

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities

Doctoral Dissertation

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**The limits and possibilities of freedom in the 20th-century
Black African novel**

**The motifs of freedom in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and
Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North***

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Budapest, 2017

Theses

In my dissertation, I examine the problems related to the limits and possibilities of individual freedom in the Black African novel by analyzing Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (translated by Denys Johnson-Davies). I discuss these novels in the context of African literature from Anglophone literary traditions; therefore, I primarily use the English versions of both works during my analysis. In the beginning of the dissertation, I outline various conceptions of freedom. Since the protagonists of the novels are not constrained in their freedom of action, I am first and foremost concerned with the issue of personal freedom.

The introduction delineates possible sources of conflicts in African societies of the 1960s portrayed in the novels. Young people coming from European universities, having seen the gap between the European culture they had experienced at first-hand and the traditional local values that were – because of their upbringing – crucial to them, realized that the fulfillment of their free wills faced obstacles. This conflict reached such an extent that it not only influenced their relations to the community and to its members, making them reconsider the values of various cultures, but they also came to question their own value systems, as well as their place in the world. Therefore, they got into conflict with themselves, with their own personalities and identities, because they could not act according to their expectations. The aim of the dissertation is to explore these processes, and to examine the attempts showed in the novels to resolve these problems.

In the first chapter of the dissertation, I present the changes in the history of the influence of postcolonial literary theory, and its controversial relationship to African literature. Then, as an introduction, I outline and compare the backgrounds of the genesis of the novels and their respective receptions. Despite their similar themes, Achebe's work was received less enthusiastically; I attempt to explore its causes partly in the context of the language and literary tradition chosen by the authors, and partly of contemporary expectations.

In the second chapter of the dissertation, I conduct my comparative analysis by using close reading; I attempt to explore the factors constraining the freedom of the protagonists. During the narratological analysis, I primarily start from Genette's concepts, but I also build on de Mieke Bal's research on focalization. In the analysis of the first chapter of *No Longer at Ease*, I examine the role of the alternations of focalization, which illustrates the

instability of the described world, thus it evokes the reader's involvement as an active participant. In the analysis, I show that – contrary to Achebe's most critics who reprimanded the weaknesses of the narration at some points – Achebe pursued the sense of uncertainty with conscious editing. In the narratological analysis of the first chapter, I highlight the differences between the narrative representations of distinct groups and locations.

For my dissertation, it is crucial to examine the problem of center and periphery. In contrast with the postcolonial interpretation, I define center and periphery from its geographical, historical and social aspects, which allows me to analyze the issues related to the identities and self-identifications of the characters. In the beginning, center is represented by the positive geographical, historical and social values for the protagonists, and everything besides those is the periphery.

In my view, the inner crisis arises when – primarily caused by geographical and social factors – the protagonist's life is distanced from the center that is important to him, or when the center is questioned, because it threatens his right to autonomous decision or his understanding of freedom. In the case of *No Longer at Ease*, the protagonist, Obi identifies himself within the geographical, historical and social context of his birthplace village, Umuofia, while his life in Lagos falls outside of it; his love for the *osu* Clara is not accepted by his *ibo* family living in a traditional rural community. This exclusion is contrasted with his progressive thinking stemming from his Western education. Thus, the gap between his traditional rural identity and his modern, urban life widens; he does not find his place, and he cannot make a decision reconciling his personal interests with the values of the center determined by the community. In the remaining part of the analysis, I discuss how Obi's spiritual crisis is projected into the portrayal of distances and movement, and how this is also reflected in Obi's very specific – though carrying symbolic meaning – spatial behavior.

In this chapter, I also mention the description of sea travel. I argue that the voyage on the sea represents an abstract ideal of freedom for both Obi and Mustafa, a character in one of Tayeb Salih's novels. However, due to the social, historical and geographical embeddedness of the novels, these ideals are unachievable, thus they lead the protagonists astray.

In the second part of the chapter, I conduct a narrative analysis of the *Season of Migration to the North*. Starting from a detailed analysis of the novel's first part, I focus on the narrative battle between the two storytellers (Mustafa and the Narrator). The stake in this battle for Mustafa is whether he can influence the way of narration while being its object, whereas for the Narrator is if he can escape from Mustafa's suppressing narrative to take both

the narration and his future into his own hands. In the case of *Season of Migration to the North* too, I examine the relationship between center and periphery, as well as the one between the two main characters, with a special attention to the Narrator. Because out of the three protagonists of the two novels, it is only the Narrator who retains some level of freedom at the end of the novel, I suppose that it is especially important to examine the relations between center and periphery in his case. The analysis shows that two decisive centers are formed for the Narrator; one can be connected to his grandfather, while the other to Mustafa. By the end of the novel, he questions the validity of both centers, and his inner crisis is also reflected in physical movement. However, the Narrator can move forward in two aspects. On the one hand, he escapes from Mustafa's suppressive narrative; this is symbolized by his first autonomous decision when, flouncing in the water, he – contrary to Mustafa who drowns in the Nile – chooses life in the middle of the river. On the other hand, as a consequence of the act of his autonomous decision, he becomes independent of the center represented by the village community.

