

East-West Encounters and Issue of cultural identity in Al-Tayyib Salih's novel "Season of Migration to the North"

Abstract: Issue of cultural identity represents one of the most important subjects of the modern Arabic literature and this is natural for people, who were under foreigners' dominion for many years. There is no doubt that in the epoch of globalization, in the environment of assimilation of nations and races, the process of modernization causes the relevant reaction – the necessity of strengthening cultural identity. Modern Arabic literature is rich with numerous works on the problems of mutual perception of the East and the West. Issue of cultural identity in many Arabic novels is raised as a result of encounter of two cultural values. In the article our interest focused on the novel "Season of Migration to the North" by Al-Tayyib Salih, which is unstudied by Georgian researchers.

Keywords: East and West, Problem of cultural identity, Modern Arabic Literature, Al-Tayyib Salih, Season of Migration to the North.

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Since ancient times till our epoch, the eastern and western traditions have been carrying on a continuous dialogue. It is known that the interest towards the "eastern-western" issue has particularly aroused within the last years. A range of the eastern-western problems became a subject of studies of many scientific centres. Significant social and culturological theories were developed, which, in their turn, exerted a certain influence on the literary works of the eastern writers. Carrying on a dialogue and finding of common language between radically different from each other eastern and western, Muslim and Christian regions, first of all, were dictated by political urgency, though, from the sphere of social sciences this process penetrated into the humanitarian sciences as well.

The subject of encounter of the West and the East and their mutual perception are not a new topic for the literature; it always was at the centre of special attention both of European and Eastern writers. Modern Arabic literature is rich with numerous works on the problems of mutual perception of the East and the West. Interestingly enough is the fact that in works of art such themes usually are chosen by the writers, who acquire such type of knowledge through their own experience and due to their biographic moments and frequently they, either consciously or unconsciously, used to identify themselves with protagonists of their literary works. Arab intellectuals, who were acquainted with European civilization, paid particular attention to the problem of interrelations between the West and the East, to the attempt of overcoming obstacles existing between material and spiritual worlds. Their progressive-minded part strived for comprehensible synthesis of achievements of the East and the West. According to Rasheed El-Enany's hypothesis, attitude of Arab intellectuals towards the culture, which exerted great influence upon their world outlook building, cannot be of anti-western character. For them Europe is an object of both love and hatred, it is both shelter and threat, invader and mate, an enemy, whom you should beware of and a friend, whom you should turn to for assistance. Arab intellectuals always faced with the dilemma. Europe for them was both malady and remedy. They strived for independence from the western master and at the same time they wanted to assimilate with the western style of life. Such ambivalence has been typical of Arabs' perception of the West since the epoch of Napoleon. (El-Enany 2006: 2)

This process has a deep impact upon the Arabic writings. There is impression that encounter with distinct society and culture has basically updated the Arabic writing and made its contribution to its modernization. Experience obtained in a foreign country finds specific reflection in the writer's works, in choice of themes and motives. Distance with his own literary traditions and acquaintance with foreign "national literature" led the writer to a new modernist, post-modernist and postcolonial style and in some cases these factors even increased his creative potential.

Our interest focused on novel "Season of Migration to the North" by Al-Tayyib Salih.

Al-Tayyib Salih belongs to the group of Arab writers bearing "both cultures", he was a 20th century Sudanese writer, integrated with Europe. He studied at the University of Khartoum, before leaving for London, where he spent a great part of his life. For a period of twelve years he headed the BBC's Arabic Service, at various periods he worked in Khartoum Radio Committee, Ministry of Information in Qatar, UNESCO in Paris, Emirates. He was married to an Englishwoman and had three daughters. (A Dictionary of... 2004: 995).

It is obvious that Al-Tayyib Salih's continual traveling from Europe to Arab countries and vice-versa was reflected in his creative work, the main motive of which was opposition of the two cultures, clash of the western and eastern worlds. This problem acquires particularly dramatic nature in "Season of Migration to the North", which made the author's name famous throughout the world. Since the date of its publication (1967), this novel was of great success both with European and Eastern literary critics. It was declared "the most important Arabic novel of the 20th century" (THE TIMES 2009: 55). "This is a novel which can and should be read more than once, if it is to yield all its secrets. One cannot say this about many works in modern Arabic literature, or any modern literature" (Jareer Abu-Haydar 1985: 53) .

In the novel Salih presents the political side of confrontation between cultures. Issue of cultural identity, raised as a result of encounter of the western and eastern values, is put with particular acuteness. The narrator of the novel and Mustafa Sa'eed are the main characters of the novel. Two lines of the plot of the novel are developed in parallel to each other.

