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FORUM ON LITERARY WORLD SYSTEMS

Tayeb Salih, Sol Plaatje, and the Trajectories of World Literature

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A crucial theoretical question in world literature studies concerns the dual trajectories of extroversion and introversion, and how they relate to or even are predicated on each other. By discussing the examples of Tayeb Salih and, in particular, Sol Plaatje, this article tries to demonstrate that although the current turn toward more "introverted" literary studies can be seen as justifiably critical of single-system modes of world literature theory, an attentiveness to the combined and contradictory trajectories of extroversion and introversion will enable a more situated and localized form of world literature studies that nonetheless evades the risk of reifying national or linguistic provenance. This also requires a stronger conception of reception history not as a transparent vessel for the literary object, but as an active agent in rendering specific texts or authorships readable as introverted or extroverted.

Keywords: extroversion, introversion, Sol Plaatje, print culture, reception history, Tayeb Salih, world literature

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Muhsin al-Musawi's rich investigation of the Arab republic of letters is yet another sign that single-system world literature theory has had its day. For all their compelling insights, the turn-of-the-millennium interventions by mainly Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova have given way to a more textured conception of world literature.[1] The "one and unequal" system that Moretti postulated is indeed unequal—but it isn't just one. Casanova's understanding of world literary space as a space united through aesthetic rivalry was always more dynamic than Moretti's, but this, too, is being supplanted by a denser understanding of the overlapping, intersecting, and contradictory forces shaping literature. One could put it like this: if world literature

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1 Pascale Casanova, *La république mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68.

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re-entered academic debates in grand fashion some fifteen years ago, signs of a turn toward "literature in the world" are currently piling up.[2] al-Musawi contributes to this important development by provincializing the Europe that had been constructed and accepted as an ideal by the *nahdah* writers and foregrounds instead the cosmopolitan and philological legacy of precisely the long Arabic cultural era dismissed by Salamah Musah, Taha Husayn, and others.

The crucial theoretical question raised by al-Musawi's study, and one that underlies so much of the controversy generated by world literature as a field of study, concerns tensions between extroversion and introversion.[3] The *nahdah* scholars, he argues (without using this particular term), should have been more introverted. Instead of adopting the values and ideals of the European enlightenment, the deep time of the Arab republic of letters when "monographs, massive lexicons, and encyclopedic dictionaries" were produced across the lands of Islam, the writers in question could have supplied the *nahdah* with the basis for a homegrown modernity.[4] Speaking as an outsider to the Arabic language, I can only take al-Musawi at his word. What I would like to reflect on, however, are the conditions governing extroversion and introversion, and our different ways of reading the relationship between the two. If the extroverted understanding of world literature—as in David Damrosch's model of circulation, or Rebecca Walkowitz's notion of the "born-translated" novel—is precisely what critics such as Gayatri Spivak, Aamir Mufti, and Emily Apter have reacted against, and if much of the disaffection with world literature studies among postcolonial scholars derives from the repetition of center-periphery (i.e., the West and the rest) models informing Moretti's and Casanova's accounts, I wish to suggest that it is an attentiveness to the dynamic *relationship* between extroversion and introversion that affords the most promising theoretical point of departure for a world-literary study that remains alert to the diversity of literatures (and notions of literature) in the world, yet evades the risk of reifying national or linguistic provenance.[5]

I will enlist two examples to illustrate briefly what I mean. Quite recently, a Sudanese student of mine, Najlaa Eltom, defended her master's thesis entitled "Lost in World Literature: Contextualizing Tayeb Salih's Novel *Season of Migration to*

2 An obvious case would be Simon Gikandi's forthcoming special issue of *PMLA* on the theme of "literature in the world." Other instances are Emily Apter, *Against World Literature* (London: Verso, 2013); Isabel Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's Printing Press* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); and Neil Lazarus, "Cosmopolitanism and the Specificity of the Local in World Literature," *Journal of Commonwealth Studies* 46.1 (2011): 119–37. Laura's Doyle's notion of "interimperiality"—even if it is not restricted to literature—is also a significant step forward in the development of a polycentric global framework for literary study. See Laura Doyle, "Inter-Imperiality: Dialectics in a Postcolonial World History," *Interventions* 16.2 (2014): 159–96.

3 One must acknowledge here that it was Eileen Julien who first introduced the concept of "extroverted" literature. Eileen Julien, "The Extroverted African Novel," *The Novel*, Vol. 1., ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 667–700.

