophers and theologians as an equivalent to the Greek word *logos*. Attar plays with this word throughout his work and scholar Lucian Stone suggests that, in doing this, Attar poetically makes fun of the philosophers and theologians of his time who sought to understand God through the faculty of reason, a futile pursuit according to Attar (Stone, 106).

6 Roland Barthes is known for his theoretical work on the role of the reader in creating meaning and Bruce Holsinger describes how medieval exegetical culture influenced Barthes in his book *The Premodern Condition*. 
Attar’s didactic style parallels the Sufi student-teacher relationship. In each of Attar’s major poetic works one main figure uses stories as a means of responding to questions, comments, and concerns. These stories can be stern, tragic, comical, paradoxical, provocative, comforting, or disconcerting, but they are each crafted to reveal a bit of wisdom proportionate to the level at which the student is able to interpret them.

Stories in Attar’s poem, and in the Arab and Persian cultures in general, involve a skillful blending of ethical teaching and metaphor to express understandings which resist straightforward description. The answers to questions about how to live well and how to relate to others are communicated through “human narratives, daily life, social norms, personal longings and edifying entertainment” (Zargar, 31). These stories, therefore, serve as a means of ethical education which meets the listener where they are and attempts to draw them upward, or inward. Rather than attributing the genius of Salih’s novel to his clever use of western literature, I argue that it is this connection to the culture of storytelling - exemplified in the intertextual connection to Attar - that facilitates binary deconstruction in *Season* by placing the reader in an internal environment where judgements are suspended and recognition of the relationship between opposites is possible.
Chapter 1: Salih’s Historical Context

When did the two worlds which clash into and contaminate one another in Salih’s novel first collide? Did the division begin with Abraham sending Hagar and Ishmael into the desert? Did an exchange of ideas accompany the exchange of goods on the silk road? Should we begin in Mecca, a bustling center of trade and the site of important poetic competitions, where a Christian was one of the first to recognize Muhammad as a prophet? Did the conflict start when Islam became an empire that stretched from India to Spain? Or with the Crusades? Or in the aftermath of that empire crumbling on all sides?

A beginning to the east-west binary is difficult to pin down, but the conflict created by European colonialism intensified this opposition and lead to a crisis of identity that is still felt to this day. Wail S. Hassan’s book, *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction*, analyses each of Salih’s works by interpreting the many cultural discourses that converge in his novels and short stories. Hassan credits *Season*, originally published in Arabic in 1966, with predicting the crisis in Arab identity that followed the 1967 Arab Israeli War. In this section I will summarize and expand upon Hassan’s valuable work in order to shed light on the political and historical moment creatively expressed in Salih’s work. Hassan’s historical account begins in 1798 with the arrival of Napoleon in Egypt. Napoleon traveled with an army and a group of scholars, intending to both occupy and conduct a scientific description of Egypt. This event is said to mark the beginning of the modern era in the Arab world, which may sound like a progressive historical shift, but, more straightforwardly, refers to the beginning of Europe’s imperialist domination of Africa and the
Near East. This physical domination was accompanied by intellectual power play as well. Europeans brought with them modern values and philosophies such as secularism, individualism, materialism, modern positivist science, the idea of romantic love, and progressive conceptions of linear time. Equally important were the accounts, descriptions, tales, and inspirations brought back to Europe from the lands which were referred to as “The Orient.” The development of a discourse about the Orient by European scientists, historians, authors, travelers, etc. would become the subject of Edward Said’s famous text *Orientalism* which laid the foundation for the field of postcolonial studies.

Although colonialism and modernity were intricately and openly connected, many people, both colonizer and colonized, saw them as two distinct projects. This separation allowed those in power to present themselves as offering something valuable to the peoples they colonized and therefore making up in some way for the occupation of their land. They weren’t simply conquering, they were civilizing, enlightening, or modernizing the world. On the other hand, those who had been forced to submit to European power now had to face up to their defeat. Many looked toward Europe and European culture with the purpose of adopting whatever ideas or innovations might strengthen their nation. In 1826, after the French occupation had ended and before England’s colonization began, a group of students were sent from Egypt to France. Having lived and studied in France for five years, Rifa‘a Rafi‘ al-Tahtawi wrote about his experiences and became the first Arab intellectual to publish a text about modern Europe.

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7 See Hassan (1), Hourani (iii and 43), and Salama (8). Much of the historical information which follows comes from these three sources.
Tahtawi dedicated the rest of his life to translation and educational reform. This was the beginning of a complementary discourse to that of Said’s Orientalists.

Tahtawi taught the generation of intellectuals who would form the Nahda movement. The Nahda - which translates to “rebirth” or “reawakening” - aimed to reconstruct Arab civilization by joining Arab Islamic heritage together with the science and technology of modern Europe (Makdisi, 806). Their reasoning was that, because European civilization had drawn heavily on advancements made by medieval scholars of the Islamic Empire, the modern developments were essentially part of their own heritage. Close study of European civilization would be necessary to ensure that they appropriate only that which would align with Islamic values and take on the virtuous aspects of modernity without contracting any of its ills, but if they could manage this, they thought they would regain their prominence on the world stage. The Nahda distanced themselves from their Ottoman rulers by aligning the Islamic cultural legacy with Europe. Tahtawi argued that the Ottomans failed to uphold Islamic principles and only superficially presented themselves as an Islamic state. Europe’s enlightenment on the other hand, while not outwardly Islamic, incorporated many essentially Islamic values. The Nahda line of thought reflected the original reasoning around French occupation; that the orient was ruled by barbarians and must be enlightened and liberated by Europe.

The events that followed World War I further intensified the conflict between east and west. The Islamic world was affected by broken promises of independence for Arab forces who fought with the allies, Europe’s breakup and colonization of lands previously controlled by the

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8 Much of the historical information that follows is from a lecture by UCSB professor Dr. Salim Yaqub.
Ottoman Empire, and the Balfour Declaration which promised to establish a Jewish settlement in Palestine. Despite these offenses, Nahda intellectuals continued to see Enlightenment Europe as distinct from European Imperialist politics. Even while fighting against European colonizers, the Nahda movement idealized European culture. In opposition to the Nahda were traditionalists who saw Europe as nothing more than their colonizer and enemy. Holding fast to Islamic tradition and condemning European influence of any kind was, for the traditionalists, preferable to the hypocrisy of the Nahda. Hassan describes these opposing conceptions of the relationship between Europe and the Islamic world as contrasting memories:

The two camps mobilized two contrasting kinds of memory with regard to Europe: the Nahda pointed to Europe’s progression from the Dark Ages to the Enlightenment; traditionalism pointed to Europe’s hostility to Islam, the Crusaders’ aggression, and modern imperialism… this polarization in Arab discourse produced a false conception of both Arab identity and of Europe. (Hassan, 5)

Both perspectives claimed to be anchored and guided by Islam, but each saw, or perhaps remembered, Europe differently, either embracing or rejecting its culture.

Ultimately the philosophy of the Nahda movement would fuel the ideology of Arab Nationalism which, despite its anti-Western politics, promoted the ideals of secularism, liberalism, socialism, and democracy. Egyptian revolutionary Gamal Abdel Nasser became the figurehead of Arab Nationalism when in 1956 he announced his plan to nationalize the Suez Canal. In an attempt to maintain its control of the canal, Britain orchestrated with France to have Israel invade Egypt. Their plan was that once Israel had invaded they would call for a ceasefire and demand that European forces be allowed to occupy and guard the canal from the military conflict. When Nasser refused to let them occupy the canal they pursued their objective by force.
The United States condemned the obvious collusion of Britain, France, and Israel and put pressure on them to withdraw their forces in hopes that control of the region would move from Britain to the U.S. and not the Soviet Union. These events mark the shift into the post-colonial period, the decline of European power, the liberation of Europe’s colonies, their struggle for identity, and the rise of a new kind of control administered by the United States.\(^9\)

Nasser’s success in the Suez crisis and Egypt’s liberation from British control inspired others to join the Nationalist cause. The ideological divide between nationalists and traditionalists began to reflect upon the map as Nationalist countries formed alliances against conservative countries, ruled by royalty or religious authorities. In the early 1960s the Imam of Yemen was overthrown by Nationalists. Saudi Arabia, another traditionalist country, supported the Imam’s attempts to regain control, and the new Yemeni republic went to Nasser for support. In 1967, while Nasser was still tied up in this conflict, Syria also asked for Egypt’s help in defending itself against a rumored upcoming attack by Israel, confirmed (wrongly) by the Soviet Union. Nasser, assuming an impending attack on Syria, began to stir up a fiery rhetoric that aimed to unite the Arab world in an effort to destroy Israel. Israel went on the offensive after obtaining a promise from the U.S. that they would not be opposed - even in the event that Israel started the war - and launched an attack on Egypt, then moved on to Jordan, and eventually Syria. Within six days Israel had tripled its territory and the U.S. demanded a ceasefire in place.

