

Season of Migration to the North Study Guide

Season of Migration to the North by Tayeb Salih

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Plot Summary

"It was, gentlemen, after a long absence - seven years to be exact, during which time I was studying in Europe - that I returned to my people" (Chapter 1, pg. 1). He returned to the small village of the Nile because he missed his people. The man had been gone for seven years. He was happy to be back and they were happy to have him back. He had missed the closeness of tribal life during his stay in Europe. It was good to wake up in his own familiar bed with the familiar sounds of the wind outside.

The narrator of the story, who is never given a name, is from a poor Sudanese village and he is the one that tells the story of Mustafa Sa'eed, in bits and pieces throughout the book. He spends seven years studying in Europe earning a doctorate. When he returns, he spots a stranger among those who had come to greet him. The stranger is Mustafa Sa'eed. The man had appeared in the village five years earlier and married one of the local girls. He works in the fields, although it is later learned that the man is a well-known economist who was active in the movement for Sudanese independence.

Mustafa is a mystery to the narrator. He talks with him and learns some details about his life. However, he feels that Mustafa is hiding something and he wants to find out what. Thus begins his obsession with Mustafa Sa'eed. Several weeks later, Mustafa disappears during the flooding, apparently the victim of drowning, but his body is never found. He names the narrator the guardian of his two young sons. He also leaves him the key to his private room, called the triangular room.

The narrator moves to Khartoum and in his position with the Department of Education, he keeps meeting people who refer to Dr. Mustafa Sa'eed. Most have stories are filled with praise for the man. This fuels the curiosity of the narrator who is on a destructive quest for information about the man.

The book emphasizes the Occident-Orient conflict in post-colonial Sudan. Each culture is curious about the other and this appears several times throughout the book. It is especially obvious with the women in the novel as their role in the different cultures and countries is discussed.

The author Tayeb Salih grew up in the Sudan and was educated in England. He came from a small Sudanese agricultural village, much as the one portrayed in the novel. He is considered a major Arab novelist of his time. *Season of Migration from the North* was translated from its original Arabic into English after it was first published in Beirut. The rich style of the Arabic writing, with its heavy use of metaphors, makes the text somewhat difficult but leaves its impression on the reader.



Pages 1-18

Pages 1-18 Summary

The narrator had been gone for seven years. He was happy to be back and they were happy to have him back. He had missed the closeness of tribal life during his stay in Europe. It was good to wake up in his own familiar bed with the familiar sounds of the wind outside.

The world seems unchanged to him as he has tea with his family while his father recites verses from the Koran. He had seen a strange man among those who came to welcome him home and asked about the man. He describes the man as around fifty, of medium height and graying hair. His father tells him that the man is Mustafa. He had arrived five years earlier and married the daughter of Mahmoud.

His family is curious about Europe and asks him many questions. What were the people like? What was life like, etc? The narrator tells them that the Europeans are just as they are. They marry and raise their children according to their customs and traditions. He tells his brother, Mahjoub, that the Europeans have many different occupations and they have life experiences much as the tribal people do.

The narrator has a lot of catching up to do as he renews friendships with the village people. He has to pay his respects to the families of those who have died during his absence and he has to offer his congratulations to those who have married. He finds his favorite Acacia tree on the banks of the Nile where he spent many hours sitting as a child, watching the water and the activity on the water. The narrator remembers his childhood and his grandfather when he sees the tree. He remembers the stories his grandfather used to tell him and how much he enjoyed hearing the stories.

Mustafa comes to visit at the narrator's house two days later bring a gift of melons and oranges. He apologizes for intruding and says he would like to get to know him. They introduce themselves and the narrator invites him to tea. As they talk, Mustafa says that he has heard that the narrator has earned a doctorate. When he finds that his doctorate is in literature, Mustafa tells him that they don't need that in their country. They need people with backgrounds in engineering, medicine or agriculture.

The narrator finds that Mustafa is from the Khartoum area where he had his own business. He decided that he wanted to go into agriculture. He took a boat along the Nile, found the village and decided that he liked it and stayed. Mustafa leaves for his fields but invites the narrator to dinner in two days. He tells the narrator that his grandfather knows the secret as he walks out, without any explanation of what he means.

When he has dinner with Mustafa, he finds his father, brother and Sa'eed the shopkeeper at the dinner. The house is like other houses in the area. Mustafa was



quite, preferring to listen to the conversation so the narrator didn't learn much about him at the dinner.

The narrator attends a meeting of the Agricultural Project Committee, whose President is a friend of his, Mahjoub. He learns that Mustafa is a member of the Agricultural Project Committee and is treated with a great deal of respect by the other members. A week later when the narrator is drinking with Mahjoub, Mustafa joins them. Mahjoub tells Mustafa he will divorce if Mustafa does not drink. Mustafa drinks, and after several drinks, he verbally recites English poetry and then abruptly leaves. When the narrator visits him the next day and questions him about the incident, Mustafa brushes it off.

Mustafa invites him over the next day. He says that the narrator must promise not to tell anyone what he tells him. He shows him a package of papers with birth certificates and passports.

Pages 1-18 Analysis

Having been away from his family and tribe for seven years, the narrator returns to his village in the Sudan after earning a doctorate in Europe. His family is curious about the Europeans and the narrator tells them that they are the same as the tribal people. His point is that people everywhere have the same life experience of marrying and raising children according to their customs and traditions. They have the same kinds of fears and hopes and worries.

Mustafa comes to visit the narrator, who is curious about Mustafa. He sizes him up and is curious about Mustafa's excessive politeness. He wonders what the man wants. They talk about the narrator's education and Mustafa tells him that the country needs educated people to further its advancement. Even after their talk, the narrator feels that Mustafa is hiding something. Mustafa senses the curiosity in him and invites him over. He has the narrator swear to never reveal what he tells him. When the narrator promises, he shows him a bundle of passports, birth certificates and other papers.



