“The instant of waking from the nightmare”: Emergence theory and postcolonial experience in *Season of Migration to the North*

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ABSTRACT

This article positions agency as a necessarily lacunal aspect of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. By allowing the theatricality of doubling and metaphor to overdetermine Mustafa's narrative, the novel implicitly challenges both the substitution of symbol for material experience and the rational logic of causation. The disruptive potential of this challenge suggests an emergent form of postcolonial experience – an unpredictable interaction of parts that redefines the whole, in which the centrality of non-human matter's role in shaping human subjectivity resists and exceeds the analytic frameworks of biological determinism and humanist agency. The article employs Jeffrey Goldstein and Peter Corning's work on the theory of downward causation, bringing postcolonial literature into dialog with the concept of emergence in the field of biological science. In this way, the article aligns the development of an alternative mode of scientific inquiry with the development of postcolonial theory, both of which are invested in challenging teleological master narratives of ordered, rational progress.

KEYWORDS

Tayeb Salih; *Season of Migration to the North*; agency; downward causation; biological science; theatricality

Discussing Frantz Fanon's work on postcolonial subjectivity, Homi Bhabha (2004) locates a “restless urgency” that produces a theoretically contingent quest for a framework “appropriate to the social antagonism of the colonial relation” (58). But this quest, Bhabha notes, by definition cannot end in success. Instead, the search develops an idea of colonial relations “in the gaps between” one framework and another (59), refusing any single theoretical apparatus. The violence of colonialism infuses the issue with heightened urgency:

What is the distinctive force of Fanon's vision? It comes, I believe, from the tradition of the oppressed, the language of a revolutionary awareness that, as Walter Benjamin suggests, “the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that is in keeping with this insight”. And the state of emergency is also always a state of emergence. The struggle against colonial oppression not only changes the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist idea of time as a progressive, ordered whole. (59)

Bhabha interrogates the positivism of historicist progress that enabled violence against the colonized subject, who was excluded from “the social virtues of historical rationality, cultural

cohesion [and] the autonomy of individual consciousness” (61). This exclusion constitutes a “state of emergency”, which demands a different way of accessing and theorizing colonial and postcolonial experience. This state is also one of *emergence*, but the word appears in its ordinary usage: merely to indicate the arrival or coming into being of something new. Raymond Williams (1977), on the other hand, describes emergent culture as “alternative or oppositional [to the dominant culture], emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely novel” (123). Both scholars, though, tend towards single-theory abstraction at the very moment when one might desire a notion of subjectivity that accounts for materiality and environment. Williams advances a fundamentally Marxist framework within which the interplay between dominant, residual and emergent forms of culture defines the range of available identities. Correspondingly, Bhabha’s conception of hybridity as anti-colonial resistance is abstract and universal; its subversive potential is nowhere localized in a specific material body, but rather in the psychoanalytic ambivalence of the colonizer–colonized relation (Loomba 2005, 149–150).

Both Bhabha and Williams, then, raise the question of emergence only to subordinate it to abstract critical frameworks, foreclosing discussion of the materiality and unpredictability of lived experience within specific environments – a central concern in postcolonial literature in general, and in Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* in particular. A short, poetic meditation on the Sudanese experience of transitioning from colonial rule to postcolonial independence, the novel features an unnamed narrator, recently returned from studying in London, telling the story of another man, Mustafa Sa’eed, whom he meets in the village of Wad Hamid.¹ Older, educated and withdrawn, Mustafa has a dark history, having engaged as a young man in a series of deceptive and abusive relationships with white women, culminating in the murder of his British wife, Jean Morris (for which he has served a term of imprisonment). As the unnamed narrator tells Mustafa’s story, he becomes enmeshed in the unsettling fabric of Mustafa’s life, which is magnified when Mustafa vanishes from Wad Hamid, presumably to drown in the Nile, after having entrusted the care of his sons and second wife, Hosna Bint Mahmoud, to the narrator. Hosna kills Wad Rayyes, the man she is forced to marry, and then commits suicide, prompting the narrator to enter Mustafa’s home, peruse the documentation of his past crimes, and then swim into the Nile, where he almost drowns himself before a moment of sudden enlightenment saves him from replicating Mustafa’s death.