4 Muhsin al-Musawi, "The Republic of Letters: Arab Modernity?" Part I, *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1.2 (2014): 269.

5 Some key interventions in this wide-ranging debate are David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Rebecca Walkowitz, "Comparison Literature," *New Literary History*, 40.3 (2009): 567–82; David Damrosch and Gayatri Spivak, "Comparative Literature/World Literature: A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Damrosch," *Comparative Literature Studies* 48.4 (2011): 455–85; Aamir Mufti, "Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures," *Critical Inquiry* 36.3 (2010): 458–93; and Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013).

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the North."[6] It is a fascinating study, taking as its point of departure Tayeb Salih's status as a "lonely canonical," a term that Eltom borrows from Mads Rosendahl Thomsen.[7] Salih is indeed almost the sole representative of Sudanese literature in Western and anglophone contexts, thanks to the success of Denys Johnson-Davies's 1969 translation of *Season* (which appeared in Heinemann's African Writers Series). There is an entire reception history to be traced here, including Edward Said's critical consecration of Salih's novel.[8] Eltom's focus lies, however, on the stakes of interpretation, as well as on Salih's dual marginalization both in relation to Western literature and to Arabic literature. Insofar as we can speak of an Arab republic of letters, a writer from Sudan writing in Arabic belongs to the provinces of that republic, having to contend with perceptions of Sudanese insignificance or backwardness. Among Western or anglophone critics, however, there is (with rare exceptions) an inability to grasp these local and regional implications. This results in a wholesale "postcolonial" appropriation of *Season* as a novel engaging with Conrad, Shakespeare, and the full range of Western imperial culture represented in Mustafa Saeed's famous library that the narrator discovers after Saeed's death.[9] The interimperial and local Sudanese dimensions of the novel, which address not only the debilitating effects of British imperialism but also the destructive legacy of the Ottoman empire and the practices of slavery that went with it, are thereby ignored, leading to a skewed reading. Most importantly, Eltom argues, if we fail to take into account that Mustafa Saeed's mother was a slave, we are missing out on perhaps the major motivation behind Saeed's imperial trajectory.

Rather than "writing back" in the earlier postcolonial sense of the word, it would seem that Salih, by writing in Arabic, is drawing on both canonical Western sources and Arabic narrative forms to make a point with a local and regional purchase. Introversion rather than extroversion, in other words. But is it so simple that we have then arrived at a "proper" understanding of *Season*, allowing us to bracket the Western "misreading" of it and debunk world literary claims of how genres and works are shaped through circulation and interaction?

What I find sobering in all of this is how my student's retrieval of *Season* as an introverted novel is thoroughly overdetermined by multiple systemic effects. Not only is the study motivated by the circulation of the novel—without its reception history in translation, it seems unlikely that her thesis would have been written at all, especially in an English department. Added to that, there are the economic disparities that led my student to apply for studies in Sweden, as well as the material and epistemic disparities between languages, making the choice to write in the hypercentral global language of English rather than Arabic seem viable and perhaps even necessary. Center-periphery relations obtain in these respects and lead, paradoxically, to an extroversion also of my student's reception of Salih. If we accept that there are few good reasons on a hermeneutic level not to strive for a Gadamerian "fusion of

6 I have asked and been granted permission by Najlaa Eltom (also spelt Naglaa Eltoum) to mention her name and her work on Salih in this article. Her essay is accessible through the Stockholm University library. Ms. Eltom, it should mentioned, is also a well-known poet in Sudan.

7 Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures* (London: Continuum, 2008), 44–49.

8 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), 255.

9 Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (London: Heinemann, 1991).

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horizons," that is, an interpretation that is as densely local as possible, the conditions enabling this particular act of interpretation will (as Gadamer would also have pointed out had he been capable of thinking beyond the European enclosure) bring us back full circle to the international and transnational relations that impinge upon the production of literature and literary knowledge. Eltom's introverted reading of Salih is in other words performatively extroverted and contributes to rather than undercuts the continued consolidation of *Season* as a work of world literature.