Pages 19-44

Pages 19-44 Summary

"It's a long story, but I won't tell you everything. Some details won't be of great interest to you, while others...." (Chapter 2, pg. 19). This is how Mustafa begins his story. He was an only child and his only relative was his mother. He had no one to order him around so he did as he wanted and because of this, he felt free. The other families used to hide their sons because they thought the government would find them and put them in the army. When a man appeared on horseback one day, Mustafa talked to him instead of running and hiding with the others. He told Mustafa to work hard in school so he could become an official in the government. He took Mustafa to the school and registered him. Mustafa later told his mother about the incident. She didn't say anything but he sensed that she was proud of him.

Mustafa found that he liked learning and he liked school. Within two weeks, he had learned to write and was regarded as a prodigy. After three years, he was told that the school could teach him no more and that he had to go abroad for further education. He wanted to go to Cairo, and the school made the arrangements for him. Mustafa tells his mother after the arrangements and the scholarship were arranged. She gives him some money that was left by his father and tells him to choose as he wishes. This is the last time he ever saw his mother.

Mustafa travels to Cairo by train and is met by Mr. and Mrs. Robinson when he arrives in Cairo. During his stay in Cairo, they treated him as a son, taking him sightseeing and showering him with love. Mustafa eventually went on to London three years later.

He meets a woman named Jean Morris at a party in Chelsea. At this time, he was only interested in enticing women to his bed. Jean Morris was found dead one day. She gassed herself but there was a piece of paper with Mustafa's name on it. At the trial, the public prosecutor is one of his teachers at Oxford. Mustafa admits that he killed Jean Morris and he is portrayed as causing the suicide of other young women. Another of his teachers was his defense attorney who tried to present him as a young genius who had obtained a teaching position at London University who had killed in the heat of passion.

Jean had wanted to get married so he married her. He was living with five different women simultaneously. This became known at the trial.

Mustafa remembers how he met Isabella Seymour. He gives his name as Amin Hassan. He had first seen her at a park and was immediately attracted to her. When asked about his background, he told her stories about the desert and jungle and how his parents had drowned when he was six.



Pages 19-44 Analysis

Mustafa grew up being independent and making his own decisions with a mother that supported his independence and respected his decisions. He never saw his mother again, once he left his village to study in Cairo. He was twelve at the time and fifteen when he went on to London. He was a woman chaser during his years in London, living with five women simultaneously. Some of them committed suicide, and one of them, Jean Morris whom he married, was killed by him. He is tried for the murder of Jean Morris. At the trial, both the public prosecutor and the defense attorney had been his teachers at Oxford. Mustafa freely admitted that he had killed Jean Morris.



Pages 45-60

Pages 45-60 Summary

"It was a steamingly hot July night, the Nile that year having experienced one of those floodings that occur once every twenty or thirty years and become legendary - something for fathers to talk to their sons about" (Chapter 3, pg. 45). The people had to swim or use boats to get around the area. The narrator is out of town when the incident occurred but his father told him of hearing screams from Mustafa's house. When he didn't return home, the people searched for him. He is presumed to have drowned, even though they never found his body.

The narrator is familiar with the area since he grew up there. He wandered around after leaving Mustafa's house the night Mustafa told him his story. He hears his grandfather's voice as he walks by and wonders if he ever sleeps. He is thinking about his talk with Mustafa and wonders if what had happened to Mustafa could have happened to him. He too had lived in London.

Two years after Mustafa's death, the narrator went to work at the Department of Education in Khartoum. One day while traveling on a train, he talked with a retired civil servant. He finds that the man knows many of his colleagues at the Department of Education. He then talks about the people who were in his form at school and says the most brilliant of them was Mustafa Sa'eed who was the best known of the students at Gordon College, the school in the Sudanese village. The narrator listens, but does not say that he also knew Mustafa Sa'eed. The man goes on to talk about his career with the government and how it was to work under English colonization. They had all expected big things of Mustafa Sa'eed.

A month after the conversation on the train, the narrator was visiting some people from the University in Khartoum, and the subject turned to mixed marriages. The name of Mustafa Sa'eed again came up as being the first Sudanese to marry an English woman. The man found it strange that nobody remembered him because he worked for Sudanese independence in the 1930s. The man said that Mustafa was now a millionaire living in England. The narrator says that Mustafa was dead. They go on to discuss the economic theories of Mustafa Sa'eed. When asked if the men had ever met Sa'eed they replied that they hadn't.

Pages 45-60 Analysis

The narrator wonders about Mustafa and if what happened to Mustafa in England could have happened to him. He decides that it couldn't because he remembered his roots and maintained his distance from the Europeans when it came to relationships.

The subject of Mustafa Sa'eed keeps coming up, years after his disappearance from the village. The narrator, now working for the Department of Education in Khartoum,



finds people that know of him. A discussion at a friend's house it is said that Sa'eed worked for the British against the Sudanese in the 1930s and is now a millionaire living in England. The narrator, who was named the guardian of Sa'eed's two sons upon his disappearance from the village, questions the statement. The discussion then turns to Sa'eed's economic theories. Sa'eed is pretty well known for a village farmer. Nobody mentions anything about a murder trial in London.



Pages 61-69

Pages 61-69 Summary

"But I would hope you will not entertain the idea, dear sirs, that Mustafa Sa'eed had become an obsession that was ever with me in my comings and goings. Sometimes months would pass without his crossing my mind. In any case, he had died, by drowning or by suicide - God alone knows" (Chapter 4, pg. 61). The living cannot dwell on each person that dies and try to figure out why.