A critical question is *why* Mustafa and the narrator choose their respective trajectories. From the migratory pattern of birds that the narrator notices while submerged in the Nile (an echo of the novel’s title) to the idea, espoused by Mustafa’s legal counsel at his trial, that it was not Mustafa but rather “the germ of a deadly disease” (Salih 2009, 29) that caused the deaths of the women he victimized, the novel mobilizes the rhetoric of biological determinism to offer *prima facie* justifications for anti-colonial pathology and violence. However, the text also rejects these quasi-scientific justifications. For example, Mustafa, in recounting his experiences to the narrator, remembers wanting to call his counsel’s defense of him “untrue, a fabrication” (29). Repeatedly, the conditions of colonialism create postcolonial phenomena that neither Mustafa nor the narrator can explain. Mustafa grandiosely describes the violence he inflicts on white women as a cosmic inevitability shaped by the legacy of colonialism in the Sudan. Before disappearing into the Nile, he claims to have been driven by fate to murder Jean Morris. On first glance, Salih seems to be contrasting Mustafa’s theatrical death with the narrator’s decision to live, of his own volition. However, the narrator

himself also partakes of a theatrical relationship to his surroundings, which does not cease even when he appears to have broken free of Mustafa's pernicious influence. In this article, I position agency as a necessarily lacunal aspect of *Season of Migration to the North*. By allowing the theatricality of doubling and metaphor to overdetermine Mustafa's narrative, the novel implicitly challenges both the substitution of symbol for material experience and the rational logic of causation. The disruptive potential of this challenge suggests an *emergent* form of postcolonial experience – an unpredictable interaction of parts that redefines the whole, in which the centrality of non-human matter's role in shaping human subjectivity resists and exceeds the analytic frameworks of biological determinism and humanist agency.

I employ Jeffrey Goldstein and Peter Corning's work on the theory of downward causation, bringing postcolonial literature into dialog with the concept of emergence in the field of biological science. In this way, I align the development of an alternative mode of scientific inquiry with the development of postcolonial theory, both of which are invested in challenging teleological master narratives of ordered, rational progress. This article is also informed by non-anthropocentric, new materialist concepts of experience, which challenge "some of the most basic assumptions that have underpinned the modern world, including its normative sense of the human and its beliefs about human agency" (Coole and Frost 2010, 4). In demonstrating the limits of scientific discourse in explaining the major events of its narrative, I suggest that *Season of Migration to the North* establishes the framework for considering the contingent materialism of postcolonial experience.

It is not, of course, my aim to use science to "diagnose" the postcolonial condition, which would risk replicating the racism of colonial discourse. Instead, I argue that the novel challenges reductionist systems within both the sciences and the humanities, interrogating the totality and predictability of an element's evolution within a given environment. In problematizing the narrator's search for what Bhabha calls a "total theory of colonial oppression" (2004, 59), the novel's ontology is consonant with postcolonial studies and emergence theory. This problematization, I will demonstrate, is why many of the novel's key moments appear lacunal, inexplicable and theatrical: characters act implausibly to demonstrate the self-deceptive fallacy of unitary explanations centered on the human subject, a fallacy to which they succumb but which the novel itself skillfully avoids. In so doing, the novel illustrates the potential of emergence theory to narrate the complexity of postcolonial experience, without resorting to anthropocentric notions of agency, on the one hand, and the ethically problematic determinism of traditional science, on the other. Emergence is thus a corollary of colonial violence, the unpredictable transformation of an environment that produces unexpected forms of postcolonial experience.

