

Cross-cultural Integration and Disintegration

By Ahlam Fathy Hassan P.H.D.

Cultural differences sharpen the imagination and help to formulate preconceived ideas concerning the "other". Reality produces either disappointment as actual encounters produce a cultural shock when the result is not up to one's expectations, or cultural conflicts, when there is an attempt to impose one's culture and beliefs on the other.

I have selected two literary works by two authors from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, the works belong to different genres for certain educational purposes. The first is *An Egyptian Journal* (1985) by William Golding, an English writer and a Nobel prize winner; the second is *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) by Tayeb Salih, a contemporary Sudanese writer.

Objectives

1. To discuss different cultural backgrounds:
 - ◆ Differences between and similarities to local culture.
 - ◆ Historical background (here Egypt - the Sudan - England).
 - ◆ Geographical background: Get them a map.
 - ◆ Compare between English idioms and those that belong to the other culture (Arabic). Examine the texts carefully for such expressions.
2. Discuss form:
 - ◆ Structure: traditional - modern - modernist - post modernist.
 - ◆ Genre
3. Encourage them to read further works for the same authors or similar works written by different authors. Provide them with a list of titles.
4. Encourage creative writing. Write their impression of a strange place they visited.
5. Create bridges between people of different culture to become more understanding and less prejudiced. Knowledge creates understanding creates tolerance.

Introduction

William Golding (1911 - 1993) a British novelist and essayist whose first novel, *Lord of the Flies* (1954), won him the Nobel Prize in literature in 1983, is one of the most original, powerful and impressive writers in modern times. Yet, he is frequently described as difficult, mysterious and perplexing. In his works Golding uses myth, fable, symbols and motifs. Furthermore, Golding abandons traditional forms for modernist ones and thus he is one of the most creative writers in the twentieth century. Golding's infatuation with ancient history, especially the Greek and the Egyptian, stimulated him to write exotic articles on Ancient Greece as well as on pharaohs and Ancient Egyptian monuments and culture. It was not surprising, then, that he was asked to make a trip to Egypt and write his fresh impression in a book. In February 1984, in spite of the difficulties, he managed to hire a boat and embark on a Nile trip from Cairo to Luxor and back again. In fact, one of his main intentions - in addition to sightseeing - was to know real Egyptians, but he discovered that a boat trip was not an ideal means to get to know people. He himself regretted his myopic vision, especially so since the small and low boat he got, unlike a tourist boat, did not allow good inspection of the area next to the banks of the river. This was soon remedied, however, by frequent debarkation and visits to local places and meetings with several natives. The thorough details in his *An Egyptian Journal* persuade the reader that the author is factual, nevertheless, Golding's artistic vision is very creative. Here in this *Journal* as well as elsewhere in his writings - fictional or non-fictional - Golding employs what Allan Massie calls "Magic Realism" (*The Novel Today* 5).

Tayeb Salih (1929 -) is a contemporary Sudanese writer who comes from the north of the Sudan. He is mainly a novelist and a short story writer who writes in Arabic. His main themes include conflict between traditions and modern thinking, the impact of aliens on the peaceful village life and the conflict between two types of cultures. His semi-autobiographical novel, *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) is based on his own experience during the period of study in England. As the events of the novel unfold, the autobiographical elements are soon discerned. The main narrator, Mehaimed, has come back

home to his small village after spending seven years in Europe to obtain his Ph.D. in English poetry. Yet, the story involves another protagonist, another Sudanese who is a stranger to the village and who claims he has come from Khartoum, seeking a quiet resort and so buys a house, finds a suitable wife and settles there. It is with this stranger, Mustafa Sa'eed, that Salih's novel revolves around.

Mustafa Sa'eed's mysterious past is gradually unravelled through his direct confessions to Mehaimed, the main narrator, through other characters who happen to know him, through his letters and through some personal papers found in his study. In fact, there have been some references to similarities between the method of narration in Salih's *season of Migration* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Why different genres?

A question forces itself here: Why am I comparing literary works belonging to different genres? One of the reasons is to familiarise students with different literary genres, the various paraphernalia of each genre and what our expectations are. Once they know the differences or perhaps an approximate definition of each, we can explain that sometimes journals verge on the fictional and works of fiction depend upon facts.