\(^9\) For more on the transfer of power from Europe to the U.S. in relation to Season and postcolonial literature see Elizabeth M. Holt’s “Al-Tayyib Salih’s Season of Migration to the North, the CIA and the Cultural Cold War after Bandung.”
The 1967 Arab Israeli War, often referred to as the Six Day War, reshaped the region physically, emotionally, and ideologically. Nasser and everything he stood for had been crushed. The Nationalist movement and its Nahda ideals crumbled. Traditionalists began to point to Nahda ideals like liberalism, materialism, secularism, and socialism as corrupting forces which had served only to weaken Islamic nations and make them more susceptible to Western domination. These shifts “spelled a profound identity crisis that resonated at all levels of Arab consciousness and called for new ways of conceptualizing the past, present, and future - even while it further solidified essentialized notions of Self and Other, East and West” (Hassan, xi).

To answer the call, various movements with diverse aims and philosophies attempted to take control of the chaos that followed. Taking us up to the present day, “Western imperialism and oppressive, dictatorial governments have combined to leave the Arab people in utter frustration and despair” (Hassan, 6).

This historical context is crucial for understanding Salih’s works, which deal with the crisis of modern Arab culture, identity, and ideology. Using Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the novel to analyze the different ideologies competing for primacy within Salih’s works, Hassan convincingly argues that his short stories and novels reflect the crisis in Arab culture, as it moves from colonial rule to Nationalism, and the subsequent crumbling of its newly formed identity. Hassan describes Salih’s work as “lending a human face to otherwise abstract historical processes” (Hassan, xxii). The abstract agents of history who seem to play their games behind the scenes of everyday life are represented in embodied form, working on and within characters that are real, relatable people. Salih’s works develop increasingly integrated layers of cultural discourse on what “modernity” should be in post-colonial, specifically Islamic, nations. The
competing discourses also question these nations’ past, present, and future relationships to the West.
Chapter 2: Intertextual Relationships in Season of Migration to the North

Completed in 1966, just one year before the Six Day War and the major social and political shifts that followed, Season of Migration to the North was praised for having predicted the failure of the Nahda vision. Just as Arab Nationalism was falling apart, the novel described the shaken worlds and profound conflicts many people faced. When asked about his writing process Salih described his view of the relationship between the Arab Islamic world and Western European civilization:

This relationship seems to me, from my readings and studies, to be based on illusions [awham] on our side and on theirs. Illusion relates to our conception of ourselves first of all, then to what we think of our relationship to them, and then to their outlook on us as well. (Hassan, 88)

This illusory relationship was formed by the many discourses produced over the long history of interaction between East and West. Salih aimed to clear away these distortions by allowing the ideas to play themselves out in his narrative. He incorporated into his novel “discourses that span the entirety of Arabic literary and cultural history… as well as resonances of the ideologies of those European novels on which it consciously modeled itself” (Hassan, 12). By bringing these varied discourses into the novel Salih created a complex web of intertextual relationships.

Season references European texts that have shaped the East/West binary and most scholars have analyzed the connections, reversals, and parodies of these texts. Shakespeare’s
Othello is mentioned by name. Mustafa uses Othello as a common reference point in answering questions about his ethnicity (Salih, 33). Mustafa describes how he seduced European women in the same manner that Othello seduces Desdemona: by telling tales of their exotic homelands and of the incredible struggles they have gone through. As Hassan notes, these self-exoticizing stories feed into the “European fascination with barbarism and monstrosity, confirming Europe’s sense of civilizational superiority” (Hassan, 98). A postcolonial reading interprets the most striking mention of Othello - “I am no Othello. Othello was a lie” (Salih, 79) - as a direct criticism of the stereotypes perpetuated through texts that distinguish the West as being superior to the East. Just as Mustafa and Othello exoticize themselves to appeal to the European sense of superiority and invoke pity, Shakespeare’s play portrays Othello as a fractured image of a man, a fabrication, made to excite and appease rather than a character whose humanity is intact. The evolution of Mustafa’s conceptualization of Shakespeare’s character serves to demonstrate all the ways Othello falls short of portraying a real human being. From utilizing Othello as a means of understanding his own identity to divorcing himself from that “lie” Mustafa embraces, rebels against, and transcends Othello.

As explicit as Salih’s use of Othello may be, much of the scholarship on Season is devoted to analyzing connections to Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. While Season makes no explicit reference to Heart of Darkness, the two novels share many structural elements. In

\[\text{10 Scholars debate how the connection to Othello should be understood. Atef Yaouyene and Barbara Harlow argue that Salih deconstructs orientalist stereotypes by reshaping the character of the moor as Mustafa Sa’eed. Hussein Alhawamdeh explains how the relationship between East and West greatly shifted between the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, arguing that a postcolonial reading misunderstands Salih’s use of Othello.}
\[\text{11 See Booker & Daraiseh, Geesey, Hassan, Ibrahim, Makdisi, Murad, Perry, Said, and Spivak.} \]
Heart of Darkness Marlow tells the story of his life-changing journey on the Congo River and his encounter with the extraordinary Mr. Kurtz. Mustafa’s character and his escapades in England have been described as a mirror image of Kurtz and his project in the Congo. Among their many similarities is the effect these journeys to distant lands have on the lives of the narrators, Marlow and Meheimeed. Both narrators are drawn toward and repulsed by a mysterious man. This paradoxical relationship results from the way the exceptional man awakens their awareness to parts of themselves that they are unaware of or have repressed. In coming up against these remarkable others, the narrators are confronted by the “other” within themselves. This phenomenon is the root of many similarities between the novels; questions about human nature, literal and metaphoric images of darkness, the central position of the rivers which double as symbols for the unconscious, and the relationship between colonizer and colonized. Season is therefore often taken to be a counter narrative, a retelling of Conrad’s history of the British imperialist project from an opposing standpoint.

Rather than imitating these Western works - which would simply extend their discourse - Salih reverses them, turns them inside out, makes a parody of them, or reworks them in some other way so as to disclose the complexity of the human condition in general and of the struggle around identity for people from postcolonial nations in particular. The character of Mustafa is an excellent example of Salih’s skillful parody. Salih renders Mustafa mysterious to the reader by giving him all of the varied and contradicting traits colonial discourse attributes to the oriental other, deliberately challenging his readers to rethink them: “I imposed all those propositions on the main character, but in the hope that at some point the European reader will reconsider those accusations, and that the Arab reader, too, will not give in to the illusion [wahm] that things are
clear cut; things are ambiguous” (Hassan, 91). Confronted by all of these attributes, the reader feels that the various accounts of Mustafa are unreliable. This unreliable feeling is the effect of bringing to life the internal contradictions of colonial discourse and granting a character more depth than any single stereotype allows. The practice of “writing back” to the empire is one that many authors from postcolonial nations have taken up; re-narrating imperial stories and histories in hopes of overcoming the forceful alienation from their own pre-colonial culture.12

Reversing and rewriting Western texts is not the only form intertextual connections take in *Season*. The first direct intertextual reference is made when Mustafa recites Ford Madox Ford’s poem “Antwerp.” Published in 1915, “Antwerp” tells of the heroic Belgian resistance against the German army in World War I. At one point in the poem Ford removes us from the epic battle scenes to describe a precise moment, women at a train station awaiting men who will never return. It is a moment Sophia Samatar describes as “zooming in” but when recited by Mustafa in a small Sudanese village it has the opposite effect, forcing Meheimeed’s perspective to broaden or “zoom out” (Samatar V, 21). The combination of zooming in and out simultaneously causes an interruption in the narrative flow. Samatar is especially interested in these moments of interruption which oscillate between local and global perspectives, disrupt the reader’s sense of linear time, and introduce intertextual connections:

The view from a distance, the collapsing of one thing into another, and the act of compression are all at work in Mustafa’s recitation: the world is suddenly seen on a large scale, as if from some distant position above, but at the same time it collapses, condensed so as to balance on Mustafa’s tongue. The encapsulation of the very large in the very small is physically impossible, but, for the narrator, psychologically inescapable. (Samatar V, 22)

12 See Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin *The Empire Writes Back.*
The significance of the poem, the context in which it was written, and the context in which it is recited build to cause an extreme reaction in Meheimeed. After this shocking incident he demands to know Mustafa’s story. This text serves to deconstruct binaries not by reversing Western narrative, but by emphasizing the connections between the large and small scale, the West and East, the past and present.

