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Journeys to the Middle: An Analysis of Liminality within 20th Century Middle Eastern Literature and Scholarship

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ABSTRACT:

When imagining the "Middle East," one might think of a particular region, identity construction, or even a style of cuisine. Yet, to what extent is the global perception of the Middle East rooted in strategic Western invention? When Edward W. Said published *Orientalism* in 1978, he prompted numerous critics—including contemporary ones like Ali Behdad and Magda M. Al-Nowaihi—to consider the precarious discursive representations of "the Orient" and the Middle East in Western scholarship. I extend this conversation in my analysis of *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih and *Snow* by Orhan Pamuk, where I seek to connect the themes of Middle Eastern literature with the concerns of postcolonial criticism. By focusing on the issues of double-consciousness, migrant assimilation, and the subjugation of women, I demonstrate how select Middle Eastern characters embody quintessentially postcolonial predicaments and challenge global understandings of the Middle East.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Migration, Middle East, Double consciousness, Hybrid

In 1978, Edward W. Said published *Orientalism*, a postcolonial critique of Western discursive representations of the "Orient," or the Middle East. Since then, scholars have considered new ways of approaching the field of Middle Eastern studies. Abbas Amanat addresses the precarious nature of the Middle East as a cross-continental, geopolitical region in his introduction to *Is There a Middle East?* (2011), while anthropologist Saba Mahmood explores the possibilities of an alternative, Islamic form of feminism in *Politics of Piety* (2004). Nonetheless, few critics have attempted to connect the themes of fractured identity within postmodern Middle Eastern literary texts to the ambiguous nature of the Middle East as a geographical region and focus of scholarship. Lisa Suhair Majaj begins such a project in "Arab-Americans and the Meaning of Race." She considers the literary motifs and social problems emerging from the irony that the U.S. government classifies Arab-Americans as "white," despite their continual portrayal as a racial "Other" to white Americans (320). I share a comparable concern for the fragmented or liminal cultural identities that are apparent in Middle Eastern literary works such as *Sugar Street* (1957) by Naguib Mahfouz, *Moth Smoke* by Mohsin Hamid (2000), and *Persepolis* (2003) by Marjane Satrapi. This thematic trend has prompted my questioning of how Middle Eastern literature fits within the discipline of postcolonial studies. In my analysis, I examine the ways that Middle Eastern literature is postcolonial, in addition to how the liminal identities of Middle Eastern characters can unearth the imagined representations of the Middle East. Through comparative literary critiques of *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) by Tayeb Salih and *Snow* (2002) by Orhan Pamuk, I argue that select 20th and 21st century Middle Eastern novels, despite their differences in national origins, can reflect similar attempts to underscore common themes and tropes found in multi-regional postcolonial literatures. In calling attention to ideas such as the double consciousness of the indigenous writer

with a Western education, the psychosis of the migrant struggling to assimilate, and the subjugation of indigenous women, these novels present issues that reinforce the multiregional nature of postcolonial themes, as well as the way that the regional category of the Middle East is problematic for those inhabiting the region and geopolitically strategic for those living outside of it. Through this approach, I demonstrate how contemporary literature can reflect, complicate, and reshape discursive representations of the Middle East, both culturally and geopolitically.

Who, What, and Where are the Postcolonial?

Postcolonial scholarship is a diverse field that emerged as an academic specialization in the Western world during the late 1970s (Lazarus 1). Simply put, scholars in this field examine colonial discourses, as well as national cultures and literatures that have grown following the post-World War II historical events of decolonization (Ray, "Postscript" 574; Schwarz 6). More specifically, postcolonialism is concerned with "forces of oppression and coercive domination that operate in the contemporary world" (Young, *Postcolonialism* 11). Postcolonial theory not only uncovers such oppressive forces, but also considers the resistance to them within discussions of the politics of nationalism, class, race, sexuality, gender, and exile in Third World countries as well as diasporic communities within First World cities (Tiffin vii; Bhabha 175). Seminal postcolonial works that explore these oppressive and resistive forces include Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), a critique of the Western World's essentialist view of the Middle East; Gayatri Chakaravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988), an essay on the refusal and inability of a privileged person to consider the viewpoints of a subaltern woman; and Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), which emphasizes a deconstructive approach to