After discussing the form we now turn to the content. Examine both works for cultural differences and reactions:

- Expectations and disappointment
- Discovery and reconciliation
- Conflict
- Language as a barrier
- English idioms and expressions versus local expressions translated into English.

Examples:

After many years of yearning to be in Egypt and dreaming to visit this fabulous country Golding was finally able to set foot on the place of his dreams, but he was disappointed to find that "the Egypt of the mind simply did not exist" (*An Egyptian Journal* 11). He came to a simple truth during his first visit, "that Egypt is a complex country of more or less Arab culture and it is outrageous for the uninformed visitor to confine himself to dead Egyptians while the strange life of the valley and the desert goes on all around him" (*E. J.* 11).

Golding's wife noticed no sense of discipline among Egyptians:

Ann decided that Egyptians worked in a different rhythm. We work at set hours and do not expect to touch work at all in the others. Egyptians do not make this distinction but expect to work or rest at any time Women work all day from dawn to dusk and beyond at both ends, work as gently as they can with intermissions for gossip and rest. They do not distinguish. (*E. J.* 154)

Another cultural observation is made by Golding when he visited an Egyptian village in the Delta. By mere chance he witnessed a family crisis over a girl, a university student who was involved in a riot against the police. Her parents, grandparents, cousins, uncles and aunts, indeed, the whole family were concerned about her safety and held several sessions to decide what to do with her. Asked how it would have been in England Golding said:

In England the family involvement would not be so widespread. It would be - nuclear. Only if the girl was very young would it seen as a matter for her parents . . . Uncles and aunts, grandparents - they wouldn't be brought into the picture at all. (*E. J.* 198 - 99)

The barrier of language helps sometimes to sharpen the differences and thus causes misunderstanding. Golding makes an observation:

I suspected now that I had identified Egypt's prime difficulty. It was indifference, *madesh*, don't bother to complete a job because it is impossible to complete it and in any case it doesn't matter. (*E. J.* 169)

In fact the Arabic word *malesh* does not have an exact equivalent in English, but the nearest equivalent is "never mind" or "it doesn't matter". However, the Arabic word denotes a sense of forgiveness absent in the English translation. For example when someone wrongs you and you say *malesh* to indicate you have forgiven him, or if you come late and request to be forgiven you say *malesh*.

Sometimes, however, sign language is more eloquent:

I did not know the word for honey, I therefore stuck my thumbs in my ears, and wagged my fingers as fast as I could, meanwhile making a buzzing noise. Said looked staggered for a moment or two, then he burst He howled with laughter until the tears streamed down his black face. I returned to our cabin wondering what would happen next. Presently there was a tap on the door. It was Said with our breakfast. He was still grinning; but miraculously standing among the pile of Arab bread, was a small pot of honey. (*E. J.* 169)

Said here displays a willingness to help and understand though at the journey's outset he has shown antagonistic attitude. When passing by an island called "Fisherman" Said was sulky and grumbling. There was a story behind that:

It was years ago. There was an Egyptian owned half the island. Some high-class tourists came up the river in their own boat One was called Fisher. He wanted to buy the island. The Egyptian invited him to a meal but the Englishman wouldn't come.

. . . .
"I suppose he thought the native was dirty", (explained the guide).

However, the Egyptian gave Fisher half of the island as a guest gift. (*E. J.* 28).

The guiding courier explained that "Egyptians are very hospitable" and that "they offer the guest what they have", while Golding commented saying "The Egyptian was a dislikable fool - Fisher was just dislikable." (*E. J.* 28)

Discuss Different Attitudes

As a matter of fact, the Nile journey helped to achieve a sense of integration. After their return to Cairo, all members of the crew looked "friendly and regretful Said, wise and

happy old man, grasped both my hands in his and said with profound seriousness: 'English troubles all long time away.'" (*E. J.* 170).

Examine the Text for Words Suggesting:

- Disappointment, disintegration, futility, misunderstanding, frustration, disillusion, discontent, chagrin, regret, mortification.
- Integration, wholeness, harmony, agreement, assimilation, understanding, amity, sympathy, forgiveness, satisfaction, content, happiness, comfort.