When viewed in relation to other modern Arabic novels, *Season* deconstructs the ideas of East and West central to the Nahda and Traditionalist movements as well. Hassan briefly explores the theme of romantic relationships between a Western woman and an Eastern man studying in Europe common to Arabic and African fiction (Hassan, 84). He mentions connections to two other modern Arabic novels, both of which aim to grapple with the tension between Nahda ideals and traditionalism. In comparison to *Season* however, they fall short in complexity by finding a neat conclusion with which to resolve the crisis.

In Tawfiq al-Hakim’s *A Bird from the East* (1938) an Egyptian art student in Paris is heartbroken by a French woman who uses him to pass the time during which she and her French lover have had a falling out. The French woman is portrayed as materialistic and cold, and the Egyptian is left trying to reconcile the beauty and grace of European art with his experience of romantic exploitation. Hassan argues that the novel reverses the colonial hierarchical relationship while simultaneously reinforcing essentialist ideas of East and West, where “the East is richly spiritual, while the West is materialistic and depraved” (Hassan, 84). Based on Hassan’s account it seems the main difference in *Season* is that the characters of Mustafa and Jean don’t fit into such simple categories; in fact, their characters are so complex that the reader can hardly wrap their mind around either of them. Like the main character in *A Bird from the East*, Mustafa may
be enamored with European culture, but he has his conflicts with it as well, and his extreme passions paint him as the exception rather than the rule. Like the French woman, Jean is portrayed as cold, independent, non-monogamous, etc. yet she is full of mystery and appears to be more a tortured soul than a “sexually liberated” modern woman.

Yahya Haqqi’s *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* (1944) tells of an Egyptian man who goes to England to study medicine. His relationship with a classmate results in the transfer of his faith from a traditional and somewhat superstitious understanding of Islam to the pure and simple facts of science. After breaking up with the British girlfriend, his return to Egypt embodies the Nahda dream: “Europe radiates Enlightenment to the intellectual elite from the colonies, who are eager to carry that light back to their native countries” (Hassan, 85). But things go downhill from there. The main character’s family is shocked by how much he has changed, he offends the people in his community, and he fails to cure his wife of a disease using western medicine. Finally, he has an epiphany on a religiously significant day (laylat al-qadr at the end of the holy month of Ramadan) and cures his wife using a sacred oil from the shrine of a saint. This story seems to bounce from one extreme to the other, portraying the Nahda vision of progress, showing how it failed when applied to the practicality of life, and then sliding back into an uncritical embrace of tradition. The unsatisfying ending returns the main character to the place where he started without any fundamental transformation having taken place. It fails to acknowledge that once we have experienced something, we can never simply “go back” to the way things were before, we can have other experiences which change us yet again or cause us to realize we were wrong, but any attempt to go back will only result in a distorted move forward.
Season revels in the paradox of the return and avoids the simplistic binaries of colonial, Nahda, and traditionalist discourses. Through the connections to other Arabic texts, Season not only “writes back” to Europe but also undermines the simplistic binary that frames the discourse between East and West. Neither East nor West is as pure and simple a concept as they may seem and in Season, “the very existence of any culture in some sort of absolute isolation from others is shown to be impossible” (Makdisi, 816). Season demonstrates this impossibility by parodying European texts and their stereotypical portrayal of the “oriental,” playing with local and global perspective, exposing the inner contradictions of postcolonial conceptions of identity, and refusing to reconcile the conflicting forces that the narrator (and reader) finds himself overwhelmed by at the end of the novel.

Outside of Hassan’s scholarship, little effort is made to acknowledge the connection between Season and Salih’s other works. The majority of Salih’s works take place in the fictional town of Wad Hamid, and therefore have been referred to as the “Wad Hamid Cycle.” In order of publication these texts are: “A Date Palm by the Stream” (1953), “The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid” (1960), “A Handful of Dates” (1964), The Wedding of Zein (1966), Season of Migration to the North (1966), Bandarshah [an unfinished and untranslated work of which two parts were published Dou al-Beit (1971) and Meryoud (1976)], and “The Cypriot Man” (1976). Each work in the Cycle shares common themes - spirituality, hospitality, colonialism, modernization, alienation, and tradition - that allow for the exploration of the relationship between self and other. Briefly summarizing some of these works will both illustrate the implications of the historical context described in the previous chapter and present the most proximate intertextual connections to Season.
In his book *Sufism in the Contemporary Arabic Novel*, Zaid Elmarsafy includes a chapter on three of Salih’s texts: “The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid,” *Wedding of Zein*, and *Bandarshah*. Elmarsafy notes that a stranger or outsider appears in many of the texts from the Wad Hamid Cycle, and refers to this pattern as the “returns of the saint” (Elmarsafy, 52). In each of the texts he works with, an “other worldly stranger comes to the village, which takes him in and flourishes thanks to the room it makes for this sacred guest” (Elmarsafy, 55). The short story “The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid” begins this pattern when an old man tells the history behind the Doum Tree that grows out of the rocks by the river bank. The tree marks the tomb of a saint after whom the village is named. Throughout the old man’s life there have been various threats to the tree by colonial and postcolonial government officials who wish to build a port, however, none of them have been successful. The villagers’ oldest memories are of the tree, and so it marks the border between death and life, order and chaos, light and darkness, the known and the unknown, good and evil. Hassan describes the doum tree as the living image of the divine will, not a universally applicable (orthodox) rule, but a highly personal one, fitted to each individual’s particular needs and capabilities and growing in proportion to his or her spiritual development. Such a mystical bond, which seems to be the ultimate significance of the doum tree to each one of the villagers, cannot be logically or rationally explained; the old man is “powerless to express” it because it falls beyond the scope of language. (Hassan, 41)

Elmarsafy describes the characters of Zein in *Wedding* and Dau al-Beit in *Bandarshah* as bestowing similar blessings upon the village. Elmarsafy does not include *Season* and the village’s interaction with Mustafa Saeed in his analysis. I assume he leaves *Season* out because

13 Elmarsafy notes the similarities between Salih’s description of the Doum Tree and the Sufi theme of the Cosmic Tree a metaphor developed by Ibn ‘Arabi for the creative Logos and the Perfect Man (p.53)
the villager’s hospitality toward Mustafa ultimately results in a chaotic tragedy which would be difficult to describe as a blessing.

Like the other saintly characters in the Wad Hamid Cycle, Mustafa is a stranger, but this is not the only parallel between them. Dau al-Beit, Mustafa, and Zein are each shrouded in ambiguity and contradiction that is never resolved and so they become “part human and part myth” (Hassan, 59). Salih’s first novel, *The Wedding of Zein*, tells of a miracle event, the marriage of the village idiot to the most beautiful girl in the village. The descriptions of Zein, like those of Mustafa, are full of contradictions. He appears at times both masculine and feminine, both childish and mature, strong and weak, and occupies both a central and a peripheral status in the village (Samatar N, 56). Another important parallel is that Zein and Mustafa are each rumored to be the prophet al-Khidr. This reference heightens the feeling that there is more to these characters than meets the eye. Despite these parallels the narratives’ messages are radically different. In an interview Salih admitted, “*Wedding* represents my hopes and dreams which I wish could be realized within human society… when it is calm and stable… As for the disturbed, contradictory world as I sense it, it is the world of *Season*” (Hassan, 51). In *Wedding*, everyone comes together for the grand celebration and whatever conflicts arise are sorted out within the community. *Season* introduces doubt, fear, violence, and sorrow into Wad Hamid, bringing the vision of utopia in *Wedding* to the ground.