He spends two months of the year in the village where he grew up. He talks of the steamer that travels on the Nile River and all of the activity that accompanies its arrival. The steamer comes once a week. There are always people there to meet the boat. His father and other family members are there to greet him when he arrives. He learns the latest news on the way back to the village as they travel by donkey. He notices they began to build a hospital but they don't have the money to finish it. They blame the government.

They talk of how life is different than it was under the English. Now they have people come every few years to promote one candidate or another. He thinks of Mustafa Sa'eed and how he came to a village like theirs. He remembers the letter from Sa'eed with instructions on what to do in the event of his death. He was left the key to the strange triangular room in his house with the message that he might find the solutions to his curiosity in that room. The papers and diaries might yield the answers he was looking for. The narrator also does not now have to abide by his promise not to talk about Mustafa.

Mustafa wants his sons to know what kind of man he was and says that they should be given the keys to the room when they are old enough. Mustafa talks of how he suffers from wanderlust, but he wants his sons to have roots in the village and grow up in its traditions. He says that far-off places call to him. The narrator thinks that Mustafa has ended his life.

Mustafa writes of how he had lied to Ann Hammond about marrying her and how she had committed suicide. After he was released from prison, he wandered around Europe and the Orient and India. He arrived in the village on the Nile and he stayed. The narrator remembers reading this but he hadn't returned to the village because of Mustafa.

Pages 61-69 Analysis

The Narrator says he isn't obsessed with Mustafa Sa'eed and doesn't dwell on his death. Thousands of people die everyday and life goes on as usual for the living. This seems to be his attitude.



Once back in the village, he thinks of Mustafa and the letter he left. In addition to instructions for his children, he talks about some of the girls in England. He says that he is called by far off places and suffers from wanderlust. Did he commit suicide or did he leave? There are contradictions in the story at the village and those that the narrator has heard from colleagues in Khartoum concerning the man.



Pages 70-87

Pages 70-87 Summary

The narrator is at his grandfather's house with some of their friends. The house is made of mud and is described as being chaotic in designed. "It is a chaotic house, built without method, and has acquired its present form over many years: many differently-sized rooms, some built up against one another at different times, either because they were needed or because my grandfather found himself with some spare money for which he had no other use" (Chapter 5, pg. 71). The result was that there was no continuity in the design of the house. The grandfather basically led an ascetic life but he splurged on what he needed for prayer. Those were his luxuries.

He and his grandfather are happy to see each other. His arrival interrupted a story one of his uncles was telling of his youth and how he was always chasing girls until they found a wife for him. Bint Mazjoub joins in with stories of her husbands. The conversation turns to Western women who are called infidel women. The narrator has no comment except to say that he doesn't know about Western women. His sister expresses her opinion that Western women aren't as knowledgeable as their tribal women are. The Western women aren't circumcised.

They then talk about Islam and how women are treated in the different countries. They banter back and forth with the old men about their sexual exploits. As the group leaves grandfather's house, Wad Rayyes invites the narrator to lunch the next. Grandfather tells the narrator that Wad Rayyes wants to marry the widow of Mustafa Sa'eed. The village thinks that he is the guardian of the wife, but he says that isn't so: he is only guardian of the children. He leaves without answering his grandfather.

Pages 70-87 Analysis

This chapter lets the reader see the interaction between the narrator's family and friends. Their discussion centers mainly on the sexual exploits of the various members of the group. When they try to coax the narrator into commenting on Western women, he refuses to do so.

Wad Reyyes wants to marry the widow of Mustafa Sa'eed and thinking that the narrator is her guardian, invites him to lunch the next day. The narrator says he is no such thing and is not happy about the situation or about the widow with a man forty years older than she is. The custom of the tribe is for the man to ask permission of the male who is the woman's guardian. Hosna has a father and brothers.



Pages 88-104

Pages 88-104 Summary

The narrator goes to the house of Mustafa Sa'eed the next afternoon to see the widow. The children, Mahmoud who is eight and Sa'eed who is seven talk with him. "They are my responsibility, and one of the reasons that brings me here each year is to see how they are getting on" (Chapter 6, pg. 88). They plan to have a circumcision ceremony for the boys, since the narrator is there on a visit. The boys leave and he is left to talk to the widow.

He asks her if she loved Mustafa and she said that he was good generous man and the father of her children. He was from Khartoum where he had had a business, she replied in response to his question. He tells her that he thinks Mustafa was hiding something but he doesn't know what. She tells him that he has the keys for the room and that he should go and look. She also tells him that sometimes at night he mumbled in his sleep in a European language, something that wounded like Jeen.

Hosna tells him that it was as if Mustafa knew that he was going to be gone. He put his affairs in order the week before his disappearance and left her with instructions. She didn't want him to go to the fields during the flooding, but he said he was a good swimmer. He wonders if he should tell her about Wad Reyyes. He listens to Hosna sob as he thinks of the words written in the letter by Mustafa about the judge and the jury at the trial and comments about the battles of World War I.

He tells her that she must put the past behind her. She has two boys and maybe should think of marriage. She says she wants no man after Mustafa. He tells her about the offer of Wad Reyyes and she replies that if she is forced to marry Wad Reyyes, she will kill him and herself.

Wad Reyyes came to see him the next morning. He tells Wad Reyyes that Hosna doesn't want to marry him. Wad Reyyes says that she is just a widow and will marry him whether she wants to or not. Reyyes accuses him of being the reason why Hosna does not want to marry Reyyes.