As an evolutionary theory, emergence dates back to the 19th century, and was

originally coined during an earlier upsurge of interest in the evolution of wholes, or, more precisely, what was viewed unabashedly in those days seen as a 'progressive' trend in evolution towards new levels of organization culminating in mental phenomena and the human mind. (Corning 2002, 18)

G.H. Lewes first conceptualized the existence of two separate compounds in chemical reactions: the "resultant", which invariably was "either a sum or a difference of the co-operant forces", and the emergent, which could not "be reduced to either their sum or their difference" (quoted in Corning 2002, 19). This conceptualization borrowed from John Stuart Mill's earlier work on the nature of causation but broke from Mill in its identification of a compound that was irreducible to the sum of its parts. In contrast to Darwinian gradualism,

which “rejected the very idea of sharp discontinuities in nature”, emergence theory, as first envisioned by Lewes, argued that “quantitative, incremental changes can lead to qualitative changes that are different from, and irreducible to, their parts” (Corning 2002, 19). In the early 20th century, emergence theory subsequently crested in a “loosely joined movement in the sciences, philosophy, and theology” (Goldstein 1999, 53). This movement, which included C.L. Morgan (animal behavior), Henri Bergson (phenomenology), Samuel Alexander and C.D. Broad (philosophy) and W. Wheeler (etymology), owed some debt to Goethe’s earlier theory of gestalt as a philosophy of the dynamic interaction between parts in a whole that was not “pre-given” (1999, 52–53). As Goldstein notes, Goethe’s 19th-century ideas of gestalt also served as the protomatter for what later became gestalt psychology: von Ehrenfels’s much-quoted observation (now a cliché) that “the whole is greater than the sum of the parts” is deployed by contemporary thinkers such as Harrington (Goldstein 1999, 52).

Through various eras of greater or lesser influence, emergence theory has constituted, within the past decade, a challenge to positivist empiricism – most notably in Jeffrey Goldstein’s (1999) formulation of emergence as “the arising of novel and coherent structures, patterns and properties during the process of self-organization in complex systems” (21–22). Goldstein’s formulation contains six basic characteristics: radical novelty, cohesiveness, wholeness, rootedness in an evolutionary process, perceptibility to the senses, and what Lloyd-Morgan originally called “supervenience”, known today as *downward causation*. In explaining downward causation, Corning notes that “the synergies produced by organized systems” in a “parts–whole relationship” constitute the basis for understanding emergence, in which “causation is iterative; effects are also causes” (2002, 21, 27). In other words, downward causation is a *process* in which an effect can itself become the cause of another effect (Goldstein 1999), as well as an *operation* characterized by the interlinked relationship between parts and whole in a given environment.

What becomes relevant to *Season of Migration to the North* is the debate on emergence as a viable method of understanding evolution, a debate that resonates in the humanities as much as in the field of biological science. Goldstein begins his analysis by citing Aristotle’s response to the Zeno paradox of a distance capable of being divided into “an infinite number of shorter segments” (1999, 51). For Goldstein, Aristotle’s position – that any length is “first and foremost a whole” – crystallizes the ideas of “whole before parts” and gestalt that serve as the forerunners to emergence theory (1999, 51). Goldstein’s definition has faced widespread but also contradictory criticism from the scientific community, including the observation that cells, in their quantum state, “are always greatly affected by the boundary conditions – the environment” (Corning 2002, 22). Understood in this way, downward causation challenges not only the positivism of biological science, but also humanist and constructivist notions of agency. Like new materialist criticism, it brings into view “active processes of materialization of which embodied humans are an integral part, rather than the monotonous repetitions of dead matter from which human subjects are apart” (Coole and Frost 2010, 8). In demonstrating the synergistic enmeshment of the human with the non-human environment, emergence theory aligns with and extends new materialism and postcolonial studies.

My analysis will mainly employ two elements of Corning’s modification of Goldstein’s emergence theory: downward causation and the synergy of scale, in which “interchangeable, like-kind parts produce [... a] form of synergy commonly known as a ‘threshold effect’ (say a flood or an avalanche)” (Corning 2002, 23). In other words, a threshold effect occurs

when enough unpredictable interactions between various interchangeable “like-kind parts” trigger a change (synergy) in a given environment that can only take place when the change reaches a certain size (scale) that cannot be known in advance. Correspondingly, the novel’s use of the literary technique of doubling sets up the promise of a causal relationship between characters or “parts” of the postcolonial environment, only to offer the “radical novelty” (downward causation) of an unexpected threshold effect that does not hinge on characters’ free will. In other words, doubling deliberately fails to capture the complex corporeal reality of Mustafa and the narrator, who partake of an environmental relation that is transformative without being either deterministic, in the model of evolutionary science, or idealistically agentic, as in certain strands of hybridity theory. In this way, emergence theory in *Season of Migration to the North* disrupts both literary expectations and the anthropocentrism of human agency.²