I see the main reason for Mustafa's failure in the fact that although he eliminates the dependence on outside powers and narratives, he cannot move further, and he can only define his independence in the context of the battle against repressive powers. This view foreshadows the critique of postcolonial theory from an African perspective presented in the first chapter of the dissertation, which argues that the theory examines the Other – in this case, the African – primarily through European narratives. Freeing himself from these narratives, Mustafa cannot take advantage of his freedom, nothing can fill the void formed after the struggle.

In the final part of the second chapter, I examine the chronology of the narratives with the help of analepsis and prolepsis, as well as with linearity and circularity. I find that the chronology of the narratives supports the observation that, out of the three protagonists, only the Narrator can consider himself free at the end of the novels. Indeed, in contrast to the circular narrative connected to Mustafa and Obi, only the Narrator can be related to linear narrative.

In the third chapter, I examine the roles of the past and remembrance, which brings the protagonists' attempts to achieve freedom into the forefront. In the case of Obi, I observe during the analysis of his relations to his mother and to Clare that he, while manipulating his image of his mother, relies on a fictitious female figure, and only recognizes how far he had moved away from reality at the time of his arrest. Remembrance and past can only contribute to the creation of the illusion of independence in his case. Similarly, Mustafa unsuccessfully

tries to recreate his lost childhood Paradise in the Narrator's village. In the changes of the "caravan" motive used by Mustafa, it is observable that as he becomes the victim of Jean Morris and the narrative of European culture, the emphasis of the caravan moves from the unbound nomadic lifestyle to the exhausting desert campaign. Wandering and discovery no longer symbolizes the possibilities, but rather the narrowing of those possibilities. For the Narrator, the conclusion can be drawn that the close connection between past and present does not allow the manipulation of his memories, therefore – contrary to Obi and Mustafa – the Narrator cannot escape to lies, so he has to face his problems, which eventually leads to the resolution of those. The Narrator learns from Mustafa's mistakes, and regards the solution of the problems as a longer, more complex, more narrative process, though he also adopts from Mustafa the cathartic moment that encourages him to action. The motive of the caravan also appears in the cases of the Narrator and Obi. Comparing their thoughts in their half-delirium states during their long road, it is observable that in the case of the Narrator, the various memories which come out of his subconscious help him to deal with his problems connected to Mustafa, and they contribute to his awakening to self-consciousness. However, in Obi's case, the arising memories point to the obstacles that hinder him in the resolution of his problems.

In the fourth chapter, I examine the roles of literature and verbal culture in the struggle for freedom and personal autonomy; furthermore, I analyze how this struggle is manifested in the characters' attitude to literature. Literature bears special importance in the novels, because all three protagonists were university graduates, and two of them had degrees in English. Using Jan Assmann's concepts of personal, communicative and cultural memories, I show that, in fact, the Narrator's best friend, Mahjoub – who is considered to be enlightened – was behind the silencing of Hosna's narrative when she was forced to marriage. I attempt to determine those techniques that can change the reader's opinion, as well as I recognize those critical points which can be exploited to unearth repressed narratives.

In the case of Obi, I analyze the role of modern English literature (viewed by him as "high culture"): in his understanding, the aesthetic standards of English literature embodied idealism. When Obi recognizes that what he considers ideal life is not achievable to him, he even begins to abandon reading the poems of his favorite English poet, Housman. Although it is not known in the end of the novel whether "high culture" can regain the importance for him, contrary to so many of his compatriots, he still does not start to use "broken English" at the end of the story. This signals that he cannot deviate from the aesthetic norms he had

already picked up, which allows those to form the basis of a type of realism – if not his earlier idealism – in the future.

Finally, in the case of *Season of Migration to the North*, I examine the impossibility to delimit the boundary between the role of the philologist and that of the poet. In Mustafa's life, literature mostly appears through the person of Othello, and with the inevitability of the Othelloian role for him, I demonstrate the chronological determinacy of both personal story and collective history. In the end, comparing Obi's, Mustafa's and the Narrator's relationship to literature, I observe what distinguishes the Narrator from the other two protagonists: he does not think in terms of literary canon, but rather approaches all works of arts – be it oral or written – without prejudice. Although in the major part of the action, the Narrator, just like the two other protagonists, is unable to neglect his constraints, his wide knowledge of literature and his unprejudiced approach to it shows his independent thinking, which lets him recognize the importance of autonomous actions and practice by the end of the novel. Therefore, he is the only one out of the three who is able to take advantage of the possibility of freedom.

Relevant publications

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