He next goes to visit Mahjoub in his field. They had gone to elementary school together and when that was finished, Mahjoub announced that he had no further need for education. Mahjoub is one of the town powers as head of the Agricultural Project Committee and the Co-operative. He is on almost every important delegation to government and one of the leaders of the local National Democrat Socialist Party. Mahjoub is amused to hear of the confrontation with Wad Reyyes and tells him not to worry about it. Mahjoub also says that if Hosna's father and brother have approved of the wedding, there is nothing that anyone can do about it.



Mahjoub says he had a lot of respect for Mustafa. He helped a great deal with the agricultural project and used his business experience to handle the accounts. They also began the Co-operative on his advice and the results have been very successful. There were rumors of a plot to kill Mustafa, who was hated by the merchants.

Mahjoub is curious about the narrator's relationship with Mustafa. They only knew each other for a year, yet the narrator is made guardian of the children. Mahjoub suggests that the narrator marry Hosna. The narrator laughs the comment off. As he walks away, he admits that he is in love with Hosna.

Pages 88-104 Analysis

The narrator takes his duties as guardians of the sons of Mustafa seriously. He travels to the village once a year to see them. This year they plan to do their circumcision ceremony.

He has to tell Wad Reyyes that Hosna doesn't want to marry him and is surprised at the reaction. Wad Reyyes says that Hosna will marry him whether she wants to or not. The narrator later talks to his friend Majhoub about the matter. Majhoub says that since Hosna's father and brothers have approved of the marriage, it doesn't matter what Hosna wants. That is the local custom. He suggests that the narrator marry Hosna. As they part, the narrator admits that he is in love with Hosna.



Pages 105-115

Pages 105-115 Summary

He leaves for Khartoum after the circumcision ceremony for Mustafa's boys. He is thinking about Mustafa Sa'eed during the drive in the hot sun and heat. He had told Mahjoub about the room to which only he had the key. "I told him that Mustafa Sa'eed was a lie. 'Do you want to know the truth about Mustafa Sa'eed?' I said to him with another drunken laugh" (Chapter 7, pg. 107). In their drunken condition, they banter about there being gold and jewels in the room.

The next day they are out in the hot sun. A Bedouin asks for a cigarette and they give him the pack. He had been traveling for two days without any tobacco. They are looking for a place of shade to escape the heat of the sun. The car trip is hot. He keeps thinking of Mustafa Sa'eed. Their land is condemned to this heat and sun.

They stop to help a disabled government car and are told that the occupants were going to arrest a woman who had killed her husband. The government representatives claim that they do not know her name. The two cars go their separate ways.

He decides to write Mrs. Robinson who is now living on the Isle of Wight. She had attended the trial. She might provide some details that Mustafa hadn't.

The car stops at an oasis for servicing. Others join them until they have a large group of over one hundred people. They spend the night singing, dancing and dining.

Pages 105-115 Analysis

On the drive to Khartoum, the desert sun is hot. The car ride is hot and he is thinking about Mustafa. He is thinking about the various women that Mustafa had known and some of their discussions. He decides to write to Mrs. Robinson to see if he can learn any more details, since she attended the trial.

He is in a better mood when the car stops at an oasis. He is feeling better about the world and everyone's place in it. All men are brothers. The driver begins to sing and others sing back in response. The group at the oasis grows as others join them until their group grew to more than a hundred men. They sang, danced, and dined. They saluted the Sudan. At dawn, they all parted and went their separate ways. He doesn't think of Mustafa Sa'eed.



Pages 116-133

Pages 116-133 Summary

He goes back to the village after receiving a cable and arrives on the steamer. It has only been thirty-two days since he left the village. He is met by his friend Mahjoub and is told that the boys are all right. "I had not thought of the boys during the whole of the ghastly journey. I had been thinking of her. Again I said to Mahjoub: 'What happened?'" (Chapter 8, pg. 116). They mount their donkeys and ride. The narrator says he should have listened to Mahjoub and married her.

Mahjoub asks what is happening in Khartoum and is told about the educational conference. Mahjoub says they should build schools and hospitals before doing anything else. He doesn't tell Mahjoub that a conference delegate told him that he reminded him of Dr. Mustafa Sa'eed who had been the President of the Society for the Struggle for African Freedom. The man went on to praise Sa'eed. The man disappeared before he could question him.

Mahjoub tells him that they buried them very quickly without a funeral ceremony. Hosna was forced to marry Wad Reyyes. For two weeks after the wedding, Hosna wouldn't talk to Wad Reyyes. The people of the village wouldn't talk about the incident. The narrator tells his mother that he came to the village because of the boys. She asks him if it was because of the boys or because of Hosna.

On the third day, he went to see his sister, Bint Majzoub. She was his last hope for information. She tells him that she awakened to hear Hosna screaming. Then she heard other people shouting as she and others ran to Wad Reyyes' house and broke down the door. They were both covered in blood, Wad Reyyes had been stabbed, and Hosna was found with a knife in her heart. They were both dead. The group of villagers buried them quickly without a funeral ceremony and without reporting the incident to the police.

He talks to his friend Mahjoub about the murders. Mahjoub wants to know who told him and figures it was his sister. They banter back and forth about the fact that nobody did anything to prevent the tragedy. Mahjoub says that Hosna told him that she wanted the narrator to marry her to save her from Wad Reyyes. Mahjoub told her to accept the situation and not to involve the narrator. The narrator and Mahjoub end up fighting over the incident.

Pages 116-133 Analysis

The narrator returns to the village in response to a telegram. Hosna and Wad Reyyes are both dead. He has a hard time finding out the details since none of the people in the village want to tell him what happened. Finally, his sister, Bing Majzoub tells him the story.