In discussing *Season of Migration to the North*, critics tend to subordinate postcolonial experience to epistemologies in which literary devices work largely to support the broader theory. Muhammed Siddiq (1978) reduces Mustafa’s oddities to the absence of his father, arguing that “instead of developing the emotional, female side of his personality at the expense of his masculinity, he has swung to the opposite extreme and overdeveloped the intellectual, masculine function” (71). Siddiq’s argument troublingly reinscribes gender traits along an undifferentiated axis of western psychology. W.S. Hassan ties Mustafa explicitly to places with specific colonial resonances, such as Cairo, the ambivalent site of both covert resistance to colonial rule and its official position as “an imperial outpost for England” (quoted in Velez 2010, 201n3), while Musa Al-Halool (2008) suggests that the narrator sees Mustafa as “a repressed phenomenon whose presence on the conscious level is threatening because it stirs up in him a latent compulsion to repeat his alienating experiences in London” (36–37). Brian Gibson (2002) passes lightly from Mustafa’s childhood, touching on his fatherless state and the “penchant for adopting a mask” that he has apparently inherited from his mother, noting only that “he is like a rubber ball, ever flexible, durable, and unaffected by outside forces” (20). The overall result is a tendency to turn Mustafa too readily into metaphor, symbolizing him almost out of existence.³ Only Michael Velez’s characterization of the novel as “a string of theatrical monologues” (2010, 190) calls into question the feasibility of reading the novel in metaphoric and symbolic terms. Velez lays the groundwork for viewing metaphor, symbol and doubling as elements that the novel deploys in order to critique their totalizing presence. The net result of an overdependence on these literary devices is a self-conscious narrative theatricality that the novel employs in order to critique.

Season of Migration to the North challenges any attempt to “explain” the colonial condition that relies on a single, closed system of interpretation and meaning; such a system, I suggest, is inherently theatrical and thereby flawed. I define theatricality as the excessively dramatic quality of speech, action, interpretation or narrative, which includes but is not limited to modes of public performance (such as acting or giving a public speech). Both Mustafa and the narrator fall into the trap of inhabiting the theatrical mode. This mode distorts embodied experience while stripping away the polyvalence of interpretive possibility from their respective situations, a distortion that destroys Mustafa and almost destroys the narrator. What appears to be inherently theatrical is instead evidence of the danger of using totalizing abstraction to explain emergent (unpredictable) phenomena in a complex, continuously changing postcolonial environment, a danger that is also hazardous for the

reader. In sustaining the richness of interpretive possibility, emergence theory becomes a necessary counter-framework for reading Salih's novel.

The origin of Mustafa's decision to engage in sexual warfare with England is self-consciously obscure. The text undermines the logic of causality, producing moments when an event or decision appears to happen magically. Mustafa begins his account of his childhood with an equivocation: "It's a long story, but I won't tell you everything. Some details won't be of great interest to you, while others ..." (Salih 2009, 18). Here, we encounter Mustafa's story as an artifact that will not reveal everything, concealed under the cloak of civility. Out of the blandishment of unrevealed detail, Mustafa crafts a colonial self-portrait bereft of sensory impression or historical specificity. His father dies without explanation, leaving behind the profit from a camel trade that, combined with Mustafa's status as an only child, means a relatively easy life for Mustafa and his mother. Salih's prose is spare, spanning less than four pages and focused more on Mustafa's turbulent relationship to his surroundings than on recording detail. Mustafa's decision to embrace western intellectualism at the expense of family remains a mystery, smoothed over by the unconvincing nod to abandonment – the mask on his mother's cold face (18) that Mustafa continues to see, in disturbing parallel, in the women whom he victimizes and drives to suicide. This mask is "thick [...] as though her face were the surface of the sea", possessed of no single color, but instead "a multitude, appearing and disappearing and intermingling" (18). Mustafa punctuates memory with vague uncertainty, tentatively characterizing first himself and then his mother as an "odd creature" (18) to justify the lack of filial connection between them. Symbol overrides embodied experience, in a featureless, abstract environment.