The narrator has returned to his native village in the Sudan having spent seven years in England furthering his education at the University. In the village, a man of approximately 50 years old attracts his attention - this is Mustafa Sa'eed, who came to the village 5 years ago. He settled down near the river Nile, to the north of Khartoum, married a local woman and has two sons. Despite the fact that Mustafa enjoys universal esteem among the villagers, the narrator questions his past during one evening party, when Mustafa wistfully recited poetry in fluent English. Due to the narrator's inquisitiveness, a reader learns about the life of Mustafa in England: in order to furthering his education, from the Khartoum elementary school he moves up to the secondary school in Cairo and then leaves for the Oxford University; at the age of 24 he is already a lecturer of economics at the University of London. During 30 years Mustafa has contacts with Englishwomen; he, through every means, tries to seduce them and finally drives them to suicide. Mustafa takes advantage of African exoticism existing in imagination of dreamy women, he deliberately creates the oriental ambience in his bedroom to have these women fallen into his trap. The last seven years he spends in the prison for killing of his English wife.

The metaphor of sexual relations became a norm in the most Arabic novels written on east-west theme. In such literary works the motive of confrontation of cultures is presented as a gender conflict: the main character of the novel, a man from the East, oscillates between two women, who symbolically identify different cultures. Through relations with a woman from the West, protagonist tries to penetrate into her culture. Later on, coming back to his home, hero tries to reintegrate with his own community, beyond the relations of a white-skinned woman and a young African/Arab, the opposition of two worlds is symbolically reflected.

Relations of Mustafa with the West have taken a tragic turn. His inner spiritual and moral world is perverted and maimed. Despite the fact that he adopted the European culture, he failed to integrate with it and at the same time he repudiated his own roots. He is a migrant. He could not find himself in the West and returned to the East, but even here, in his homeland, he is isolated. For villagers Mustafa

is "alien". He could not reach peace of mind and disappeared in the waters of the Nile. Mustafa is a negative model of an educated Sudanese man. After return from Europe, he is passive in his own society. He is a "hybrid", who failed to find his place and role in neither of the cultures. (Kudsieh 2003: 211).

The inner world of the narrator is also disturbed after meeting with Mustafa Sa'eed. He makes up his mind to swim across the Nile, which flows to the north of the village from the West to the East. In the middle of the river he feels that he is exhausted and has no strength either to reach the northern bank or to return to the southern one. At that time, birds are flying in the sky from the south towards the north. "Were we in winter or summer? Was it a casual flight or a migration?" - The narrator puts a question to himself. He is between the two banks: he abandons his traditional African-Arabic values, i.e. the southern bank, but fails to reach the European, i.e. the northern bank. In this situation, as distinct from Mustafa, the narrator gives preference to the life; he comes out from the river and cries: "Help! Help!" (Salih 1969: 168-169).

In contrast to Mustafa, the narrator struggles and strives for self-identification; he tries to adopt the best from the foreign culture and preserves his native roots. In this struggle the narrator's emotional balance is violated, as in case with Mustafa, he also enters the river, but as distinct from Mustafa in this struggle he wins a victory. The narrator chooses the life. For him the process of individualization and "return to his own cultural roots" results in success (Siddiq 2003: 104).

The river Nile is a symbol of renewal and destruction. The narrator is on the middle way between the East and the West, he is not able either to go forward or to return back. Swimming across the river embodies the self-transformation. (Kudsieh 2003: 213).

Specific historical situation: clash of traditional African-Arabic and modern European (British) civilizations exerts influence over two main characters of the novel. Their problem is to identify cultural identity, standing face to face with foreign civilization, which aggressively encroached upon their traditional civilization, but, on the other hand, they are not able to deny this foreign civilization, since this civilization promoted their maturing and made their "ego" incongruous with their traditional way of life. Given these circumstances, inner and social integration of their personality are equally unachievable. (Wielandt 1981:492).

Despite the fact that the thematic, structural and stylistic analogies of the two main characters of the novel present Mustafa as an alter ego of the narrator, the encounter of civilizations impacts them completely differently. Partially it is caused by their different personal attitudes of mind and upbringing and partially by fact that they represent different generations and, therefore, they have distinct experience of interrelation with Britain. Mustafa left for Oxford to further his studies at the time when England exerted complete power over Sudan. The narrator left the University in England approximately 30 years after the British colonial governance in Sudan, when the attitude towards the British civilization was changed and for the majority of Sudanese people it became a component of their intellectual world outlook.