understanding the construct of the nation through a focus on de-centered, hybridized spaces and individuals. Because postcolonial studies is not housed exclusively within a particular discipline, and literature deemed postcolonial may be written by authors from a variety of regions, it is difficult to determine what constitutes the postcolonial today. Although much of postcolonial literature and scholarship focuses on modern social conflicts in South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, cultural concepts central to the discipline, such as alterity, hybridity, subalternity, imperialism, are also explored in the colonial, post-colonial, and non-colonial contexts of nations within the Americas, East Asia, Central Eurasia, and the Middle East (Schwarz 8; Childs and Williams 10; Adams 6). Canonical postcolonial works like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother* (1997) share significant thematic commonalities with novels produced in nations that are not typically associated with the postcolonial—such as Sigrid Nunez's *A Feather on the Breath of God* (1995) and Tariq Ali's *The Stone Woman* (2000). With this in mind, the contemporary understanding of postcolonial literature is changing. For instance, Ella Shohat states that the linguistic nature of the term "postcolonial," with its inclusion of the word "post," potentially inhibits the field's inclusiveness of works on contemporary issues of "neocoloniality" and the persistence of First World hegemony after colonial independence (Shohat 104). I support her call for a "flexible yet critical" (112) usage of the term, and I argue for a similar application of the term "Middle East."

Like the word, "postcolonial," the conception of the "Middle East" is difficult to describe because it spans across multiple continents, states, colonial histories, religions, and languages. In a similar way that Edward Said characterizes the Orient as "the stage on which the whole East is confined [by the West]" (Said 63), Magda M. Al-Nowaihi argues that "[t]he very appellation [of

the Middle East] is a creation of colonialism, for this region is 'Middle' simply because the point of reference, in more than one way, is Europe" (Al-Nowaihi 283). On the one hand, the Eurocentric, geopolitically strategic categorization of the Middle East as a conflict-ridden, Islamic, traditionalist, and exoticized region ignores the diverse histories of cultural borrowings and ongoing interactions among people of different countries and faiths within the region (Asad 10). On the other hand, the diverse literature emerging from the region may help theorists to further critique and deconstruct the concept of the Middle East. In this vein, two scholars who are revisiting discursive, deconstructed representations of the Middle East are Ali Behdad and Juliet Williams. They argue that the highly essentializing critiques of the Middle East by Westerners, as well as expatriates from the Middle East who critique the lack of secularism in their home countries, are contributing to what they call a discourse of "neo-Orientalism." Unlike Edward Said's classic conception of Orientalism, this new, supplementary mode underscores how practices such as the wearing the veil have become *topos-obligés* that contribute to "a kind of doxa about the Middle East and Muslims that is disseminated, thanks to new technologies of communication, throughout the world" (Behdad and Williams 293). With this in mind, looking at works of modern and contemporary literature in the Middle East and its diaspora through a postcolonial lens can allow scholars to consider how the imagined clash of civilizations between the Western and Islamic worlds becomes internalized, inverted, and parodied by select characters living in nations where discourses of modernity (both Oriental and neo-Oriental in nature) become tools of violence and stigmatization.

In order to emphasize the intersectionality between postcolonial and Middle Eastern literature, I will support my argument with comparative literary critiques of *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) by Tayeb Salih and *Snow* (2002) by Orhan Pamuk. Situated in 1960s Sudan

and at turn-of-the-millennium Turkey, respectively, these novels depict national and cultural contentions in distinct countries and time periods. Yet, I would argue that they represent modern, postcolonial narratives of the Middle East. One could say that *Season of Migration to the North* is not a Middle Eastern novel because the Sudan is in Africa, or that *Snow* is not a postcolonial work because Turkey was never a colony. However, I believe that the novels' almost parallel explorations of alterity, Westernized education, identity conflict, non-belonging, migration, modernity, and secularism reflect central issues to postcolonial scholarship and illustrate the liminal nature of the people, nations, and societies within the contested region of the Middle East.