The narrator goes out to see his friend Mahjoub in the fields. He is thinking that there is nothing for him in the village where he grew up. He wonders why he doesn't just leave. Mahjoub says that the narrator should have married Hosna and tells them of Hosna's visit. She wanted to marry the narrator. He and Mahjoub end up fighting physically.

Apparently, no one believed Hosna when she said she would kill Wad Reyyes and herself if she were forced to marry him.



Pages 134-165

Pages 134-165 Summary

The narrator wonders what has happened to his world. He is beginning to think that he should have told Hosna how he felt about her. That might have prevented the events that occurred. He feels that he lost the war because he didn't act when he could have. "The world has turned suddenly upside down. Love? Love does not do this. This is hatred. I feel hatred and seek revenge; my adversary is within and I needs (sic) must confront him. Even so, there is still in my mind a modicum of sense that is aware of the irony of the situation. I begin from where Mustafa Sa'eed had left off. Yet he at least made a choice, while I have chosen nothing" (Chapter 9, pg. 134).

He goes to the house of Mustafa Sa'eed and uses the key to enter the triangular room. He looks around the room. To him, Mustafa Sa'eed is in the room and he describes Sa'eed as his adversary. He thinks he will burn the room when he leaves.

There are all kinds of books in the room. Mustafa kept a big library. There were pictures on the wall most of them of Mustafa. He sees pictures of some of the women and wonders why they committed suicide. He reads the inscriptions on the photos and some of the other papers that he finds, including a notebook with Mustafa's life story. The room is full of pieces of the life of Sa'eed. While he is looking at the items in the room, he wonders why Hosna killed Wad Reyyes. Murder is not a frequent event in their village. People didn't do those kinds of things.

The narrator feels that he has come to know some of the people in the pictures. He has formed his own opinion of some of them. He relates his knowledge of them to events that occurred at the trial and feels bitterness toward the Sa'eed that did this to them, including Hosna. The situation between Sa'eed and the women in England is tangled up with the situation involving Hosna and the events in the village that led to the killing of Wad Reyyes, in his mind. This is also tangled up in the clash between the Occidental and Oriental cultures and how a member of one yearns for the other. Many thoughts go through his head as he looks at the memorabilia in the room. As he reads of Jean Morris, he is thinking of and fantasizing about Hosna. He more or less feels that he killed Hosna when he left without talking to her because that led to the forced marriage that resulted in the death of Hosna.

The narrator feels that Mustafa wanted him to find the missing pieces to the story he had told and to put together a complete picture that would result in Mustafa being looked upon favorably. The narrator felt that he must bring it all to an end.

Pages 134-165 Analysis

The narrator finally enters the triangular room looking for answers about Mustafa Sa'eed. He thinks he will burn the room when he has finished looking around. He needs



to destroy what is consuming him, even though he doesn't say it outright even though he does express the fact that he is looking for revenge. He figures Mustafa presented him with an incomplete picture of himself so that he, the narrator, would try to find out the true story. Mustafa apparently could not do this for himself and created the whole situation because he felt that the narrator would do so. This is apparently a flaw in Mustafa's ego. Mustafa wanted his place in history and felt that the narrator was the person that could do this for him.

The thoughts of the narrator are tangled up as he looks at the items in the room. As he reads things about the women in England, he thinks of Hosna. He fantasizes about Hosna, and how he killed her by leaving her in the situation of being forced into a marriage with Wad Reyyes. He decides he has spent years obsessed with Mustafa Sa'eed, and he must end it.



Pages 166-169

Pages 166-169 Summary

When he tired of looking over the contents in the triangular room, he departed, without burning the room or destroying anything. "I had put out the candles and locked the door of the room and that of the courtyard without doing anything. Another fire would not have done any good." (Chapter 10, pg. 166). The narrator does not finish the story of Mustafa Sa'eed. When he walked out of the room, he left Mustafa Sa'eed and Hosna behind him.

He feels that he has to do something, so he went to the river to swim. He decides to swim to the Northern shore. He was half way across when he couldn't go any further and was caught in the current. He makes the decision to live, fights his way to the surface, and calls for help. This is how the book ends.

Pages 166-169 Analysis

When the narrator walked out of the triangular room, he closed the door behind him. He closed the door on the story of Mustafa Sa'eed and left himself and his story in the room. He closed the door on Hosna and his guilt over her death. He never told Hosna that he loved her and did nothing to save her from the forced marriage.

The narrator goes swimming in the Nile and almost drowns. He realizes that he has a choice between life and death. He chooses life and fights his way to the surface. He can't complete the story of Mustafa Sa'eed as it is destroying him. He opts to live.



Characters

Narrator

The Narrator is the character in the novel that is chosen to tell the story of Mustafa Sa'eed. He is never given a name and is always referred to as 'he' or 'him'. He is from a small village in Sudan located on the Nile River. He left his family and the closeness of his tribe to attend school in Europe, where he received a doctorate in literature. He returns to his village and family after completing his studies and his acquaintance with Mustafa Sa'eed begins. When Mustafa disappears, the narrator is left as guardian of his two sons. He obtains a job in Khartoum in the Department of Education and returns to the village every year for two months. He becomes obsessed with the story of Mustafa Sa'eed, the mystery man who he meets when he returns to village from his seven years of studying abroad. He meets people in different places who have high praise for Mustafa and his work as an economist. The narrator figures that Mustafa selected him to piece together the story of his life and present him in a favorable view. The obsession with Mustafa is very destructive for the narrator. At the end, the narrator decides it all must end and that he must get on with his life.