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14 In sura 18 of the Qur’an Moses follows a teacher who demands that he never question him. The teacher performs acts which appear to be extremely immoral and paradoxical. When Moses protests and questions the teacher, the explanation the teacher gives reveals both the hidden reasons behind his actions as well as his profound wisdom. This teacher is al-Khidr, an important figure in Sufi thought who appears in Attar’s stories. For the Qur’anic story see Abdel Haleem’s translation of the Qur’an p.183, for a description of al-Khidr see Samatar *Nonstandard Space* p.54, and for an example of Attar’s use of al-Khidr see Wolpe p.53.
Four of the texts in the Wad Hamid Cycle share the same narrator: “A Handful of Dates,” Season of Migration to the North, Bandarshah, and “The Cypriot Man.” Each story begins with the narrator feeling at home in the world, but sooner or later a powerful figure enters his life and puts him into a state of profound uncertainty and crisis. The narrator goes unnamed in the first two texts, but in Bandarshah his name is revealed to be Meheimeed. In Bandarshah Meheimeed appears at the end of his life and recounts various stories about his own life, and about the broader history of Wad Hamid as a space of encounters with various “others” or outsiders. In each of the narratives Meheimeed is “constantly engaged in recollection, reorganization, and reinterpretation of the past” (Hassan, 15), and in the process, engaged in the task that confronts all post-colonial nations, seeking to understand their own tradition as well as their relationship to the colonizer. Hassan argues convincingly that Salih’s novels advocate for a middle way between the extremes of the Nahda and the traditionalists: “There is no simple way to adapt tradition to the conditions of the present, as Nahda intellectuals envisioned. For Salih, tradition is part of a cultural memory that must constantly be reinterpreted, not nostalgically fetishized and jealously guarded” (Hassan, 14-15).

The short story “A Handful of Dates” demonstrates the struggle to reconcile tradition with the here and now through the relationship between Meheimeed and his grandfather, Hajj Ahmad, who symbolizes tradition and authority in each of the stories in which he appears. The relationship between Meheimeed and Hajj Ahmad ranges from reverential and loving to resentful and rebellious depending on the context. In “A Handful of Dates” young Meheimeed is a star pupil at Qur’anic school and his grandfather is pleased by his beautiful recitation of sura al-Rahman (The Merciful). When Meheimeed learns that his grandfather is forcefully buying the
land of a poor man named Masood and reaping the harvest of Masood’s beloved date trees, he is confronted with the realization that his grandfather’s actions contradict the message of the holy verses he knows by heart. In each of Salih’s works the Qur’an is “a standard that is always evoked but, with few exceptions, almost invariably ignored, distorted, misquoted, or exploited for personal gain” (Hassan, 35). By using the Qur’an in this way Salih touches on the complex connections, or disconnections, between tradition, values, spirituality, and authority. In the end of the story Hajj Ahmad gives Meheimeed a handful of dates from the trees he has acquired from Masood. After eating them Meheimeed runs to the river and forces himself to vomit the dates back up. A similar dynamic arises between Meheimeed and Wad Reyes in Season when Wad Reyes misquotes the holy book to justify his desire to take a new wife and Meheimeed corrects him (Salih, 65).

Just as most critics have ignored Season’s resonance with other modern Arabic novels, so have they ignored its intertextual references to medieval texts. Though Salih inserts the names of three medieval Islamic poets, the eighth century poet Abu Nuwas is the only one whose poetry makes it into the text of Season. Two poems of Abu Nuwas are recited by Mustafa during his seduction of Ann Hamond, one of the many young women who commit suicide after he leaves them. Sophia Samatar alludes to the power of language as she describes the dangerous effect of Arabic poetry upon Ann. Just as orientalist discourse has inspired Mustafa’s constructed identity, Ann’s interest in Arab-Islamic poetry leads her into a relationship with her own fantasies (Samatar, 26). Samatar concludes that, whether Eastern or Western, the literature of the other

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15 Al-Ma'arri 973-1057 CE (Salih, 23) and Omar Khayam 1048-1131 CE (Salih, 118) are also mentioned.
holds a devastating power to create self-deceptive narratives; I would expand this observation.

Clearly Ann’s fantasy is informed by the poetry of Abu Nuwas, but her own culture’s orientalist narratives provide the foundation. Likewise, Mustafa doesn’t only draw on orientalist stereotypes, but also uses knowledge of his own culture’s literary tradition to seduce her. The dramatic roles they end up playing are patched together from the fragments of multiple narratives. Reinforcing one another’s self-deceptions Mustafa and Ann get caught in a mirage of assumptions and short-lived pleasures.

The power of narrative to shape one’s perspective is also a theme connecting *Season* and *Alif Laila wa-Laila (1001 Nights)*. Often referred to in English as “The Arabian Nights” this collection of stories is thought to have been compiled during the reign of the Abbasid Caliphate in the 9th century, when it was translated from Persian into Arabic. The oldest surviving manuscript contains thirty five stories, told over the span of two hundred and eighty one nights, and so some translators have added stories in order to fulfill the expectations set up by the title.\(^\text{16}\) It was first translated into French in 1704 and, due to its immediate success, was quickly translated and adapted into other languages and mediums. It was even translated from the French into some of the languages of India (where many scholars believe the tales originated), as well as Persian and Arabic (Haddawy, 520). The status of *1001 Nights* as a literary work in the Arabic language seems to have been elevated only after its appreciation in the West. The history of this text reveals its significance in relation to *Season* and Salih’s deconstructive work. Clearly *1001 Nights*...

\(^{16}\) Elizabeth Holt notes that Salih includes references to these added stories. One example is the phrase “Open Sesame” (Salih, 89) from the story of “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” added to Antoine Galland’s 1704 translation of *1001 Nights* into French. This story is not in the original manuscript and Galland reported that it was told to him orally.
Nights has become as much a Western text as it is an Eastern one, as much an Orientalist project as it was a product of “the Orient.” The collection has had so many authors, translators, editors, etc. that one literally cannot go back to its origins, because they are unknown. Any iteration of 1001 Nights is necessarily an adaptation of what these stories could mean, where they could be from, and where they might be going.

The famous frame tale - within which all the other stories are told - involves a king, Shahrayar, who witnesses the infidelity of his wife and vows to take a new wife each night only to kill them in the morning to protect himself from future betrayals. His vizier’s daughter, Shahrazad, asks to be married to him and, despite her father’s protest, she succeeds in becoming Shahrayar’s bride. Shahrazad tells Shahrayar story after story always coming to a point of suspense just as the sun rises, so that his curiosity overpowers his fear of betrayal and he allows her to live, sparing many other young women in the process. Hassan reads Mustafa’s sexual conquest in England as echoing the madness of Shahrayar before marrying and eventually being educated by Shahrazad (Hassan, 97). Mustafa, in fact, describes himself and Jean as Shahrayar and Shahrazad, but twists the comparison: “It was as though I were a slave Shahrayar... encountering a Scheherazade begging amidst the rubble of a city destroyed by plague” (Salih, 29-30). This passage strips away the royal status of the characters from the Nights. The reference to the plague transports Shahrazad from India to England and subtly references the secularization of Europe. All that remains is the fascination that captures both Shahrayar and Mustafa which keeps them engaged with just one woman.

The Shahrayar-Shahrazad or student-teacher relationship is not only mirrored by Mustafa and Jean; it shows up multiple times within Season. For much of the text Mustafa serves as a
Shahrazad in relation to Meheimeed. Although on the surface Meheimeed seems unlike Shahrayar in every way, they share the desire to repress certain parts of themselves. Similar to Shahrazad’s seduction of Shahrayar, Mustafa excites Meheimeed’s curiosity and holds his attention by never telling his story completely. Just as Shahrazad’s fate is deferred each day by Shahrayar, so too Mustafa never gives Meheimeed all the pieces of his puzzle, never allowing Meheimeed to form a judgement of him. Shahrazad’s transformation of Shahrayar has a very different feel than Mustafa’s transformation of Meheimeed, as the former is brought to a place of clarity while the latter is thrust into chaos and confusion. Yet they are both strung along by their curiosity and ultimately invited toward an appreciation of the complexity of life, themselves, and others. Elizabeth M. Holt also describes Meheimeed as a Shahrazad in relation to the reader. Just as Shahrazad lapses into silence, confronted by the possibility of her death when the sun rises, Meheimeed stops mid narrative and steps into the river at sunrise to confront his own death (Holt, 84). Like Shahrayar, the reader is left in suspense at daybreak.