Doublespeak and Double Consciousness: Knowledge as Power and Debilitation

In *Season of Migration to the North* and *Snow*, the respective narrators as well as protagonists represent Arab or Middle Eastern subjects who experience a similar sense of double-consciousness upon their returns home from prolonged stays in Europe. With their Western knowledge comes power, but this power both strengthens and weakens them in different contexts. To contextualize this, W.E.B. Du Bois first articulated the conception of the double-consciousness of the African-American in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). He argues that the African-American faces a split between his black identity and his American one, and his double-consciousness results from "[the] sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (3). Decades later, Frantz Fanon of Martinque described a similar way in which black men, specifically Africans, exhibited this nature of doubleness not only on a racial and national level, but also on an intellectual one. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), he writes, "The black man has

two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man […] The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language" (17-18). Thus, as the black man gains the power to communicate in a Western language, he also becomes more aware of the West's persistent ill regard for his blackness. Unlike the white man, the black man faces prejudiced reminders that his intellect is in spite of his race (116).

This ontological experience of doubleness pervades postcolonial theory and literature. According to Ato Quayson, a primary concern of the postcolonial figure is "the double vision that a peripheral existence in the world engenders" (Quayson 96). Having a peripheral identity is synonymous with being an Other, which Robert Young claims is the cultural stereotype of existing "outside modernity, outside the West" (Young, "Postcolonial Remains" 36). Because people of numerous racial and national origins are considered Others in postcolonial societies, this feeling of double-consciousness is becoming more apparent in global literature. Much like Fanon argued, the characters in many postcolonial novels recognize their double-consciousness through language—during their conversations with people who perceive them as a cultural Other. For example, in *My Brother*, Jamaica Kincaid explains that while visiting her brother in Antigua after her years of living in the U.S., they could no longer understand each other's English. Not wholly lamenting this fact that she is neither fully Antiguan nor fully American, however, she states, "I could not have become a writer living among the people I know best" (162). Derek Walcott similarly conveys his divided allegiance between his African ancestral origins and his appreciation of the English language in the poem, "A Far Cry from Africa" (1930). He writes: "I who have cursed/The drunken officer of British rule, how choose/Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?" (26-30). This desire for Western knowledge and

simultaneous loss of cultural identity underscores the dilemma for the postcolonial Other. Such problems of double-consciousness and conflicting loyalties dominate Middle Eastern novels as well, especially in *Season* and *Snow*.

In *Season of Migration to the North*, the unnamed narrator is initially attracted to the West when he pursues an English literature degree in London and a career in the modernized Sudanese capital, Khartoum. Upon returning home to his Sudanese village seven years later, when the novel begins, he starts to realize his sense of double-consciousness. During a gathering with the villagers, everyone began asking him questions, such as, "Were the people there [in Europe] like us or were they different?" and "Was life expensive or cheap?" (Salih 4). He downplays any major cultural differences and responds that Europeans are not that different from the villagers—they work in professions ranging from farming to medicine, and they have families with good morals and traditions. He further claims that he wishes he could have gone into further detail, but in his conceit he feared the villagers would not be able to comprehend him. Thus, he questions his cultural and intellectual position in relation to the villagers, as a result of his education in the West. The narrator's newfound knowledge of Western literature and culture, viewed in juxtaposition with his humble past in a rural Sudanese village, illustrates his sense of double-consciousness.

Despite his initial longing to return to the comforts of the village, the narrator soon becomes intrigued by his mysterious foil and figure of foreshadowing, Mustafa Sa'eed. Placed into a highly developed education system in Khartoum by chance, thanks to a uniformed man with a unique turban called a "hat," Mustafa was lured by the Western Other at an early age. After the headmaster's encouragement, he moves to Cairo in order to take advantage of the education offered there. He characterizes the city as "a desert laid out in blue-green, calling me,

calling me" (Salih 24). In this metaphor, the arid environment of the Middle East is transformed into a beautiful mirage when he becomes introduced to the West. Upon his later move to study economics at Oxford in London, he further begins to understand his sense of double-consciousness, for he represents "the handsome black man courted in Bohemian circles" and "a show-piece exhibited by members of the aristocracy" (Salih 48). In this way, one can juxtapose the narrator's return home from Europe to an onslaught of cultural questions with Mustafa's experiences as a young man faced with the intrigue of the West, as well as the West's understanding of him as a Middle Eastern Other. For both the narrator and Mustafa, their knowledge of English marks them as Others in the eyes of the Sudanese villagers and London elites, neither of whom would expect someone from the Sudan to be so competent in the language. Thus, Tayeb Salih demonstrates how the weapon of the Western language initially tantalizes the characters with the mirage of the West, only to later fracture their senses of cultural identity.