Here is another example of cultural differences:

Golding was taken to look into a house of a "poor fellah" where he was greatly welcomed by the elderly wife and husband to the extent of being embarrassed, and then

Inspired, I asked about grandchildren. This was popular. The family tree down three generations was unravelled for me. There was in the courtyard a huge columnar structure, not free-standing but bonded to the wall among the heaps of sugar cane. It was about the same size though not shape as the huge storage jars in the palace at knosses. The father or rather . . . grandfather, seeing my interest bent down and fished some grain out of a hole at the base. I shook hands all round and the exquisite old lady . . . finished me off by kissing my hand. (*E. J.* 62).

After his visit to Egypt and meeting with real people, Golding found it difficult to sum up his complex impressions in a single attitude. In fact there was a change of perspective as he realised more and more that "the Egypt of the mind simply did not exist", yet he could not help visualising the place full of British people. Egypt aroused in him contradictory sentiments

The Egyptian experience was becoming more and more *various*. How to get the lot under one hat? There was a great defect in width of sympathies, I thought. I could not spend any time in the Old Winter Palace without returning in imagination not to ancient Egypt but to Victorian and Edwardian days when these quaint and spacious hotels had been filled with people so, so . . . different! (*E. J.* 127).

While Golding transposed British people to inhabit Egyptian hotels, the main protagonist in Salih's novel turned his London flat into a Sudanese territory. Women ensnared into his place

had either to yield peacefully and utterly to his own domination, in this case the domination of the East to the West, or to fight and struggle, not for their freedom but for supremacy. Characters achieve allegorical meanings and symbolic overtones in their desire to come out victorious after the bedroom battle.

Mustafa Sa'eed, Salih's main character in *Season of Migration*, sought this kind of domination and supremacy. He once gave a lecture in Oxford on Abu Nuwas who was an Arab poet of Syrian origin, but was not interested in giving factual details concerning the poet. He attempted chiefly to impress his audience, therefore, he invented untrue stories in order to nourish them with exotic ideas about the East:

I read them some of his poetry about wine in a comic oratorical style which I claimed was how Arabic poetry used to be recited in the Abbasid era. In the lecture I said that Abu Nuwas was a Sufi mystic and that he had made of wine a symbol with which to express all his spiritual yearnings, that the longing for wine in his poetry was really a longing for self-obliteration in the Divine - all arrant nonsense with no basis of fact Feeling that my elation was communicating itself to my audience, I lied more and more extravagantly. (*Season of Migration to the North* 143)

Moreover, meeting by chance Isabella Seymour, a woman in her early forties, Mustafa Sa'eed was able to ensnare her with his charming conversation and his lies:

Our house is right on the bank of the Nile, so that when I'm lying on my bed at night I put my hand out of the window and idly play with the Nile waters till sleep overtakes me. (*S. M.* 39)

It was not difficult for him to create fables about his country nor for her to accept them:

As we drank tea, she asked me about my home. I related to her fabricated stories about deserts of golden sands and jungles where non-existent animals called out to one another. I told her that the streets of my country teemed with elephants and lions and that during siesta time crocodiles crawled through it There came a moment when I felt I had been transformed in her eyes into a naked, primitive creature, a spear in one hand and arrows in the other, hunting elephants and lions in the jungles. (*S. M.* 38)

Real encounters between "North and "South" created conflicts. Jean Morris treated Mustafa Sa'eed contemptuously. She pursued him everywhere seeking to humiliate him. If he asked her to dance with him she would say "I wouldn't dance with you if you were the only man in the world" (*S. M.* 155). Yet, she was deeply in love with him. She later accepted to marry him as a means of mortifying and tormenting him for she would not let him touch her.

I was the invader who had come from the South, and this was the icy battlefield from which I would not make a safe return. I was the pirate sailor and Jean Morris the shore of destruction. And yet I did not care. (*S. M.* 160)

At the time of his trial in London, a sense of retaliation overpowered Sa'eed as he remembered the British invasion of his country:

When Mahmoud Wad Ahmed was brought in shackles to Kitchener after his defeat at the battle of Atbara, Kitchener said to him, "Why have you come to my country to lay waste and plunder?" It was the intruder who said this to the person whose land it was, and the owner of the land bowed his head and said nothing. So let it be with me. In that court I hear the rattle of swords in Carthage and the clatter of the hooves of Allenby's horses desecrating the ground of Jerusalem Yes, my dear sirs, I came as an invader into your very homes: a drop of the poison which you have injected into the veins of history. "I am no Othello. Othello was a lie". (*S. M.* 94 - 5)