Mustafa Sa'eed

Mustafa is one of the men in the village who arrived several years after the Narrator's departure. He married one of the village women. Since he is a stranger to the Narrator, he is very curious about the man. Mustafa is of the opinion that their country needs educated people to aid in its advancement. He doesn't see the Narrator's work in literature as being in the right area. Mustafa had had his own business in Khartoum but decided he wanted to go into agriculture. He is an only child who grew up in Khartoum without a father or any other relatives but his mother. When Mustafa begins school, he is considered to be a prodigy and after three years is sent to study in Cairo on a scholarship and then on to London to study at Oxford. There, he married, and later killed his wife, Jean Morris. He names the narrator as the guardian of his sons when he disappears and leaves him with the key to his private triangular room. He is a mysterious man to the narrator who figures that Mustafa wanted the narrator to fill in the pieces of his life and present him in a favorable light. No reason is given for this.

Mahjoub

Mahjoub is a boyhood friend of the narrator. They attended elementary school together after which Mahjoub said he required no further education. He is the Chairman of the Agricultural Project Committee and the Co-operative. He is also a leader of the local National Democratic Socialist Party and serves on many delegations to government. He is one of the local powers in the village.



Hosna

Hosna was the wife of Mustafa. She was the mother of his two sons that the narrator was appointed the guardian of. She tells the narrator that Mustafa use to mumble in his sleep, something about Jeen. When she is forced to marry Wad Reyyes, she carries out her threat and kills him and herself.

Jean Morris

Jean Morris is a woman that Mustafa meets at a party in Chelsea. She is one of the women that Mustafa is seeing and, when she wants to get married, he marries her. Jean was killed by Mustafa.

Bint Mazjoub

Bint Mazjoub is the sister of the narrator. She has had eight husbands, all of whom are dead. She is known for her rough manly talk. She is the only one to tell her brother of the details of the deaths of Wad Reyyes and Hosna.

Grandfather

Grandfather is the narrator's grandfather. He is over ninety-years-old. His grandson always liked to hear his stories as he was growing up. The man tends to be rather acetic. His only luxuries are what he needs for prayers. He walks to the mosque every day for prayers.

Wad Rayyes

Wad Rayyes lives in the village and is a friend of the narrator's family. He has had several wives and wants to marry Hosna, the widow of Mustafa Sa'eed. He is killed by Hosna.

Mahjoub

Mahjoub is the brother of the Narrator.

Sa'eed

Sa'eed is the shopkeeper in the village



Mahmoud

Mahmoud is the eight-year-old son of Mustafa and Hosna.

Sa'eed

Sa'eed is the seven-year-old son of Hosna and Mustafa.



Objects/Places

Village Along the Nile

The village at the bend in the Nile is the description the Narrator gives to his village in the Sudan.

Khartoum

Khartoum is a city in the Sudan. Mustafa is from the Khartoum area. The narrator works for the Department of Education in Khartoum.

Cairo

Cairo is where the secondary school is that Mustafa was sent to study at.

London, England

Mustafa arrived in London when he was fifteen.

Nile River

The Nile is the longest river in the world and runs through Sudan and the village that the tribe lives in.

Triangular Room

The triangular room is at the house of Mustafa Sa'eed. The key to the room was left to the narrator who has not entered the room, even though Hosna suggested he might find his answers there.

Grandfather's House

Grandfather's house is in the village. It is made of various rooms that were added whenever the old man needed the room or had extra money. It is the site of a gathering by the family and some of their friends.



London Courtroom

The courtroom in London is visited several times with references to the trial of Mustafa Sa'eed.

Wad Reyyes House

This is the house in the village where the deaths of Hosna and Wad Reyyes occurred.

Village Fields

The agricultural fields around the village are the site of numerous conversations between the narrator and Mustafa and Muhjoub.



Themes

Occident-Orient

One of the major themes of the book is the clash between Occidental and Oriental cultures. This is also referred to as North and South throughout the book. Both Mustafa and the narrator came from small Sudanese villages and were educated in England. Mustafa accepted and tried to become a part of the Western culture by running around with women. Many of the women around him committed suicide because of the lies he told them and because of the empty promises he made. He married one, Jean Morris, and admitted to killing her. He ends up returning to the Sudan and settling in a small village and marrying a local woman and living according to the village customs and traditions.

The narrator did not accept Western life. He is asked about Western women as soon as he comes home. He replies that he doesn't know about Western women. There is a discussion at his grandfather's house, on one of his visits, the centers around the sexual exploits of the men and the differences between the woman and the Western infidels. When Hosna is forced to marry Wad Reyyes, the narrator says that the old days of the father and brother approving the marriage should be over. She should be left to make her own choices. He never admits to loving her.

Curiosity

Another theme throughout the book is the curiosity of the narrator. He is curious about Mustafa Sa'eed right from the beginning and it is this curiosity that fuels the novel. The narrator sets out to find out about Mustafa, even after he has a talk with Mustafa and he tells him pieces of his story. There are so many holes in the story that Mustafa tells before he disappears, that the narrator feels that he is hiding something.

The narrator is hooked on finding out the secrets of Mustafa's life. He meets people in different places who know the man and who refer to Mustafa. They hold him in high regard. He learns that Mustafa is a well-respected economist and was active in the quest for Sudanese independence. No matter how much he learns, it isn't enough and he becomes obsessed with Mustafa and his life.

The narrator, who has had the key to the triangular room since Mustafa's disappearance, never entered it looking for answers, even when Hosna suggested it. When he does, he decides that his fascination with Mustafa must end and that he must get on with his life. Neither Mustafa nor the narrator did the right thing in regards to their women and they both paid the price in terms of guilt.



Destructive Behavior

The destructive behavior of many of the novel's characters is obvious throughout the book. Mustafa's days in England are fraught with destructive behavior. He is simultaneously seeing five different Western women, making promises to each. Many of them kill themselves. He admits to killing his wife, Jean Morris and to contributing to the death of the other room by making empty promises of love to them.