In *Snow*, Orhan Pamuk also explores how a Middle Eastern person feels a sense of double-consciousness after living in Europe for several years. The third-person narrator, Orhan, tells the story of Ka, a poet from Istanbul who travels to the impoverished city of Kars, Turkey after twelve years of political exile in Frankfurt, Germany. Like Mustafa, Ka becomes intrigued by the luring promise of the Western world at a young age. As Orhan states, "Ka loved Turgenev and his elegant novels, and like the Russian writer Ka too had tired of his own country's never-ending troubles and came to despise his backwardness" (Pamuk 31). Thus, although Istanbul at the turn-of-the-millennium is relatively modernized, Ka nonetheless feels that the uneducated, fundamentalist masses outside of the capital city dominate Turkey's political and cultural scenes. However, after his twelve-year stay in Germany, where he became frustrated by his decline

toward a "worthless nobody" (Pamuk 103) social status, Ka longs to return to Turkey, where he at least once belonged to the intelligentsia. Rather than go back to his former home in Istanbul, he travels to Kars. According to Orhan, this journey represents "an attempt to step outside the boundaries of his middle-class childhood, to venture at long last into the other world beyond" (Pamuk 18). Viewed in this way, Ka's initial desire to embody the Western Other eventually becomes an unobtainable mirage. Now, he hopes to explore the mysteries of a pious, poverty-stricken, town near the Armenian border.

When Ka begins speaking with the townspeople of Kars, he discovers that he is too much of an Other to blend in with the locals. Portraying himself as a journalist, he claims that the reason for his arrival is to investigate the Muslim girls' suicides in the wake of the state's decision to ban women from publicly wearing headscarves. While engaging with a local about this issue, the narrator notes that this person "was happy to see that a well-read, educated gentleman like Ka had taken the trouble to travel all the way [to Kars] to find out more about his city's problems" (Pamuk 6). Although Ka and the people of Kars are both from the same country and share a common language, the villagers treat him differently because he has had a taste of the West. Ka later meets his antagonist, a Muslim political radical known as Blue, who says to him, "You belong in the Istanbul bourgeoisie. Anyone can tell, just by looking at your skin and the way you hold yourself" (Pamuk 74). In instances like these, Ka realizes that he is an outsider in Kars because of his appearance and mannerisms. Unable to escape his sense of double-consciousness while in Germany, he only feels it more strongly in a small town within his home country.

The development of their language skills in Western cities and education systems enables the protagonists and narrators of *Season* and *Snow* to tell their respective stories. Through a

Foucauldian line of reasoning, these characters become literary examples of how Middle Eastern subjects, like African, Caribbean, or even American ones, may develop their powers of language after being disciplined into docile and productive beings through modernized institutional practices (Foucault 137). In these particular novels, moreover, the knowledge the Middle Eastern protagonists gain from their Western education becomes a double-edged weapon that, while affording them temporary successes in scholarship, ultimately leads to their downfalls.

Melancholic Migration: The Un-Making of Hybrid Subjects

In postcolonial studies, as well as in *Season of Migration to the North* and *Snow*, one can connect the theme of double-consciousness with Homi Bhabha's theory of ambivalence. Bhabha adapts the term from Freud, who explains ambivalence thus: "The individual [unconsciously] wants to carry out this action (the act of touching) […] but he may not carry it out, and he even abominates it" (Freud, "Taboo and the Ambivalence of Emotions"). For Bhabha, ambivalence underlies the colonial dynamic of desire and repulsion for the postcolonial Other (and vice versa). In *The Location of Culture*, he states that the ambivalent colonial power "repeatedly turns from *mimicry*—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to *menace*—a difference that is almost total but not quite" (91; emphases original). This makes sense in the context of *Season* and *Snow*, for the respective protagonists mimic the mannerisms and language of the Western Other—becoming what Bhabha calls "almost […] but not quite" (Bhabha 89) the Westerner. Therefore, their cultural identities remain split and confused. In the process, the simultaneous forces of attraction and repulsion between the depicted Western and non-Western subjects lead to violent, destructive consequences for both sides of the binary. This phenomenon is evident in contemporary postcolonial novels such as Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011). The cosmopolitan