The theme of storytelling and its powerful effect on the listener is central to both *Season* and *1001 Nights*.¹⁷ Not only is Mustafa’s life story embedded in the story told by Meheimeed - as Sharazad’s stories are embedded in the frame tale - but the two texts are engaged in the same task. In both *Season* and *1001 Nights* stories weave in and out of other stories as a way of founding a rich and complex view of the human condition within the reader. The prologue to *1001 Nights* claims that the tales teach the art of discourse and critical thought and the educative power of stories is mirrored in the frame tale. Shahrazad’s storytelling is often described as

¹⁷ Samatar notes this theme in *Season* without relating it to *1001 Nights* on p. 26 of her article “Verticality and Vertigo: Spatial Effects in Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*.”
“curing” the madness of Shahrayar by subtly showing him painful aspects of his own life through fanciful stories that grant a broader perspective and a bit of emotional distance. Salih attempts to cure the reader of the tendency to see things “with one eye” by exposing the profound relationship between opposite categories such as East and West, colonial and postcolonial, modern and traditional. Opening the other eye, or broadening one’s perspective, requires an interest that subdues one’s tendency to judge. *1001 Nights* and *Season* both show that narrative, especially one that remains mysterious, is capable of placing a person in this suspended state.

18 See Jerome W Clinton’s “Madness and Cure in the *1001 Nights.*”
Chapter 3: Attar’s “Parable of Sheikh San’an”

The final telling of Mustafa’s passionate and deranged love affair with Jean reaches back to a twelfth century epic poem that has not received any scholarly notice until now, Farid-Ud-Din Attar’s *Mantiq al-Tayr* (*Conference of the Birds*). In Attar’s poem the birds of the world journey in search of a majestic bird called the Simorgh who they want to be their king. Each bird has its own personality and the leader, the Hoopoe, who has convinced them all to embark on this perilous adventure, guides them along the way by giving advice, answering questions, and telling stories. The longest story told by the Hoopoe is “The Parable of Sheikh San’an,” which is told after the birds have become eager to set out on the journey and ask their guide how they should begin. Due to its length and its placement within the overarching narrative, this parable stands out as being of great importance. The paradoxical twists and turns of the parable leave the reader feeling uneasy about the task of pinning down a message or moral lesson. Its embrace of the contradictory and its perplexing effect on the reader already recall central aspects of *Season*, however, there are also structural similarities which I would like to explore. In order to flesh out these connections I will provide a summary of the parable, describing its place within the larger narrative of Attar’s epic poem, as well as a summary of the related section in *Season*.

*Conference of the Birds* begins by introducing the Hoopoe and twelve other birds, then describes how the birds of the world have all come together seeking a ruler. Already the Hoopoe stands out as an exceptional character:

The Hoopoe stepped forward, hopeful and restless.
A Wayfarers cape hung from its shoulders,
and the Crown of Truth graced its head.
Schooled in the ways of the Path,
the bird’s perception was swift,
its spirit attuned to right and wrong. (Wolpe, 41)

The Hoopoe tells the other birds about the mysterious Simorgh who lives far away on Mount Qaf, a mountain said to wrap around the world, into and from which the sun rises and sets. The birds are excited by the Hoopoe’s story, but they are also fearful of the long and perilous journey and so each of them puts forth an excuse for why they cannot go. The Hoopoe responds to their excuses one by one giving advice in the form of short stories. After each concern has been heard and addressed the birds have one more question:

And with one voice the birds were heard to say:
‘Tell us, dear hoopoe, how we should proceed-
Our weakness quails before this glorious deed.’ (Darbandi and Davis, 67)\(^1\)

In response to this request for guidance the Hoopoe gives them a few more words of advice, then tells “The Parable of Sheikh San’ân.”

The Hoopoe’s advice comes as a description of what it means to be in love. Loss of a sense of self and the pain of longing are two of the main experiences he attributes to the lover. Belief and unbelief, piety and sinfulness; these are qualities which attach to the concept of self and so, the Hoopoe says, as the lover loses interest in him or herself these oppositions fall away. This phenomenon purifies an individual’s vision: “True love comes with passion that burns away veils” (Wolpe, 84). And yet, the next line clarifies that what happens to a person in love depends

\(^{1}\) I cite from two different translations of Attar’s poem depending on which most succinctly captures the idea I am trying to communicate. I feel my understanding of Attar’s work has benefitted from reading both translations. The rhyming couplets of the original poem are preserved by Darbandi and Davis who translate the complete work - prologue, main text, and epilogue - couplet by couplet. Wolpe’s translation excludes the prologue and aims to express the cultural essence of the original in contemporary verse and poetic prose.
upon their specific circumstance: “Sometimes it ravages the veil; at other times it mends it” (Wolpe, 84). Loss of concern for oneself and one's own beliefs is necessary in order to prepare for what the journey ahead demands:

> When neither blasphemy nor faith remain,  
> The body and the Self have both been slain;  
> Then the fierce fortitude the Way will ask  
> Is yours, and you are worthy of our task.  
> Begin the journey without fear; be calm;  
> Forget what is and what is not Islam;  
> Put childish dread aside - like heroes meet  
> The hundred problems which you must defeat. (Darbandi and Davis, 68)

Overcoming the egoic self and our own faulty understandings of right and wrong is both a painful task, and a necessary one. It is the first hurdle to surmount, in order to face the multitude of obstacles and trials which await the birds on their journey.

As with each of the Hoopoe’s responses to the birds, he offers a story to illustrate the meaning of his words of advice. “The Parable of Sheikh San’an” begins with an account of the high esteem in which the sheikh is held among the Muslim community. He has lived in Mecca for fifty years, is a teacher to four hundred disciples, is sought out by other great sheikhs for his interpretations of scripture, observes all sacred laws, and has the Qur’an memorized. It therefore comes as a shock when he finds himself having a recurring dream of a beautiful young woman in Rum.²⁰ At this point in the story there is a change of voice:

> No soul on earth walks the Path without coming to such a strait. If the Wayfarer cuts through the strait right away, the passage will light up all the way to the throne of the Almighty. But if he or she falls behind, the road will stretch out even longer than before. (Wolpe, 86)

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²⁰ Rum most likely refers to Constantinople, the eastern capital of the Roman Empire at the time.
Instead of dialogue or narration of events the Hoopoe seems to be instructing his listeners on the nature of the spiritual journey: what to expect and how to react. The sheikh understands that he must go to Rum to figure out what this dream means, and many of his disciples follow him. There the sheikh sees a Christian woman of unmatched beauty, many verses are dedicated to describing how lovely she is and how many men have fallen madly in love with her after only glimpsing her hair. Though the sheikh quickly averts his eyes, it is too late, one look at her face and his soul is set aflame with passion. He sits outside her home waiting to see her again and his astonished disciples attempt to counsel him, but nothing they say has any effect.

The Christian woman eventually comes down to see what this old man is doing waiting outside her door. The sheikh professes his love for her and she laughs at him, advising that his time would be better spent preparing for his impending death than dreaming about beginning life anew with her. The sheikh argues that love strikes young and old in the same manner. The Christian sees that there is no getting rid of him, so she makes impossible demands which he must meet if he desires to be with her: drink wine, bow down to idols, and burn the Qur’an. At first the sheikh agrees only to drink wine, claiming that he could never renounce his faith, but when she replies that his love for her must be nothing but “smoke and scent” if he is not willing to “bow to (his) beloved and take on her shade” he agrees to do whatever she asks (Wolpe, 94). The Christian then takes the sheikh to a temple where he drinks wine and as he becomes drunk the verses of the Qur’an are burned out of his memory. Completely drunk, the sheikh throws his dervish cloak into a fire and puts on the Zon’nar, a belt that Christians wear. He asks his beloved what else she desires of him and reminds her that he has done all these horrible and painful things in order to be with her. She demands gold and silver for her bride price and he complains
that she is not keeping her word. Since he is poor she tells him he can satisfy her bride price by herding her pigs for one year. The sheikh stoically agrees.