In the village, Hosna says she will kill Wad Reyyes and herself if she is forced to marry him. No one takes her threats seriously. Two weeks after the forced marriage, she carries out her threat. The narrator never tells Hosna that he loves her and does nothing to prevent the forced marriage. He forced Hosna into the situation by remaining silent. The guilt consumes the narrator at the end of the book as he explores the triangular room. This guilt is also an example of destructive behavior on the part of the narrator. He knows the deaths could have been prevented if he had acted on his feelings toward Hosna.

The narrator's quest for information about Mustafa Sa'eed becomes an obsession. He begins to see the destructive bent at the end of the book. When he enters the triangular room, he decides he will burn the room when he leaves, but it doesn't. He says the obsession with Mustafa must end. When he is swimming and almost drowns, he makes the choice to live, thus saving himself from the destructive path he was on.



Style

Point of View

The book is written in the first person point of view, with the unnamed narrator telling the story of the main character, Mustafa Sa'eed. This means the reader sees the action of the novel through the eyes of the narrator and learns the details as the narrator learns them. This is one of the restrictions involved in the use of the first person.

The second chapter of the book involves Mustafa telling the narrator his story. It is also written in the first person and the reader must be aware that the person is different than the narrator.

The use of the first person makes the story more personal because it is being told by the narrator who is present at the events as they unfold. The problem with the use of the first person is that the reader is not privy to any events that take place out of the presence of the narrator, unless they are told of by other characters. This is the method used in *Season of Migration to the North*.

Setting

There are various settings for the action of the novel. Most of the novel takes place in various locations in The Sudan, with references to events that occurred in London. The setting for most of the action is a small, unnamed village along the Nile. This is the village where the narrator was born and raised and returns to after his schooling in England. This is the village where Mustafa Sa'eed settled.

The story of Mustafa's life includes his own village where he was born, a few pages devoted to his schooling in Cairo and then various scenes that take place in London. There are various places he visited with the women and scenes involving the trial.

Khartoum is also the setting for some of the novel since the narrator works in Khartoum. He attends meetings and social events where the name of Mustafa Sa'eed keeps surfacing.

Language and Meaning

The writer has his own style of writing. He presents things in a piecemeal fashion with numerous references at various points in the novel and with a repetition. This means that the reader has to jump around in time putting together the information about the various characters when it is presented.

The language used in the writing is full of metaphors. There are various quotes from poetry in the book. The writing style is somewhat difficult to cope with if the reader is

used to traditional Western style novels. The meaning of the book is also difficult to ascertain as the reader has to fill in the gaps and cope with the difficult writing style. There are some references to Arabic and local terms that the reader must become familiar while reading the novel.

Structure

The structure of the book is difficult to explain. There is a natural break for ten chapters in the book, but there are no chapter numbers or titles. The way the reader can tell that he has come to a new chapter is that the first line is in bold italicized print.

Each chapter pertains to a particular scenario in the story the author is telling. There are many flashbacks as the author tells the story in a piecemeal fashion, relying on the narrator and the reader to piece together the pieces of Mustafa's life. There are many quotes of poetry in the book which adds a change of pace to the reading style. The author intended the information to be piecemeal, even though it would have made it easier for the reader to have a better organization for the book.



Quotes

"As best I could I had answered their many questions. They were surprised when I told them that Europeans were, with minor differences, exactly like them, marrying and bringing up their children in accordance with principles and traditions, that they had good morals and were in general good people." (Chapter 1, pg. 3)

"Then he shook his head and said, 'That tribe doesn't mind to whom they marry their daughters.' However, he added, as though be way of apology, that Mustafa during his whole stay in the village had never done anything which could cause offence, that he regularly attended the mosque for Friday prayers, and that he was 'always ready to give of his labour and his means in glad times and sad' - this was the way in which my grandfather expressed himself." (Chapter 1, pg. 5)

"'Your grandfather knows the secret,' he said to me with that mocking phantom still more in evidence round his eyes, as I escorted him to the door and he took his leave of me." (Chapter 1, pg. 11)

"The teachers regarded me as a prodigy and the pupils began seeking my friendship, but I was busy with this wonderful machine with which I had been endowed. I was cold as a field of ice, nothing in the world could shake me." (Chapter 2, pg. 22)

"'Had your father lived,' she said to me, 'he would not have chosen for you differently from what you have chosen for yourself. Do as you wish, depart or stay, it's up to you. It's your life and you're free to do with it as you will. In this purse is some money which will come in useful.' That was our farewell: no tears, no kisses, no fuss. Two human beings had walked along a part of the road together then each had gone his way. This was in fact the last thing she said to me, for I did not see her again." (Chapter 2, pg. 23)

"And the train carried me to Victoria Station and to the world of Jean Morris." (Chapter 2, pg. 29)

"Occasionally the disturbing thought occurs to me that Mustafa Sa'eed never happened, that he was in fact a lie, a phantom, a dream or a nightmare that had come to the people of that village one suffocatingly dark night, and when they opened their eyes to the sunlight he was nowhere to be seen" (Chapter 3, pg. 46)

"Was it likely that what had happened to Mustafa Sa'eed could have happened to me? He had said that he was a lie, so was I also a lie? I am from here - is not this reality enough? I too had lived with them. But I had live with them superficially, neither loving nor hating them. I used to treasure within me the image of this little village, seeing it wherever I went with the eye of my imagination." (Chapter 3, pg. 49)



"Through facts, figures, and statistics you can accept your reality, live together with it, and attempt to bring about changes within the limits of your potentialities. It was within the capacity of a man like Mustafa Sa'eed to play a not inconsiderable role in furthering this if he had not been transformed into a buffoon at the hands of a small group of idiotic Englishmen." (Chapter 3, pg. 59)