As mentioned previously, Salih's own practice of literary introversion is similarly ambiguous. The Shakespearean and Conradian allusions, as well as the bizarre library at the end, are apparently instances of extroversion. But instead of "writing back"—a trope that always risks reproducing the centrality of a Western canon—one could perhaps say (and this is my own point, not Eltom's) that Salih was "writing with" the troublesome baggage of Western literature *in Arabic*, the full implications of which are readable by way of Sudanese history rather than the British imperial legacy. As should be obvious, then, *Season of Migration to the North* presents us with no simple either-or option in respect of extroversion and introversion. It is instead hybrid to the core, as Patricia Geesey and others have argued.[10] Beyond that label, however, the notion of different and combined directionalities of extroversion and introversion (that could be conceptualized in spatial as well as temporal terms) may help to refine the embattled notion of hybridity.

My second example will perhaps further clarify this point. Sol Plaatje (1876–1932), the remarkable South African polymath, is possible to describe in any number of ways: translator, editor, linguist, journalist, founding member of the SANNC (later the ANC), the first black South African novelist in English, and so on. His claim to literary fame rests mainly on the novel *Mhudi* (1930), but to this must be added his translations of Shakespeare into Setswana, his gathering and translation of Setswana proverbs, and his seminal reportage *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), an enduringly powerful documentation of and protest against the consequences of the 1913 Natives' Land Act.

In everything he did, Plaatje moved between and across languages, reaching out to a range of different audiences. The papers he edited, *Koranta ea Becoana* and *Tsala ea Becoana* (later *Tsala ea Batho*), were bilingual, with material in Setswana and English, but directed at a Tswana readership. *Native Life in South Africa* was, by contrast, targeted at readers in Britain, and he made many frustrated attempts to have *Mhudi* published in the United States before it was belatedly published by the Lovedale mission press in South Africa in 1930.[11] Assessing Plaatje's own positioning in what we might call a fractured world literary space is therefore highly dependent on what rhetoricians call "the rhetorical situation, and what Karin Barber has theorized as addressivity, whereby texts "convene" an audience through language, topic, generic conventions, and apostrophization.[12] Plaatje's 1930 translation of *A Comedy of Errors*, or *Diphosho-phosho*, convenes a Setswana-speaking audience, whereas the Victorian

10 Patricia Geesey, "Cultural Hybridity and Contamination in Tayeb Salih's *Mawsim al-hijra ila al-Shamal* (*Season of Migration to the North*)," *Research in African Literatures* 27.3 (1997): 128–40.

11 Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist 1876–1932* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 349.

12 Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 137–39.

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style of *Mhudi* implies a completely different readership: British, white colonial, and North American. Plaatje's *Sechuana Proverbs with Literal Translations and Their European Equivalents*, published in London in 1916, is a trickier case: although evidently made readable to a British public, the alienness of Setswana (for that same British public) comes forth on the pages of the book. This makes it, on the level of style and genre, more than just a case of rhetorical accommodation. Indeed, we know that Plaatje's own declared intention with *Sechuana Proverbs* was to help publicize and preserve the legacy of Tswana culture in the context of accelerating modernization, a figure of thought mirrored by the reviewer "A. W." in *African Affairs*, who called it "a most valuable contribution to a department of research which is becoming increasingly difficult as European culture advances in South Africa."[13] When including "European equivalents" to the proverbs from a number of different languages, however, Plaatje moves beyond the conventional purposes of ethnographic documentation. The comparative collage of proverbs and quotations in English, French, German, Dutch, and Latin serves instead performatively to place the Tswana heritage on equal footing as its European counterparts. As Schalkwyk and Lapula note, "[i]n both recording the proverbs of his language and displaying equivalents for them in a range of European languages … . Plaatje felt that he could show that Setswana 'is fully equipped for the expression of thought.' "[14]

This transformation of the pages of a modest English publication into a crossroads where different worlds meet cause us to question Schalkwyk's and Lapula's (as well as Plaatje's) emphasis on sheer *preservation*. Although the notion of preservation invoked the social Darwinist melancholia of extinction, Plaatje had another future in mind for Setswana—another horizon of expectation, to speak with Reinhart Koselleck[15]—as becomes clear when we look at his endeavor to translate Shakespeare. Adopting the spatial metaphor of directions, we find here a combination of the rhetoric of preservation with a forward-looking ambition to move ahead and make it new. Translating Shakespeare could, and did, assist in developing printed Tswana literature in dynamic interaction with the oral heritage. Famously, Plaatje "vernacularized" Shakespeare by renaming him "Tsikinya-Chaka," or "Shake-the-sword," in the spirit of Tswana praise-naming. *Diphoso-phoso* (the only surviving full edition of his translations), likewise makes liberal use—in an apparently "domesticating" translation—of Tswana proverbs and idioms.[16] Not unlike what occurred in other translation "movements," as in the particularly famous case of German romanticism, Plaatje made use of Shakespeare to cultivate Setswana literature. More particularly, Setswana *print* literature. According to Seddon, Plaatje's translations remained "the only secular literature available in Setswana" until the 1940s, which indicates the structural importance of Plaatje's intervention, but also that his optimism concerning the potential of print was checked by material and political circumstances.[17]