The novel forsakes causality for synergies of scale: the swift interaction of elements in a time and place at which the threshold effect – the decision to pursue a colonial education – occurs without warning. For example, Mustafa's decision to forsake his mother for a colonial education occurs when a British officer interrupts a game he and his friends are playing. The British horseman occupies both the figurative and literal high ground; his mount elevates him to a height at which he can survey and assess from a distance. This narrative frame establishes the conditions in which the young Mustafa must choose: alone in the space suddenly abandoned by his Sudanese classmates. The officer does not impose, persuade or perform any other action; instead, the environment itself takes over, the synergistic matrix of possibilities shaping Mustafa's decision, which is neither rational nor emotional nor forced on him. The officer describes the school as a "nice stone building in the middle of a large garden near the Nile"; Mustafa points to the officer's hat (which he takes to be a turban), before mentioning his dead father and agreeing to go to school (Salih 2009, 19). Unconvincingly, he tells the narrator that this childhood decision was the first he had made of his "own free will", even as he discredits his own memory: "I don't ask you to believe what I tell you. You are entitled to wonder and to doubt – you're free" (20). Interiority is withheld from the reader during this exchange, which is emotionally and symbolically blank, as if a transformation is occurring that Mustafa does not understand even in retrospect.

The opacity of the entire scene dramatizes the limits of Mustafa's position: a Sudanese man indoctrinated in the western tradition of rational Enlightenment, delving back into an early childhood memory but unable to shape that memory to the logic of his guiding principles. This narrated memory is an early and rare moment when symbol does not intertwine and mediate event. Salih refuses to supply causation at this moment, doing nothing more than indicating a correlative and then swiftly moving on to Mustafa's exploits in school. Both

agency and scientific positivism are undone in the implausibility of events; the narrative “environment” has effected a change in material experience that resists a single frame of meaning. In so doing, the text also reveals the *older* Mustafa still firmly in the grip of overriding metaphors, symbolic representations from which all other possible meanings have fallen away, leaving only the pathology of anti-colonial desire.

Through Mustafa’s trajectory, the novel illustrates both the agony of the postcolonial subject, searching for “a dialectics of deliverance” (Bhabha 2004, 58) in a specific historical moment between colonization and independence, and the limitations of the rationally scientific frame in making sense of that moment. Instead, the novel uses downward causation to explain the postcolonial condition: non-gradualist and transformative, a challenge to colonial teleology and scientific positivism. Mustafa’s predisposition is to see doubles everywhere: Jean Morris, to whom he is drawn as if by fate; the other white women he seduces; and the narrator, to whose care Mustafa commits his own wife, Hosna bint Mahmoud. In each instance, though, the doubling arises both from Mustafa’s pathology and from the self-delusion of his chosen double. His initial meeting with Ann Hammond, another white woman he deceives and abuses, takes place according to an orientalist script that both of them decide to enact for the benefit of an audience. In the middle of a lecture, Mustafa is engaged in spinning a web of deception about the Arab poet Abu Nuwas, including the idea that “the longing for wine in his poetry was really a longing for self-obliteration in the Divine – all arrant nonsense with no basis of fact” (Salih 2009, 118). Mustafa has already assumed the entertainer’s persona, making truth out of the falsehoods that his audience is willing to believe. The lie he offers dramatizes the very “truth” of his own willingness to let theatricality supersede all other meanings: evidence of his “longing for wine” in the “poetry” of *his* own words.