"Thousands of people die every day. Were we to pause and consider why each one of them died, and how - what would happen to use, the living? The world goes on whether we choose for it to do so or in defiance of use." (Chapter 4, pg. 61)

"I leave you the key of my private room where you will perhaps find what you are looking for. I know you to be suffering from undue curiosity where I am concerned - something for which I can find no justification. Whatever my life has been it contains no warning or lesson for anyone." (Chapter 4, pg. 65)

"And the river, the river but for which there would have been no beginning and no end, flows northwards, pays heed to nothing; a mountain may stand in its way so it turns eastwards; it may happen upon a deep depression so it turns westwards, but sooner or later it settles down in its irrevocable journey towards the sea in the north." (Chapter 4, pg. 69)

"I lingered by the door as I savoured that agreeable sensation which precedes the moment of meeting my grandfather whenever I return from a journey: a sensation of pure astonishment that that ancient being is still in actual existence upon the earth's surface." (Chapter 5, pg. 73)

"We were in fact known in the village for not divorcing our wives and for not having more than one. The villagers used to joke about us and say that we were afraid of our women, except for my uncle Abdul Karim who was both much divorced and much married - and an adulterer to boot." (Chapter 5, ph. 80)

"I looked at them: three old men and an old woman laughing a while as they stood at the grave's edge. Tomorrow they would be on their way. Tomorrow the grandson would become a father, the father a grandfather, and the caravan would pass on." (Chapter 5, pg. 85)

"He had wanted me to spare them the pangs of wanderlust. I would do nothing of the sort; when they grew up, if they wanted to travel, they should be allowed to. Everyone starts at the beginning of the road, and the world is in an endless state of childhood." (Chapter 6, pg. 88)



"'It was as though he felt his end drawing near,' said Hosna. 'A week before the day - the day before his death - he arranged his affairs. He tidied up odds and ends and paid his debts. The day before he died he called me to him and told me what he owned and gave me numerous directions about the boys. He also gave me the letter sealed with the wax and said to me, 'Give it to him if anything happens.'" (Chapter 6, pg. 92)

"I left him and took myself off, having become certain about a fact which was later on to cost me much peace of mind: that in one form or another I was in love with Hosna Bint Mahmoud, the widow of Mustafa Sa'eed, and that I - like him and Wad Rayyes and millions of others - was not immune from the germ of contagion that oozes from the body of the universe." (Chapter 6, pg. 104)

"The road is endless, without limit, the sun indefatigable. No wonder Mustafa Sa'eed fled to the bitter cold on the North." (Chapter 7, pg. 108)

"I shall write to Mrs. Robinson....I shall write to her; perhaps she can throw some light on things, perhaps she remembers things he forgot or did not mention." (Chapter 7, pg. 112)

"The war ended in victory for us all: the stones, the trees, the animals, and the iron, while I, lying under this beautiful, compassionate sky, feel that we are all brothers; he who drinks and he who prays and he who steals and he who commits adultery and he who fights and he who kills. The source is the same. No one knows what goes on in the mind of the Divine." (Chapter 7, pg. 112)

Mustafa no longer concerns me, for Mahjoub's telegram has changed everything, bringing me worries of my own." (Chapter 8, pg. 121)

"She looked at me searchingly for a while and said: 'The boys or the boys' mother? What was there between you and her? She came to your father and her very words to him were: 'Tell him to marry me!' What an impudent hussy! That's modern women for you! That was bad enough, but the terrible thing she did later was even worse.'" (Chapter 8, pg. 123)

"I'm not altogether clear as to what happened next. However, I do remember my hands closing over Mahjoub's throat; I remember the way his eyes bulged; I remember, too, a violent blow in the stomach and Mahjoub crouching on my chest. I remember Mahjoub prostrate on the ground and me kicking him, and I remember his voice screaming out 'Mad! You're mad!' I remember a clamour and a shouting as I pressed down on Mahjoub's throat and heard a gurgling sound; then I felt a powerful hand pulling me by the neck and the impact of a heavy stick on my head." (Chapter 8, pg. 133)

"Now I am on my own: there is no escape, no place of refuge, no safeguard. Outside, my world was a wide one; now it had contracted, had withdrawn upon itself, until I myself had become the world, no world existing outside of me." (Chapter 9, pg. 134)



"Though I sought revenge, Yet I could not resist my curiosity. First of all I shall see and hear, then I shall burn it down as though it had never been." (Chapter 9, pg. 136)

"I became bored with reading the bits of paper. No doubt there were many more bits buried away in this room, like pieces in an arithmetical puzzle, which Mustafa Sa'eed wanted me to discover and to place side by side and so come out with a composite picture which would reflect favourable upon him. He wants to be discovered, like some historical object of value. There was no doubt of that, and I now know that it was me he had chosen for that role. It was no coincidence that he had excited my curiosity and had then told me his life story incompletely so that I myself might unearth the rest of it." (Chapter 9, pg. 154)

"Even so, I was still holding a thin, frail thread: the feeling that the goal was in front of me, not below me, and that I must move forwards and not downwards. But the thread was so frail it almost snapped and I reached a point where I felt that the forces lying in the river-bed were pulling me down to them," (Chapter 10, pg. 167)

Topics for Discussion

How did the narrator meet Mustafa?

What does Mustafa say about his background?

What opinion do people outside of the village have of Mustafa Sa'eed?

Is the narrator obsessed with Mustafa Sa'eed?

What are the contents of the telegram that required the narrator to return to the village?

What was in the triangular room?

What decision does the narrator make after he enters the triangular room? How does this affect the end of the novel?