protagonist, Julius, continually tries to create new threads in his life story in order to forget the brutal self he left behind in his home country of Nigeria. Yet, he finds himself slipping in casual instances, such as when he stubbornly refuses to respond cordially to a New York cab driver who acknowledges him as "brother." Julius thinks, "I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me" (Cole 40). Ever the mimic, however, Julius later greets a Moroccan shopkeeper living in Brussels as "brother" (Cole 102). Met with a puzzled response, Julius quickly regrets this decision. These awkward occurrences reveal his struggle to negotiate cultural understandings as he cultivates a self through mimicry. After Moji, a woman he raped in Nigeria, confronts him in New York about his past cruelty and persistent ambivalence, Julius considers suicide. Such a contemplation, which is recurrent in postcolonial literature, demonstrates how ambivalence in Bhabha's context enhances the postcolonial migrant's depravity and despair.

Due to the idea that the colonial discursive mentality keeps the Other spatially, temporally, and culturally distant from the Western subject, Bhabha argues that the postcolonial subject must exist within a "third space—where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences" (218). While one might conceive of the third space as a productive, hybrid cultural melting pot, this illusion is challenged as a result of the ambivalence invading the space. The enactment of cultural identity from the third space "displaces the narrative of the Western nation which Benedict Anderson […] describes as being written in homogenous, serial time" (Bhabha 37). Thus, the postcolonial migrant who travels to the West (and back to a village, in the cases of *Season* and *Snow*) faces the challenge of being unable to achieve the fantasies of cultural superiority and homogenization they had envisioned.

Sara Ahmed additionally qualifies the postcolonial migrant's dissatisfaction with the ambivalent nature of always being an Other. Borrowing from Freud's definition of melancholia

as the “[pathological] reaction to the real loss of a love object” (Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” 250), which can “reinforce an already existing ambivalence” (251) toward that object, she argues that “[t]he melancholic migrant holds onto the unhappy objects of differences, such as the turban […] Such differences […] become sore points or blockage points, where the smooth passage of communication stops” (Ahmed, “Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness” 133). With this in mind, I argue that the protagonists of *Season* and *Snow* are Middle Eastern melancholic migrants. They strive for Westernization at the cost of relinquishing parts of their indigenous selves. Unhappy with the third space in which they dwell, where they cannot achieve their fantasies, they become ambivalent about their roles as mere mimics and perennial Others.

As evidenced by his efforts to start a family in the village and hide most traces of his European experiences, Mustafa Sa’ed seeks to neglect his Western self. He hopes that his two sons “grow up imbued with the air of this village, its smells and colors and history” (Salih 55), even though he himself has been tainted through his pursuance of the mirage of the West. Midway through the novel, after an unknown time has passed since his first meeting with the narrator, Mustafa disappears from the village. He leaves behind a letter asking that the narrator take care of his children and “spare them the pangs of wanderlust” (Salih 54). He also hints as to why he cannot function in the village or elsewhere in the world when he writes, “Rationally I know what is right: my attempt at living in this village […] But mysterious things in my soul and in my blood impel me towards faraway parts that loom up before me and cannot be ignored” (Salih 56). Thus, Mustafa leaves the village and the world, partially due to his inability to feel a sense of secure belonging or make peace with himself after his experiences in the West.

Despite Mustafa's interesting personal history of migrations, his occupation of a third space hinders his ability to tell this story. The narrator discovers this when looking through Mustafa's notorious, darkened room, where he had hidden European literature and any other traces of his past in Europe. Perhaps this was a place where he could dwell by himself, but his isolation only fed into his paranoia and inability to speak about his experiences. The narrator sees that Mustafa has a notebook called "*My Life Story* by Mustafa Sa'ed," with a dedication to "those who see with one eye, speak with one tongue and see things as either black or white, either Eastern or Western" (Salih 125). Inside the book, however, there are only blank pages. It is as though Mustafa feels that he is the only one who fulfills the requirements of this dedication. Despite his acute knowledge of different languages, he cannot find the words to describe his life story. In the West, he is an exoticized, Middle Eastern showpiece. In the village, people barely converse with him and cannot relate to his experiences as a migrant. From his third space, there is no middle ground from where he can speak.