Attar has the Hoopoe interject another piece of teaching after the sheikh agrees to become a swineherd. He cautions the other birds, and the reader, not to judge the sheikh too harshly:

Do not imagine only he could fall;
This hidden danger lurks within us all,
Rearing its bestial head when we begin
To tread salvation’s path - if you think sin
Has no place in your nature, you can stay
Content at home; you are excused the Way.
But if you start our journey you will find
That countless swine and idols tease the mind -
Destroy these hindrances to love or you
Must suffer that disgrace the sad sheikh knew. (Darbandi and Davis, 78)

Any of the birds listening to the story, or the reader following along, could just as easily fall victim to the power of passionate love and end up doing things that one would soberly describe as unthinkable deeds. This piece of advice reminds us that we can never truly say what we would do, or not do, in a given situation because it is not until we find ourselves faced with a certain experience that our ideas and moral intuitions are put to the test.

The story continues by returning to the sheikh’s disciples who have been witnessing his fall from grace all along. Confused and distressed, they ask him what they should do, but he simply tells them to leave adding that they should tell the truth about what happened to him if anyone asks. When they return to Mecca one of the sheikh’s faithful friends asks about him and, after the disciples explain what has happened, the friend scolds them for abandoning their sheikh in his time of need. The friend leads them back to Rum and on the way they spend forty days and nights fasting and praying. The friend then has a dream in which the Prophet Muhammad tells
him, “I have lifted that dusty haze from the Path and have raised (the sheikh) from darkness” (Wolpe, 102). In response to their devotion and earnest prayers the sheikh is restored to his senses and his misdeeds are washed away. In Rum they find their sheikh ashamed and full of grief. They rejoice that his faith has returned to him and prepare to take him home to Mecca. The Christian woman then has a dream in which the sun falls into her arms and speaks to her. It tells her to go after the sheikh:

As he took your path without pretense,
Take his path now in truth and innocence.
Follow his lead; you once led him astray -
Be his companion as he points the Way. (Darbandi and Davis, 85)

When she awakens from the dream the woman is filled with longing and pain. She runs outside and begins a frenzied search for the sheikh, who has already set off with his disciples. The sheikh hears a voice that informs him of what has happened and so he turns back to look for her. When they find each other at last the woman’s clothes are torn, her feet are bare, there is dirt in her hair, and she faints into the sheikh’s arms. As the sheikh holds her he weeps and his tears wake her. She asks him to rid her of her shame, so he teaches her “the ways of the Path” and then she is able to surrender her life.21

The parable ends with the Christian woman’s death. Attar has the Hoopoe give us one last piece of instruction:

We all leave this world like a breeze,
Depart it just as she did.

21 In her book, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, Annemarie Schimmel explains that “The Path” is an important figurative concept for mystics in all religious traditions: “In Islam the path (tariqa) is the connecting segment between the law (shari’a), or “main street” (shar’), and the Truth (haqiqa)” (Schimmel, 98). This three part configuration offers a simple yet insightful view of what “the path” is and how mysticism relates to the religion as a whole.
Many have suffered like this in the path of love.
If you grasp love, you will grasp what I just said.

Whatever you can imagine is possible in the Wayfarer’s Path.
It is all compassion and despair, faith and faithlessness.
The ego has no ear to hear such mysteries.
Comprehension is based on capacity.

If it has not been ordained, you cannot grab your share.
Truth must be listened to by the heart and the soul,
not by what is fabricated from water and clay.
The battle between the ego and the heart flares hotter by the hour.
Wail, mourn, and lament the sorrow it brings. (Wolpe, 106)

These final words call on the reader’s own mortality, knowledge, and ability to interpret. The logical, or analytical aspect of one’s intellect is equated with the ego. Meanwhile, the key to true understanding lies in the capacity of one’s heart which implies emotional and psychological, or spiritual, intelligence. After hearing this story the birds feel ready to offer themselves fully to the journey in search of the Simorgh. They are so excited by it that they become restless and impatient to begin. With the Hoopoe as their guide they take flight.

The connection to “The Parable of Sheikh San’an” lurks in the final pages of Season, where the details of Mustafa and Jean’s relationship are brought together. Meheimeed is in Mustafa’s secret room looking at the painting Mustafa made of Jean and remembering the pain in Mustafa’s voice as he had told him that he killed her. Meheimeed wonders, “Was it because he had lost her? Or was it because she had made him swallow such degradations?” (Salih, 128).

Following this thought, Mustafa’s voice floats in and takes over the narrative. We do not hear from Meheimeed again until he is stepping into the river in the final scene. The confusion, mystery, and chaos which have been building throughout the novel come to a chilling climax in this final telling of Mustafa’s story. He begins by describing how he would run into Jean
everywhere he went. If he approached her she would turn away, yet if he ignored her she would do something outlandish to turn his attention back toward her. In an attempt to loosen her grip on him, Mustafa reports managing to stay away from Jean for two whole weeks only to have her come find him at his house. The events that follow are emblematic of their relationship and serve to seal their fate.

Jean stands naked before Mustafa and he describes feeling ablaze with “all the fires of hell” consuming him. She has just chased away Ann Hammond and now makes demands upon Mustafa, to give her certain things if he desires to be with her. Each of the items Jean demands are symbolic of Mustafa’s layered identity. First, an expensive Wedgwood vase symbolizing material wealth and his assimilation into English society. He easily grants her the vase which she then smashes on the floor. Next, a rare Arabic manuscript which points to Mustafa’s intellect and his cultural roots. His thirst for her allows him to part with it. She chews it up and he feels as if she has just eaten his liver. Then she asks for the most valuable thing Mustafa owns, “the thing I treasured most,” a Persian prayer rug which was given to him by Mrs. Robinson (the wife of the couple who took care of him while he was studying in Cairo) as a parting gift. The rug is clearly a religious symbol, but as the thing he treasures most it also alludes to his heart; representative of one’s emotions in Western thought and of a person’s soul in Islam. Jean burns the rug in the fire and laughs. When Mustafa finally approaches her, she kneels him in the crotch and he passes out, awakening later only to find that she has gone.

He pursues her for three years after this incident and eventually she tells him that she is tired of the chase and asks him to marry her. Even after they marry Mustafa remains trapped in a struggle with his desire for her and her avoidance of him. Two months into their marriage they
have still never been intimate and, enraged with frustration on all levels, Mustafa threatens to kill her. Despite her vulnerable position Jean handles Mustafa with unflinching confidence, simply telling him he is not the type of man who kills. Her calm reaction to his threats brings him to his knees. Suddenly he remembers his mother who has recently passed away and is filled with remorse for having felt no sadness or emotion of any kind when he first heard the news. Mustafa describes finding pleasure in the torment he suffered and admits that he doesn't understand how or why. Jean slowly took everything away from him, this incredibly painful and violent process broke down his identity, freeing him of his illusions while simultaneously destroying his sense of self. Jean's public humiliations, violent acts, and unfaithfulness chip away at Mustafa and build up a mountain of pain where the mirage of a man once stood.

On a cold February night, after twenty two days without sun, Mustafa finds himself feverish with "boiling" blood. He comes home to find that he has miraculously regained a confidence he thought he had lost forever. Jean is in a strange mood as well, the power dynamic has shifted somehow, and he feels they are speaking honestly for the first time. She is naked on the bed and he sits beside her with a dagger in hand. She begs and pleads with him, never spelling out exactly what it is she wants him to do, but looking at the dagger with "astonishment, fear, and lust" (Salih, 135). As he presses the dagger into her chest he sees ecstasy in her eyes. They profess their love for one another as space and time gather together "into a single point before and after which nothing existed" (Salih, 136). This scene is described as a reenactment of Othello's murder of Desdemona, or the tragic conclusion of two people who played out the stereotypical roles assigned to them by colonialism and patriarchy. While this may be one layer of the significance of Jean’s death, it seems an insufficient explanation of all the details involved.
It is not simply Jean's infidelity or Mustafa's jealousy that causes him to kill her. Their relationship is much more complex and impassioned than the colonial and patriarchal masks they wear. Jean’s murder is not the ultimate farce and the consequence is not that Mustafa divorces himself completely from orientalist ideas, it is a confrontation with death which affects Mustafa so profoundly that afterward he is unable to savor anything life has to offer.