In case of Mustafa Sa'eed, the crisis of cultural identity is directly caused by colonial situation. It would not be correct to say that the British colonialism rooted him out from his culture and native surroundings. In fact, his roots have never been deep in Sudan and he has never felt self-affirmed in Sudan (Wielandt 1981:493).

According to Amin Maalouf, People's feelings towards their native land, which they have to leave, are not easy to experience. They leave relatives in the country they are abandoning and they reproach themselves for this; they abandon their houses, where they were brought up; they abandon their sweet memories. There also exists a feeling of being attached to the native land and this feeling is very deep-rooted in these people. (Maalouf 2007: 48)

As for Mustafa, there is no any emotional thread that might have connected him generally with the African-Arabic world, individuals or cultural values of his native country. Change of place is imagined by Mustafa as a nomad's journey, who temporarily puts up a tent on the peak of the mountain and then takes down it. The same metaphor is used in respect of Mustafa's transient relations with Englishwomen: women are also "mountains", on which Mustafa pitches his tent to have a short rest.

On the example of Mustafa Sa'eed, the author intended to manifest that comprehension of cultural identity of a person is revealed only in confrontation with foreign culture. Immediately upon arrival in Britain, Mustafa realizes the cultural difference; and despite the fact that he speaks English fluently, he suddenly discovers that this language is foreign to him. In spite of the fact that subsequently Mustafa Sa'eed experiences cultural assimilation (at the age of 24 he has become a lecturer at the London University), cognition that he is cut off his own culture and is oppressed by European civilization, increases little by little. At the same time, Mustafa guesses that this cultural lag and humiliation is not only his individual, but also collective fate of Africans and Arabs conquered by European colonialism. The details of this cognitive process are not shown in the novel, but the obvious manifestation of this is the intention of Mustafa Sa'eed to subdue Englishwomen. A lot of passages in the novel show us that for Mustafa Sa'eed's relations with Englishwomen means a certain revenge for European violence, but Mustafa represents Africa or "the East" not so as they are in fact, but so as the European women imagine it, he is setting traps to catch them. Rotraud Wielandt calls this process an intercultural comedy. (Wielandt 1981:495).

Mustafa compares his victim, a British woman with a town, which he conquers and subdues. It is particularly interesting that exactly a European female, who symbolically embodies the West, is naïve and is a victim, while the symbol of the West - a male, Mustafa plays the role of a conqueror and colonialist. (Kudsieh 2003: 213).

Mustafa is aware that the voice, which seduces and entraps the victims in fact is not his; actually this is the "disease" of European violence brought to Africa or "venom" injected by Europeans into veins of history. Despite the fact that Mustafa's intellectual outlook is enriched by European culture, he failed to integrate even with academic circles. European culture remains for him to be colonial. Finally, Mustafa returns to Sudan, he returns to his geographic origin, but this provides for more aggravated cultural rupture of his individuality, which is divided into two contrasting parts. He cannot free himself from the impact of the European culture, which he establishes in one closed secret room of his house. Therefore, he is not able to integrate with the local society either.

As distinct from Mustafa Sa'eed, who carried out his "revanchist campaign", the narrator in the novel rejects all kinds of violence. And this is obvious not only from the fact that while staying in England he did not commit any crime, but even from the fact that in the end of the novel, the narrator will not burn down the English room in Mustafa's house. This room represents the European side of Mustafa's personality, which was created by European colonialism. Burning of the room symbolically proceeds with the chain of violent acts by European colonialists. The narrator believes that this chain must be broken. His attitude towards Europe is completely different. He studied in England, when Sudan was already an independent country. On the second hand, the narrator was connected with his native Sudan closer than Mustafa Sa'eed was. The narrator does not feel alienated from his native surroundings after the years spent in England: "I looked through the window at the palm tree standing in the courtyard of our house and I knew that all was still well with life. I looked at its strong straight trunk, at its roots that strike down into the ground, at the green branches hanging down loosely over its top, and I experienced a feeling of assurance. I felt not like a storm-swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose." (Salih 1969: 2).

For the narrator and other representatives of his generation the perception of mutual relations between Europe and African Arabs develops from negative towards positive.

Therefore, Al-Tayyib Salih interprets the change of cultural environment as a chance of nourishment and enrichment, though he knows very well that this process could be agonizing and means triumph and loss at one and the same time. The author adheres to modernization with preservation of identity and national values and longs for life in such a world, where the conflict ideas can co-exist together.

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