By pretending to have known each other in a previous life, Mustafa and Ann demonstrate the text’s insistent critique of any closed method of understanding the “jagged testimony of colonial dislocation, its displacement of time and person, its defilement of cultural and territory” (Bhabha 2004, 59). Following Mustafa’s lecture, audience members throng around him, only to be interrupted by Ann, who approaches Mustafa and kisses him. Mustafa describes it as “one of those rare moments of ecstasy” for which he would give his life, “in which [...] lies are turned into truths, history becomes a pimp, and the jester is turned into a sultan” (Salih 2009, 119). For his life to be worth no more than a single moment of theatrical performance, Mustafa must subordinate experience to the trope of predestined fate, which he uses to justify the violence of his actions. Subservience to binary oppositions between colonizer and colonized overrides the complexity of the moment he shares with Ann. The two are acting, but offstage, after the actual performance (the lecture) is over; the kiss they share is an embodied act that disregards the audience for whose benefit they enact this script. This representation of doubling relates postcolonial experience to emergence: non-linear, adaptable, unpredictable and containing one or more “attractors”, transformative states that move beyond earlier ideas of equilibrium (Goldstein 1999, 55–56). In other words, the theatrical technique of doubling falls short of describing Mustafa’s relation to his environment, which challenges the abstract “equilibrium” of fate.

Mustafa’s trajectory is not fate, but rather mediated by his desire to explain his life as driven by fate. His characterization of Jean Morris as the “goddess of death” whose path must “inevitably” coincide with his “star of destiny” (Salih 2009, 127) is shaped by his obsession with doubles, parallels and symbolic alignments. He expects that the world through which

he moves will evince an immutable metaphor, fixing his double and himself in synchronous orbit. On the night he murders Jean Morris, he finds her in a theatrical pose, “stretched out naked on the bed, her white thighs open”, ready “both to give and to take” (134–135) and suddenly receptive to the sexual advances that she has, until this point, violently refused. Action arises theatrically on a winter’s night, “a field of ice” with bare trees whose branches “are collapsing under the weight of snow” (134). Salih yokes the text to the suffocating pathology of Mustafa’s desire, which has reached its apotheosis both in intensity and focus. The reader is imprisoned in the same discourse that has at once enraged and captivated the novel’s narrator; Mustafa begins speaking, in this final dramatic monologue, without warning, right after the narrator has finished ruminating on a surviving picture of Jean Morris. No preamble accompanies Mustafa’s final word, as if the narrator himself is possessed by Mustafa’s rhetoric. Jean acts like a marionette in response to Mustafa’s actions, “robbed of her own volition and [...] moving in accordance” with his desires (2009, 135). The scene presents a submissive female pose theatrically lacerated with violence, the narrative push towards murder as the nadir of Mustafa’s blighted trajectory.

Metaphor breaks down in Mustafa’s narrative, dramatizing the colonial hegemonies he simultaneously endures and replicates: a prisoner of the destructive metaphor of colonialism, caught between “image and fantasy” and “overdetermined from without [by] the heterogeneous assemblage of [...] history, literature, science, and myth” (Fanon, quoted in Bhabha 2004, 61). After pushing the knife into Jean, he describes the two of them as “a torch of flame, the edges of the bed tongues of Hell-fire”, as “the universe, with its past, present, and future [is] gathered into a single point before and after which nothing existed” (Salih 2009, 136). If fate is the tenor, the abstraction from which he must draw comparison, and Jean Morris the only vehicle through which this tenor can find expression, Mustafa has discovered not metaphor, with its diverse array of contingent meanings, but an interpretive dead end: the fatal culmination of his predisposition to worship literary abstraction. A delicate irony, here: the fate that for Mustafa is inexorable is not cosmic sexual predestination but rather his *predisposition* towards such a rigid notion of postcolonial experience. This is metaphor’s murder: the evisceration of subjective depth in the name of sexual pathology. The text deploys Jean Morris both to accommodate and to thwart Mustafa in this expectation: acquiescent to patriarchal norms, but driving him to the position of the emasculated Oriental who can only reassert himself through violence towards the white symbol of British colonialism. Implausibly, Jean Morris invites her own murder, dramatizing the impossibility of understanding colonial and postcolonial experience within a single system of abstract meaning.