13 A.W., review of *Sechuana Proverbs* by Sol Plaatje, *African Affairs* 16 (1917): 183.
14 David Schalkwyk and Lerothodi Lapula, "Solomon Plaatje, William Shakespeare, and the Translations of Culture," *Pretexts* 9.1 (2000): 16.
15 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
16 Deborah Seddon, "Shakespeare's Orality: Solomon Plaatje's Setswana Translations," *English Studies in Africa* 47.2 (2004): 85.
17 Seddon, 90.

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The question of print culture is, of course—or should be—central to any discussion of world literature. If the deep time of literary histories in the world can be described in terms of "scriptworlds," as David Damrosch has argued, then "printworlds" are what structure world literature(s) in the modern era.[18] The point is easily missed: if Plaatje's many struggles and successes have been read in relation the British imperial network and the Black Atlantic,[19] a key enabling factor of his literary endeavors both in English and Setswana is the fundamental fact of standardized print technology in the Latin alphabet. His translations of Shakespeare's were motivated not least by a sense of regional rivalry in which Setswana was losing out, as Willan makes clear:

> Although Setswana had been one of the first Bantu languages to be committed to writing in the early part of the nineteenth century … it had, by the 1920s, been far overtaken by work that had been done in other languages, particularly in Xhosa and Sotho … . Apart from Plaatje himself, indeed, no native Tswana-speakers had written, or at least published, any books in their own language. Xhosa and Sotho, by contrast, had produced widely known writers like S. E. K. Mqhayi and Thomas Mofolo, whose novel, *Chaka*, published in 1925, had met with immediate acclaim, and was soon to be translated into English. For Plaatje, the effect was only to emphasise the extent to which Tswana had fallen behind.[20]

This, then, is one way of assessing not just Plaatje's *desire* for creating a vernacular literature, but also the complex double movement of extroversion and introversion that his writing career exhibits throughout. As Sheldon Pollock reminds us, the vernacular turns in literary history are never "just" about writing in the vernacular: they are about dignifying a language that is *positioned* as a vernacular in relation to a cosmopolitan other.[21] And the means for doing so are typically to transfer and refashion the resources of the cosmopolitan language. Plaatje's sense of "falling behind" has therefore not least to do with Setswana's incomplete entry into the world of Latin print to which the hegemonic language of English so solidly belonged, and in which Sotho and Xhosa were making their mark at the time. In what can seem an unlikely move, even Afrikaans, the very language that would later come to symbolize the horrors of apartheid rule, was enlisted by Plaatje's collaborator David Ramoshoana as an impressive model to emulate:

> The Dutch-speaking people of South Africa have pulled their Afrikaans—a baby among languages spoken in the Union—out of the fire and have launched it as one of the most important languages in the half-continent by writing it in newspapers, magazines, and books. Their ablest writers contributed articles, etc., and thus fixed its literary efficacy, and so it now faces the world as a cultural language.[22]

18 David Damrosch, "Scriptworlds: Writing Systems and the Formation of World Literature," *Modern Language Quarterly* 68.2 (2007): 195–219.

19 Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 125–68; Laura Chrisman, *Rereading the Imperial Romance: British Imperialism and South African Resistance in Haggard, Schreiner, and Plaatje* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000).

20 Willan, 325.

21 Sheldon Pollock, "Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History," *Cosmopolitanism*, eds. Carol A. Breckenridge et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 15–53.

22 David Ramoshoana quoted in Willan, 326.

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It would perhaps be overblown to speak of a South African "republic" of vernacular letters in the early twentieth century, comparable to al-Musawi's Arab republic, but some local version of the rivalry that Casanova traces in Europe (with Joachim du Bellay and Herder as key proponents of vernacular literature) is discernible here. The crucial difference has to do with the harsh colonial conditions under which Plaatje labored, which can also be registered on the level of writing and print technology.