Like Mustafa, Ka also cannot find a place of belonging or security. He spent years of displeasure in Frankfurt, explaining to an old friend, "The thing that saved me was not learning German. My body rejected the language, so I was able to preserve my purity and soul" (Pamuk 33). In this way, as Mustafa also suggests after spending some time in Europe, Western culture and language resemble tantalizing mirages that eventually become corrupting powers to be avoided. Although he comes to Turkey with a mission that is nostalgic as well as purposeful, Ka seldom meets people that he can trust or identify. Not long after his arrival to the snow-covered town, he comes to view Kars as rather distinctive from his hometown of Istanbul. As Orhan indicates, "[N]o longer was he returned to a place where he could enjoy the middle-class life he missed too much even to visit in his dreams. Instead, the snow spoke to him of hopelessness and

misery" (Pamuk 9). People in Kars regard Ka as an outsider, not just because of his Western mannerisms, but also because he is a secular, non-practicing Muslim. The Muslim radical, Blue, bluntly tells Ka how he and others in the community perceive him: "You don't belong to this country; you're not even a Turk anymore" (Pamuk 327). It is perhaps with these thoughts in mind that Ka decides to leave Kars and return to Frankfurt.

Although the reader does not have a full sense of what Ka's life in Europe was like until the end of the novel, Orhan states that Ka gave English lessons to Turkish migrants when he first arrived in Germany years ago. However, once he was officially declared a political exile and awarded asylum benefits, he socially removed himself almost entirely from the Turkish migrant community, in part because "[h]is fellow exiles had found Ka too remote and too bourgeois" (Pamuk 256). From his third space, Ka struggles to make and maintain relationships due to cultural differences—even within a hybrid environment. In tracing Ka's final steps in the Turkish community of Frankfurt where he resided, just before his murder by unidentified assassins, Orhan searches Ka's home to find a possible motive for the crime, as well as Ka's notebook of poems about Kars. He finds no traces of this book and supports the belief that the assassins, possibly connected to Blue, have confiscated it. Ka's thoughts as a hybrid migrant, like Mustafa's, cannot be read or understood by anyone else.

Mustafa and Ka explore their identifications as cultural Others after migrating throughout urban and rural spaces in the Middle East, as well as in European cities. One result of these migrations is that the characters cannot definitively identify themselves, even though the people they encounter may want to pigeonhole them as Arab or Western. This failure to embody cohesive, homogenized identities forces them into melancholia. Sara Ahmed argues that "[t]o read others as melancholic would be to read their attachments as death-wishes, as attachments to

things that are already dead" (Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* 141). Ka and Mustafa eventually find themselves attached to the non-Western selves that they can no longer regain as a result of their chase for the Western illusion of self-betterment. Regardless of what actually led to their deaths, their melancholy and ambivalence toward their hybrid states killed their spirits.

Pray or Prey: Women as Tradition, Desire, and Nation

In addition to developing a sense of double-consciousness and occupying a third space, the protagonists of *Season* and *Snow* pursue strong desires for women who are their cultural Others. Mustafa and Ka treat the females they respectively romance as objects of desire, conquest, exoticism, and traditionalism. The women in these novels become more than women, but arguably less than human, as they represent bodily territories to be physically and intellectually excavated by male power. In his attempt to know and conquer the indigenous woman, the liminal migrant becomes a new type of colonial power. This power struggle, coupled with the paranoia of isolation within the third space, ultimately incapacitates the protagonists.