The repression of community, which is what the colonizer demands of Mustafa in childhood, returns in the projection of doubles onto other figures, a deadly state of equilibrium in which he rejects substantive difference and imposes an unsustainable, toxic sameness on others. This toxicity is contiguous with colonial binaries of civilized European and savage African that Mustafa tries to use for his own ends. Doubling is the unhealthy reflex of the colonized subject, in which both difference and similarity disappear within overdetermined metaphor. Mustafa’s fixed ethico-spatial orbit, though, is not the novel’s final word on postcolonial subjectivity; instead, the very rigidity of his position as a foil to the narrator’s uncertainty. In the final section of this article, I will read the narrator’s near-death experience in the river through the lens of emergence theory. I argue that through a series of inexplicable interruptions, the text offers agency tantalizingly as a “black box”, only to

reject any anthropocentric attempt to decipher the contents of that box, leaving the reader with the sense that postcolonial experience “will always stay one step ahead of the ground won by prediction” (Goldstein 1999, 60).

Himself an effect of colonialism, Mustafa becomes a causal factor in the narrator’s trajectory, but the implausibility of their association – the literary convenience of their similarities, the flimsy textual premise for Mustafa entrusting the narrator with the care of his wife and children – foreshadows a radical newness to the latter’s eventual transformation. As Mustafa’s presence catalyzes events in Wad Hamid, so too does his permanent absence (presumably death by drowning) enact its own particular transformation of the environment.⁴ The effects of Mustafa’s disappearance are perceptible and clear: the murder of Wad Rayyes, Hosna’s suicide, and the narrator’s almost-death all pivot on the relationship he develops with Mustafa. This relationship marks them as interchangeable parts whose interaction produces a series of unexpected transformations or *threshold effects* in the village. In the final chapter, the narrator is suspended between life and death in the Nile, which he has entered after having finally accessed Mustafa’s abode in Wad Hamid. Enraged at the lies he has discovered while looking through Mustafa’s possessions, he finds himself at the river almost by accident, entranced by how the “objects on the two shores” are “half visible, appearing and disappearing, veering between light and darkness” (Salih 2009, 137). Without clear purpose, the narrator begins swimming into the current, before deciding to gain the far shore. This resolve almost kills him, as he becomes fatigued and starts to drown. Drowning, he sees in his surroundings a “vast echoing hall,” a blinding “semicircle” (138), and finally an illuminating image of migration:

In a state between life and death I saw formations of sand grouse heading northwards. Were we in winter or summer? Was it a casual flight or a migration? I felt myself submitting to the destructive forces of the river, felt my legs dragging the rest of my body downwards. In an instant – I know not how long or short it was – the reverberation of the river turned into a piercingly loud roar and at the very same instant there was a vivid brightness like a flash of lightning. (138–139)

The novel brings up migration only tangentially; it passes through the narrator’s mind as he struggles to swim. It evokes the lives of both the narrator and Mustafa: sand grouse, suspended between north and south, between “casual flight” and migration to the same place that destroyed Mustafa. More significant, though, is the sense that the narrator, as if by chance, has come to perceive a pattern of flight that *may or may not* be migratory. In other words, this passing reference to evolutionary biology is the moment when metaphor reacquires multiple possible meanings, releasing the narrator from the rigidity of Mustafa’s obsessions. This release allows the narrator to take his first steps into non-human identification, destabilizing anthropocentric agency. The migration of grouse provides no fixed answers, only an orientation and the growing suggestion that an unexpected event – a threshold effect – will occur at the convergence of auditory and visual sense-perception (the roar and the brightness). As the novel approaches its climax, it also widens its perceptual lens: freed from the narrator’s unhealthy relationship with Mustafa, we expand outward to the “vast (and still expanding) universe of cooperative interactions that produce synergistic effects of various kinds, both in nature and in human societies” (Corning 2002, 23).

Just as the narrator’s perspective expands to accommodate the unpredictability of downward causation, the Nile’s material presence characterizes postcolonial experience as fundamentally emergent. In a river that flows in all directions, determining any movement’s cause

is impossible. The narrator hangs between life and death, partially immersed in water, caught between succumbing to the river and reasserting his own desire to live. This suspension both affirms and denies Mustafa's death drive, which almost consumes the narrator. And while it provides the locale for the narrator's sudden decision to live, it fails to explain *how* the locale shapes that decision in positivist terms: "Suddenly I experienced a violent desire for a cigarette. It wasn't merely a desire; it was a hunger or thirst. And this was the instant of waking from the nightmare" (Salih 2009, 139).