And yet, in spite of his seven year imprisonment in England, in addition to the melodramatic events touching his life there, it was a great surprise for Mehaimed to find his study modelled on a western style. After Sa'eed's death, Mehaimed became the guardian of the wife and two sons. He was also the only one allowed to touch ^{Sa'eed's} personal belongings:

How ridiculous! A fireplace - imagine it! A real English fireplace with all the bits and pieces, above it a brass cowl and in front of it a quadrangular area tiled in green marble, with the mantelpiece of blue marble; on either side of the fireplace were two Victorian chairs covered in a figured silk material, while between them stood a round table with books and notebooks on it. (*S. M.* 136)

The well furnished study was shelved with books, English masterpieces in different branches of knowledge, and not an Arabic book among them. Sa'eed's upbringing and culture induced him to reject Western culture, but at heart he was steeped in this "other" culture because of

Mehaimed brought Bent Majzoub a bottle of whisky she sat drinking and talking until one third of the bottle was gone without having any effect on her except making her more animated. She then exclaimed "That's enough of the heathens' drink It's certainly formidable stuff and not a bit like date arak" (*S. M.* 76). Western women are considered by common Sudanese as infidels since they do not believe in Islam. Wad Rayyes, a man in his seventies but still hale and hearty has been a womaniser, interested in marrying more than a woman at a time. He asks Mehaimed who has been to Europe: "They say the infidel women are something unbelievable" (*S. M.* 80). Mehaimed himself compares between his education in a foreign country and the simple crude "learning" of the almost illiterate natives of his village:

When they laugh they say "I ask forgiveness of God" and when they weep they say "I ask forgiveness of God". Just that. And I, what have I learnt? They have learnt silence and patience from the river and from trees. And I, what have I learnt. (*S. M.* 130)

The concept of marriage in a Sudanese village is different from that of an urban place or even a village in Europe. Though Hosna Bent Mahmoud is a mature woman - a widow with two sons - her father as the patriarch and arbiter of the family agrees to give her in marriage to elderly Wad Rayyes who is forty years older than her - Mehaimed asks Wad Rayyes:

"But if she doesn't want to marry?"
 "You know how life is run here," he interrupted me. "Women belong to men, and a man's a man even if he's decrepit." (*S. M.* 99)

Language: Imagery, myth . . . etc.

Both writers are described as mythmakers, writers of fables as they intermingle between fact and fiction. Salih writes his fiction as if he was writing a journal whereas Golding writes his journal as if he was writing a work of the imagination, linking the present with the past in a chain of events that verge on the mythical.

I remember coming to Memphis thousands of years ago in the area opposite where Cairo would be but was yet undreamed of, and for miles the streets were lit with a soft light; and like Odysseus out of sheer curiosity I stole ashore and walked, skin pricking, in the city; for before every door was a small pottery lamp lit so that the whole place shone. But there was no one about. For this was All Souls' night when the dead walk, and the boy who had gone adventurously forth with his bronze sword in his hand fled screaming back to his boat with the terror of the dead around him. (E. J. 165)

Tayeb Salih resorts to the myth of actual life in the Sudan. Words such as "crocodile", snake, palm tree and river are turned into symbols and motifs in the novel. Mustafa Sa'eed tells Isabella Seymour, "You'll find I'm an aged crocodile who's lost its teeth" (S.M. 39). The crocodile is a symbol of fertility in the Sudan, its cornucopia. The Sudanese consider it a good omen and place it stuffed in front of their shops. It is also one of the ancient Egyptian gods representing the river Nile. Yet, as the river itself it is a symbol of life and death. The narrator, who seemed to be more of an observer than a participant, finally sheds off his neutrality when a decision had to be made. Overcome by grief after learning the news of Hosna's tragic death, he turned to the river to swim. Then in the middle of the stream, "I found I was half-way between north and south. I was unable to continue, unable to return. I turned over on my back and stayed there motionless, moving my arms and legs with difficulty, just as much as needed to keep me afloat" (S.M. 167).