Plaatje fought many losing battles in his day, most famously and heroically against the devastating Natives' Land Act. On a personal level, however, it seems that even this was overshadowed by a seemingly arcane conflict concerning Setswana orthography. In characteristic southern African fashion, Setswana's passage into the realms of writing and print in the nineteenth century had been facilitated by missionaries. More to the point, no less than four different mission societies had produced four distinct spelling systems for Setswana—and none of them met with Plaatje's approval. His own alternative, which he would vainly struggle to have accepted, supplemented the Latin alphabet with signs from the then current international phonetic alphabet. Plaatje insisted that this was by far the most reliable representation of the language and that all the other alternatives produced distortions.[23] The initiative in this question eventually changed hands from missionaries to academics keen on orthographic reform, but Plaatje's authority on the matter—no doubt on racial grounds—remained mostly and painfully unrecognized.

As Willan points out, part of the tragedy is that Plaatje's principled stand became an obstacle to publication: had he accepted one the current orthographies, then more of his work would have survived. Plaatje, one could say, was caught in an aporia. He had correctly identified two distinct aspects of the consolidation of "recognized" literatures a century ago. The first was the cultivation of print culture, which also meant subjecting oneself to the onerous technical and material demands of producing print in standardized form. The second was the cultivation—or *cult*, rather—of the vernacular as a bearer of unique and irreplaceable cultural value. The distribution of extroversion and introversion between print culture and the cult of the vernacular is not at all as clear cut as it might first seem. If the aim of print is to reach out, then it is equally about harnessing an external technology for local ends and different types of audiences, some of them very restricted. Exploring and caring for the vernacular is certainly an introverted undertaking, but as the example of *Sechuana Proverbs* shows, it can be equally about showcasing specific cultural value to a wider world. What we can say is that Plaatje's commitment to the cause of Setswana was to a large degree prompted by the fracturing and dissolution of the Tswana cultural community. But by placing such faith in the capacity of orthography to retain authentically and without distortion the values of Setswana, he not only misread the conventional relationship (in a Saussurean sense) between language, print, and the world, but also underestimated the objective violence of racial exclusion in the Union of South Africa.

With Plaatje, we have a writer and cultural activist possessing not only a superior knowledge of the language Setswana, but also a dedication to the scientific principles

23 Willan, 325, 340–48.

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of linguistics, who yet is denied the full authority that should have been his due. Having fallen almost into oblivion after his death in 1932, scholars such as Tim Couzens, Stephen Gray, and Brian Willan made use of their structural privilege as white, anglophone academics in South Africa and the United Kingdom in the 1970s to insert him into what was then the emergent, revisionist historical narrative of South Africa.[24] This highly successful, if not always uncontroversial, act of retrieval is of course also a part of Plaatje's world-literary trajectory: a mode of performative extroversion enabling a fine-grained, introverted appreciation of his achievements.

As we broach the question of world literature from these vantage points, sheer textualism or sheer aestheticism become impossible alternatives. But it would be equally misguided to refuse to take Plaatje's own faith in the values of print, the vernacular, verbal art, Shakespearean drama, and narrative seriously. What both Plaatje and Salih demonstrate are the thoroughgoing entanglements that shape the work of writers in a world that is already connected *and* stratified. The "problem" of world literature, in Moretti's well-known phrase,[25] is no less urgent today than fifteen years ago. What we are learning as we extend the paradigm of world literature beyond hegemonic languages and global centers of (cultural) capital is the inherent potential of reconfiguring the problem not just from within any given geohistorical location, or, for that matter, through a recognition of the diachrony of reception as a "thick" history in its own right, but ultimately by attending to the combined, contradictory, and proliferating trajectories that shape literature in the world.

Let There Be *Nahdah*!

Tarek El-Ariss
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This essay examines the movement of Arab national and cultural revival known as nahdah *(meaning renaissance or awakening) as a speech act and a performance involving a* nuhūd *(rising) and an uncertain practice of civilization (*tamaddun*) that seek to bring about a culture of knowledge. Contesting its treatment as a*

24 Besides Willan's book, see for example: Tim Couzens, " 'The Dark Side of the World': Sol Plaatje's 'Mhudi'," *English Studies in Africa* 14.2 (1971): 187–203; Tim Couzens, "Introduction," in Sol T. Plaatje, *Mhudi* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 1–20; and Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979).
25 Moretti, 55.

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