**Connecting the Parable to Season**

Taking “The Parable of Sheikh San’an” and the final telling of Mustafa’s story side by side, we can now highlight some of the overlapping features. At the outset of their stories Mustafa and the sheikh seem like polar opposites. The sheikh is a highly regarded holy man, while Mustafa is a young student who frequents parties, makes a game of seducing women, and has no qualms about lying. Yet, these characters share some important attributes. Like the sheikh, Mustafa holds a certain status as an intellectual. Along with being well known and admired for their remarkable intelligence, both characters suppress passion and emotions. The sheikh is startled and therefore clearly unaccustomed to his lustful dream, and Mustafa is completely detached emotionally from the women who obsess over him. Mustafa reports earlier on in the novel that Mrs. Robinson used to ask him, “Can’t you ever forget your intellect?” (Salih, 23) and then confirms, “My soul contained not a drop of sense of fun - Just as Mrs. Robinson had said” (Salih, 26). Their prominent intellectual status and detachment from emotional life take Mustafa and the sheikh to a foreign land where they find themselves infatuated with a strange woman.

In both tales this woman teases, ridicules, and humiliates the detached central character. She dismisses his advances and insults him personally only to string him along with requests and
broken promises. In both cases, the asymmetrical relationship feels unjust to the contemporary reader who understands that love requires equality and reciprocity. Attar’s conception of love, however, demands an uneven relationship because his stories use love between two human beings as a symbol for the seeker’s relationship to the Divine:

The most pervasive metaphor in Sufi literature (Persian and Arabic alike) for the pains of losing oneself in an unreachable divinity is the love of one human for another. A human beloved can be coy, uninterested, capricious, and yet the uniqueness of that beautiful beloved keeps the lover entranced. Analogously, the Real can hide from His lovers, cause hearts to be deprived of a sense of proximity, and seem infinitely distant even to those who have spent a lifetime drawing near to Him. (Zargar, 272)

As we enter into these relational metaphors, it is important to keep in mind that the understanding of God in Islam is absolute oneness without form of any kind. We all know the aching feeling of being far away from a loved one, perhaps across immeasurable distances, but the metaphor of proximity seems strange when referring to an immaterial, transcendent, oneness. This longing for closeness can be understood as “always yearning for… the tearing away of the veil of transcendence” (Ritter, 526). In Attar’s poetry the separation of lover and beloved becomes a metaphor for the forgetfulness that permeates human existence and the illusions that cloud our perception. These illusions keep us from seeing how connected we are to our world (even to the parts of our world we would prefer to distance ourselves from). Salih’s desire to clear away illusions and disclose the complexity of the modern world finds a voice in Attar’s metaphor.

This poetic ideal of love helps to explain the shared situation in which the Sheikh and Mustafa find themselves, as both describe the suffering they endure in religious terms. The sheikh compares the night he spends waiting outside the Christian’s home to all the nights he’s
spent in prayer (Wolpe, 88) while Mustafa “swallows” Jean’s psychological torment, “as the man fasting swallows the agonies of the month of Ramadan when it falls in the scorching heat of summer” (Salih, 132). As the men pursue their unrequited love, their torment builds, culminating in a scene where they are closer than they have ever been to the women they desire, but fail to gain access to them. In Season this scene takes place in Mustafa’s home in England where Jean destroys the three symbolic items she has asked him to give her (the vase, manuscript, and prayer rug). In the parable, the Christian woman takes the sheikh to a temple and he fulfills her requests (drink wine, bow to idols, and burn the Qur’an) which amount to sacrificing everything that gives his life meaning. The men’s characteristic rationality has fled as they have been possessed by intense emotions and fiery passions that burn away their personal identity. The men sacrifice that which they treasure above all else, and for both this item is a religious symbol suggesting that they are not simply giving up an object. In granting the request for their most treasured possession they are handing over their heart or soul.\(^22\) The “lovers” surrender themselves completely - mind, body, and soul - to their “beloved.”

Despite their sacrifices the men are once again denied by the women they desire. The end of their pursuit is delayed. The Sheikh’s disciples fast and pray for 40 days before one of them dreams of the prophet Muhammad and the Sheikh’s faculties are restored. Mustafa says that the sun had not shown for 22 days when he returned home to find that the confidence he thought he had lost forever was restored at last. In both cases the women are transformed as well and it is

\(^{22}\) This is a common theme in many religious stories. One example is the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of his son which appears in Sura 37 of the Qur’an. The idea is also expressed in the famous verse from the Gospels of Matthew 6:21 and Luke 12:34 “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
unclear exactly what has happened to any of the characters. The parable communicates the source of this shift with two dreams - one of the Prophet Muhammad and the other of the sun - but in *Season* the cause is as ambiguous as the change itself. The mysterious breakthrough initiates similar endings in both stories: the women surrender their lives and die in the arms of the men. The way they die and the degree to which the men are responsible for their deaths differ - Mustafa kills Jean with a dagger while the sheikh’s words cause the woman to die - but both women express being ready for death and their deaths are even described as ecstatic experiences.

When the Christian woman is in the sheikh’s arms his teardrops fall onto her like rain and she is described as, “a drop of water in this sea of fantasy” which has now “found her way to the True Ocean” (Wolpe, 106). The rain, the water, the sea, and the ocean serve to create an image of the cyclical connectedness of the sheikh, the woman, and the Divine. If the sheikh’s love for the Christian woman was meant to mirror a human being’s love for the Divine, then this ending in which the sheikh becomes the teacher and the woman reaches the final stage of the journey (poverty and annihilation) is rather paradoxical.23 This paradox is repeated in the ending of the main narrative of Attar’s poem. Over the course of the dangerous journey most of the birds have died or been killed. Thirty of them remain and when they finally are permitted to enter into the presence of the Simorgh - the majestic bird they seek as their ruler - they only see their own reflection. Attar takes this opportunity to reveal his witty pun, that “The Simorgh” ends up being

23 Attar describes seven stages that the spiritual seeker experiences on their inward journey: quest, love, knowledge, detachment, unity, wonderment, and poverty and annihilation. The meaning of poverty and annihilation is famously illustrated by the “Parable of the Moths” in which a group of moths who are attracted to the flame of a candle venture closer and closer attempting to gain knowledge of it. Only the last moth, who is consumed by the fire, is said to have reached true understanding (Wolpe, 310).
“thirty” (si) “birds” (morgh) in Persian. These endings bring the idea of unity to the forefront superseding all conceptions of individuality and separation.

This doubling of the paradoxical experience of unity that dissolves all boundaries shows up in the structure of Season as well. At the moment of Jean’s death Mustafa describes her and himself not as two individuals, but a “torch of flame” (Salih, 136). In fact, it is not just the two of them who become a single entity, the whole universe is experienced as “a single point before and after which nothing existed” (Salih, 136). Mustafa has killed Jean, and yet he too has suffered a death; if not physical perhaps psychological. The rest of Mustafa’s life is spent in a profound emptiness, longing to be brought back to life. Sophia Samarar predicts that he is at last able to lose himself once again when he drowns in the flooded river (Samatar V, 35). Meheimeed’s near death experience at the end of the novel is both a repetition of Mustafa’s experience with Jean and a re-enactment of Mustafa’s death (if he did truly die in the flood). Proximity to death causes the boundaries of space and time to dissolve and a troubling realization follows, all their lives they have not truly lived. Mustafa feels he never existed, his identity is “an illusion, a lie… a heap of ashes” (Salih, 28) and Meheimeed’s entire identity has been formed by exterior forces, he has never before had volition of his own (Salih, 139). Their new perspective is brought about in a moment of suspension, “outside the bounds of time” where they become both the killer and the killed, the water and the drowned, the other and the self (Salih, 127).

Reading Deeply

Season’s intertextual connection to “The Parable of Sheikh San’an” brings an awareness of deeper meaning lying beneath the novel’s surface. Conference of the Birds, like other medieval story collections, calls upon the reader to assume an active role in interpreting events
by leaving things ambiguous and working against our expectations to incite curiosity. As a Sufi text, the message to be uncovered involves clearing away distorted perceptions of the world and oneself in order to experience the interconnected nature of reality. The importance of storytelling in *Season* is clear, as even the form of the novel is designed to present an oral tale, communicated by Meheimeed. The ethical dimension of the narrative aims to educate the reader on the nature of opposites, dismantling assumptions that fail to acknowledge their interconnectedness. If the reader is affected by their confrontation with paradox and allows their curiosity to develop, they will step up to the challenge of interpretation and the transformative power of stories will be realized.