In *Season*, women in the Sudanese village are viewed primarily as symbols of cultural tradition and childbearing. Someone who recurrently emphasizes this is Wad Reyyes, a villager who marries a new bride every year and has his sights set on Mustafa's widow. He tells the narrator, "The nonsense you learn at school won't wash with us here. In this village the men are guardians of the women" (Salih 82). Further, Wad compares the role of women in the village to their role in other parts of the Middle East, saying, "The Nigerians, the Egyptians, and the Arabs of Syria, aren't they Moslems like us? But they're people who know what's what and leave their women as God created them. As for us, we dock them like you do animals" (Salih 68). It is evident that in this rural Sudanese village, women maintain their traditional Muslim roles, even

though Muslim women in other Middle Eastern cities and countries may expand or alter their understandings of these roles. Perhaps it is with this dichotomy in mind that Mustafa has such violent and complicated relationships with women.

Edward Said states that the European invented image of the Orient is characterized by "romance, exotic beings, [and] haunting memories and landscapes" (Said 1). In *Season*, Salih assesses this romanticizing of the Other, but he reverses the traditional cultural roles by identifying the explorer or conqueror as the Middle East and the typified Other as the West. Once Mustafa comes to fully comprehend the ideas of Western culture and the Western perception of his indigenous culture, he begins to formulate his personality and language in a way that entices European women into his bedroom. He epitomizes his seduction of Ann Hammond, who Mustafa calls "easy prey" (Salih 27), with the statement, "She would tell me that in my eyes she saw the shimmer of mirages in hot deserts […] And I would tell her that in the blueness of her eyes I saw the faraway shoreless seas of the North" (Salih 120-1). This blue sea mirage metaphor that initially attracted Mustafa to the West comes into play again during his conquest of Europeans like Ann. The fact that many of these women end up dead, reportedly by means of suicide, demonstrates how the sensual language of the Other inevitably become too insufferable for the Othered (and, in Mustafa's case, Western) women to bear.

These plays on Oriental tropes are not pleasurable for Mustafa in the long run, because the metaphors of blue sea mirages soon turns into metaphors of warfare and disease. In his conquest for Jean Morris, who married him yet constantly rebelled against his luring seductions, Mustafa describes how he would "stay awake all night warring with bow and sword and spear and arrows" (Salih 29). Mustafa effectively manipulates his double-consciousness to violently conquer the Other, using his bedroom as an extended metaphor of the colonial seduction and

violent entrapment of the colonized through the use of deceptive language. However, after Jean Morris lures him into stabbing her to death, it is evident that the colonial game becomes too much for Mustafa. After all, it is not long after this incident that he moves to the Sudanese village and marries a local. Following his damaging, convoluted experiences as both the colonized and colonizer; the traditional Muslim woman becomes a symbol of temporary stability for him.

Modern secular legislations in Europe and the Middle East, such as the banning of the headscarf, have prompted questions about the role of Muslim women. *Snow* is largely about Ka's migratory struggles, but the stories of Turkish women foreground the novel. He listens to numerous local opinions about the Muslim women's suicide incidents, such as the ex-mayor's feeling that "the streets of Kars are filled with young women in head scarves […] And because they've been barred from their classes for flaunting this symbol of political Islam, they've begun committing suicide" (Pamuk 21). One woman he meets who wears a headscarf, on the other hand, tells Ka that the suicides represent more than religious devotion and fragility; they are also attempts for women to control their own bodies. Through these conversations, one learns how the politicization of the headscarf issue has led to the polarization and isolation of headscarf-wearing Muslim women in Kars, who were once in the cultural majority in the city before the ban.

What has become obvious in Turkey is that secular laws like headscarf bans are causing political tensions to mount, especially in small cities like Kars. In the novel, a radical Muslim murders the director of the local Institute of Education, due to his enforcing of the headscarf ban and possible indirect contribution to a girl's suicide. People begin referring to this incident as a reflection of dated yet persistent modernity vs. traditionalism and secular vs. religious

fundamentalism debates. For example, a revolutionary actor-playwright tells Ka, "If we don't let the army and the state deal with these dangerous fanatics, we'll end up back in the Middle Ages…traveling the doomed path already traveled by so many tribal nations in Asia and the Middle East" (Pamuk 203). In this sense, the political and cultural battles of Orientalism are being waged on and on behalf of the bodies of Middle Eastern women.