In his recent book on the lyric poetry of Sa’di, a later Persian poet, Domenico Ingenito stresses the importance of clarifying the means by which poetic characters are meant to symbolize the Divine. The permissibility of erotic poetry was the subject of much debate between theologians who wondered if it truly inspired religious feeling or simply carnal lust. Ingenito brings up a few accusations facing erotic poetry at the time: that it appeals to base sexual instincts, that it associates other entities with God, and that it makes claims for incarnation. A defense against these charges brings the focus to the reader, or listener’s ability to interpret meaning:

The exterior form of listening [to erotic poetry] generates carnal temptation [*fitna*], whereas its inner dimension [*batin*] offers an inference [*‘ibrat*]; therefore he who recognizes the sign [*ishara*] may lawfully hear the inference, otherwise he seeks temptation and will be exposed to calamity. (Ingenito, 254)

Ingenito goes on to explain that the word “*‘ibrat,*” here translated as “inference,” could also be translated as “deduction,” “allusion,” “suggestion,” or “teaching” and that its root means “to
cross” or “pass through” implying a transference of meaning from one level of cognition to another (Ingenito, 254). We see a reflection of this idea in the closing lines of “The Parable of Sheikh San’an,” which allude to the fact that each person has a different capacity for accessing the inner meaning of the story.

Attar, and other medieval poets, mean for their works to speak to the reader on a level that today's readers will find difficult to reach. The inferential process is meant to bring the reader, or listener, to an intuitive understanding of inner meaning by way of symbols that are part of our everyday “common” knowledge. This process and how it is distinct from modern modes of thought can be illustrated by the use of metaphor and the impact it has on a reader who understands intuitively as opposed to the reader who requires an explanation or an “unpacking” of the metaphor. Something substantive is lost in a straightforward, logical explanation, no matter how good of an explanation it may be. The same effect is apparent when stories and fables are concluded with a simple platitude. The “moral” of the story may become clear, but a relational understanding of what is being communicated in the story will be overshadowed by the easy phrase. When a straightforward explanation is not offered, “the intimation resulting from the inferential process brings the reader… to a different level of intellectual awareness which does not require an analytical process of interpretation” (Ingenito, 255). This means of communication goes against linear models of thought, time, and progress which dominate the modern worldview.

The measure of poetic beauty in the medieval Persian and Arabic world was the poet’s ability to produce an experience of wonder in the listener or reader. Reports of poetic recitals and the responses they solicited give us a glimpse into the past:
Anyone whose ghazal stirred up the lyric ritual \([\text{samma}^\prime]\) would be considered the master of lyric composition... Eventually they read a poem of Ashhari, but no sublime sensation \([\text{zawq}]\) was elicited. None of their ghazals were able to trigger an aesthetic response until they started reciting the following...

A wind I want, filled with my soil, to gently caress your hair.  
On fire I am for waters as pure and fresh as your limbs.

Suddenly, from the portico, Zahir threw himself in the middle of the space and let out a scream. (Ingenito, 471)

In the recorded event described above the audience proclaims the author of those lines to be the “absolute master of lyric composition.” Similarly in Conference of the Birds the Hoopoe’s telling of the Parable of Sheikh San’an elicits a dramatic response:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{They heard the tale; the birds were all on fire} \\
\text{To quit the hindrance of the Self; desire} \\
\text{To gain the Simorgh had convulsed each heart;} \\
\text{Love made them clamour for the journey’s start.} 
\end{align*}
\]  

(Darbandi and Davis, 86)

The bird’s excitement allows them to place their lives in the Hoopoe’s “hands” and follow as he guides them on the path. Unfortunately in translation we miss out on many of the linguistic, rhythmic and repetitive tools these poets used. We can, however, still appreciate the surprising subject matter or storyline, the beautiful imagery, and the bewildering moments of paradox. Even in English some of the sparks may still cause a small flame to ignite.

The last section in Season tells of Meheimeed’s reaction to Mustafa’s story. He locks up Mustafa’s place and, feeling enraged, goes to swim across the river. The description of what happens to him in the water is confusing and chaotic. A “violent desire for a cigarette” brings Meheimeed back to his senses and only then does he shed some light on what has happened. As things are falling back into place he says, “Though floating on the water, I was not part of it” (Salih, 139). This realization tells us that before the cigarette craving Meheimeed had lost the
ability to determine the boundary between himself and the water. Suddenly he regains the awareness of his separation from the elements and with it comes an awareness that his life has not been his own. Crossing paths with Mustafa has confronted Meheimeed with the complexities of his own being and it is too much to handle. Unlike the birds who follow the Hoopoe after hearing his story, Meheimeed walks away from Mustafa: “I left him talking and went out” (Salih, 137). He slips into the river’s depths, but his will to live forces his body up out of the water to call for help.

Attar’s story could function on potentially infinite levels depending on who is listening and how they are listening. At one level, the parable serves to warn against “outward” or straightforward interpretations and the religious transgressions associated with them. A superficial reading of the parable attributes the sheikh’s misery and humiliation to the abandonment of his faith. The sheikh’s sins can be equated to the orthodox accusations against erotic poetry and storytelling mentioned by Ingineto: indulging in base sexual instincts, associating other entities with God, and in doing so suggesting incarnation. The torment which the sheikh goes through is central throughout the parable and the words of instruction, which mention idolatry and faithlessness, could be read as describing a direct connection between his suffering and his misdeeds. The surprising ending of the story however - in which the sheikh is restored and teaches the Christian woman Islam before she surrenders her life - presents a challenge to such a straightforward interpretation and therefore demands to be re-read with more subtlety. Once the story has been flipped on its head, any simplistic understanding will be

24 In the introductions to their translations of Conference of the Birds both Wolpe (18) and Darbandi & Davis (xv) advise the reader that meaning does not lie on the surface of the stories.
confused. Without a neat, predictable conclusion the reader is forced to contemplate possible meaning and, hopefully, this paradoxical state will eventually lead them to the realization that the story cannot be read at a superficial level.

Tayeb Salih engages with a very similar project in Season. His use of other texts undermines the various discourses competing to influence Arab identity: orientalism, liberal tolerance, Nahda ideals, and traditionalism. Each of these ideologies rests on the understanding of East and West as totally distinct entities which must either remain completely separate or fit together without changing each other. Both of these options are impossible because East and West have already influenced, changed, and constructed one another and will continue to do so. Salih expresses the long history of interaction between East and West in terms of contagion. At various points in the novel he seems to be referring to different instances of colonialism or conquest. However, he does not simply attribute the source of infection to the West. This disease “oozes from the body of the universe” (Salih, 86). Endeavoring to explain what exactly Salih means by his doubly metaphoric statement presents the reader with an impossible problem. Season is full of these impossible problems which leave readers confused, forcing them to think, re-read, and seek a deeper understanding.

Like Conference of the Birds, Season can be read on many levels. Placing Season among the many works which renarrate colonial and postcolonial history paves a clear avenue for interpretation. Centering in on the specific political and historical context adds a layer of depth. Understanding the novel as part of the longstanding Islamic storytelling tradition invites the reader to witness the power of language in action. Paradoxical stories function on non-linear modes of thought, expression, and communication which demand that the listener or reader
actively interpret whatever inferences they are able to grasp. Trusting in the reader’s ability to
grapple with chaos and confusion may seem risky, but giving them the chance is the only way to
activate the transformative power of language.
Conclusion

Tayeb Salih masterfully draws upon world literature making his novel an example, in both form and content, of interconnection. The connection to Attar’s *Conference of the Birds* adds to the many levels of meaning accessible in *Season of Migration to the North*. From the global stage to the most intimate spaces of our interior lives *Season* places the reader in zones of conflict with no easy resolution. Impossible problems hinder our ability to make judgments and force us to acknowledge the complexity of history, empire, revolution, independence, identity, difference, tolerance, and understanding.

We all make judgements, judgements give us power and security, but they also interfere with our ability to see what we do not understand, creating the illusion of knowledge. The great teachers of history have described education as a process of emptying out and bringing forth, acknowledging the fact that understanding how little we know is the first uncomfortable step toward self-knowledge. Attar and Salih’s texts work to destabilize our assumptions and open us up to a different mode of understanding through paradox and metaphor.
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