It is in this heightened political environment that Ka travels to Kars, not only to find a sense of home and investigate the suicides, but also to reconnect with Ipek, a newly divorced woman he had once desired. Upon realizing that Muhtar, her pitiful ex-husband, is still in love with her, Orhan remarks, "Ka feared that both of them longed for Ipek as a symbol of escape from [a] defeatist state of mind" (Pamuk 52). Thus, the characters' desire for Ipek—a beautiful, working-class woman in Kars—stems less from love than it does from a need for stability in a time of political and personal distress. Further, when Ka first makes love to Ipek, he treats her in a way that, judging by the narrator's imagination, somewhat parallels Mustafa's violent, colonizing lovemaking. As Orhan describes it, "[I]t was not Ipek herself who was arousing Ka but a pornographic image […] Ka worried that Ipek was not as fragile as he wanted her to be. This is why he pulled her hair to cause her pain, why he took pleasure from her pain […] to the accompaniment of an internal music sound track as deep as it was primitive" (Pamuk 249). Ka thus seeks a sexual experience that is in one instance Middle Eastern and in another Western, in which Ipek is fragile as well as erotic. His desire for Ipek, beyond an escapist fantasy, is a violent conquest for the meek, oppressed, female Other.

For Mustafa and Ka, the Othered women of the Middle East and the West become more than desires. They are enactments of nations and regions. As Sangeeta Ray indicates in *En-Gendering India*, "Generally, tradition is a hard thing to let go of, and more significant, even if

men had to adapt because they were part of the ephemeral public life, women could always be counted on to affirm the continuity of tradition" (Ray 1). As long as national leaders and writers continue to privilege (or debase) women as uncontaminated upholders of traditional national culture, the discourse of the nation prevails. In *Midnight's Children*, for example, Indian male characters fall for women who are covered by a perforated sheet. These women represent traditionalism and modesty, and it is because they are only viewable in segments that they become so intriguing. Despite the fact that the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, feels that women were essential to his upbringing, one sees that he and many men in the novel foolishly make the mistakes of "loving in fragments" (Rushdie 40), only to later become heartbroken.

The women in *Season* and *Snow* are also, in a sense, loved in fragments. They are not typified as human beings, but rather as uncharted territories, collectible Oriental (or Western) mementos, and symbols of either religion or secularism. Through the descriptions of the women, one learns less about them and more about the men's journeys, as well as polarized male imaginings of women. Although Mustafa and Ka entertain their own respective hybrid states, the women remain geographically and culturally positioned—only to be Othered in the male imagination. In this sense, while the male protagonists explore the possibilities of a more cosmopolitan Middle East, their adventures are at the expense of, and to an extent put to an end by, the stationary women who come to culturally represent the Middle East, the West, England, and Turkey.

Conclusions: The Impact of Literature on Regional Scholarship and Debates

Season of Migration and *Snow* both underscore postcolonial themes, while also providing useful narratives for scholarship on the Middle East. Salih reveals the stigmatizing, violent, and

isolating results of Orientalism, while Pamuk implies a similar warning for the contemporary lawmakers and citizens spreading neo-Oriental messages. In this way, these works precede and build upon the thematic subjects that have become valuable to postcolonial literature and theory. Reflecting on these works in the contemporary era, when some argue that the postcolonial is becoming transnational and parts of Africa, Asia, and borderline Europe may comprise the Middle East, one can begin to think more critically about the liminal nature of various subjects—from postcolonial scholarship as a whole to localized individuals like the Middle Eastern migrant and the subaltern woman.

By reading and analyzing texts like *Season* and *Snow*, one can better comprehend how the region of the Middle East was invented by the Western mind for strategic, politicized purposes. Although Mustafa had never seen a turban until he was a child and studied diligently in Cairo and in London, he is nonetheless positioned as an exotic, Arab showpiece. Despite the varieties of cultures and religions in Turkey, the image of the headscarf becomes a sudden threat to secular government officials who desire for Turkey to be included within the European Union. Many of the struggles in these novels, as in real life, reflect the largely invented battles between the East and West, or, more specifically, between the Middle East and Europe. Salih and Pamuk critique the violent, dangerous nature of colonial and Orientalist discourse; contemporary scholars of postcolonial and Middle Eastern studies can use these works to better understand and critique the liminal nature of their academic disciplines today.

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