The cigarette itself hearkens back to the narrator's trips to and from Khartoum, an ironic case of a toxic man-made object being hailed as a life-giving substance. It also recalls the Bedouin furiously chain-smoking, "gulping in the smoke with indescribable avidity" (90), and the distribution of cigarettes accompanied by the mocking words, "To the good health of the Sudan" (95). However, what drives the narrator to "wake" from the "nightmare" of suicide? The urge to smoke a cigarette appears with no apparent cause. Patricia Geesey attributes the narrator's change of heart to the "realization that the hybrid condition must be traded for the stance of the more productive bicultural trait" (1997, 138), while Benita Parry sees his epiphany as a decision "to remain within the limits and possibilities of Sudan" (2005, 167). Michael Velez (2010, 200) reads the Nile as the embodiment of unpredictable space: it flows in all directions, capable of sustaining life or destroying it (as it did to Mustafa). While all are persuasive readings, they each impose an epistemological "law" onto the text, reducing narrative complexity to the status of an "epiphenomenon" (Corning 2002, 25).

If the narrator already knows that Mustafa's narrative is a lie, why does the novel defer his epiphany until after his near-suicidal plunge into the Nile? The narrator has already seen through Mustafa, enough to ridicule his attempts at poetry, which have "no true feeling, no genuine emotion" (Salih 2009, 127). Mustafa, for the narrator, is the pitiable man "who had not let a moment pass without recording it for posterity" (115) and whose "egoism" and "conceit" are boundless (128), even in death. From nothing, we appear to get something, an alchemical transformation that has the appearance of magic. But it is precisely the emergent quality of the narrator's decision that demonstrates the novel's commitment to rejecting Enlightenment reason and reductionist biological science. If the Nile acts as the boundary condition for the various "cells" or individuals within its environment, the actual and specific transformation of those cells is not scientifically predictable, empirically verifiable or narratively plausible. In this sense, the river is the most suitable locale for emergent transformation, since water is "the paradigmatic example of emergence", an elemental substance whose "basic atomic properties [...] have been understood for almost two centuries" but which defies reduction to any single category of knowledge, be it quantum theory, thermodynamics or hydraulics (Corning 2002, 24). The cigarette's appearance must, of necessity, defy rational explanation. The narrator's decision to enter the Nile, an effect of his relationship to Mustafa, joins with the material presence of the river to produce a transformation that exceeds both agency and biological determinism. The structure of the novel has militated towards a revelation that must come, inexplicably, at this moment, triggered by environment but irreducible to metaphor, science or free will.

The seemingly labored theatricality of this final scene is actually the novel's *threshold effect*, the point at which the cooperative, synergistic elements of the narrative produce an unforeseen, radical and non-gradualist break from the supposed causal element. Unlike Mustafa, the narrator rejects the toxic metaphor that would preordain his fate, but this rejection does not hinge on an individual agency. Theatrically, the text invokes Mustafa's

drowning, only to pull the narrator back from it by way of locale and action that are equally theatrical. In an emergent framework, where elements do not flow toward predictable, gradualist transformations, the seemingly cumbrous parallel between Mustafa and the narrator gains ironic meaning precisely *because* it is heavy-handed: consciously deployed and then skillfully rejected. This rejection occurs for reasons that range from the ironic – the desire for a cigarette, a toxic substance, occurs while the narrator is drowning in the river, a source of nourishment and life – to a kind of pragmatic opportunism that barely rises above social prescription and self-interest: “I shall live because there are a few people I want to stay with for the longest possible time and because I have duties to discharge” (Salih 2009, 139). As an effect of colonialism, Mustafa has now become a cause: driving the narrator to the brink of death but providing him with a moment of illumination that springs not from reason, but from the downward causation of postcolonial experience. In other words, the narrator’s decision emerges from his material enmeshment within a contingent network of human and non-human elements and from the uniquely “cooperative interactions” (to use Corning’s term) that result from such enmeshments.

While the river does not determine Mustafa’s fate, it is neither “the monotonous [repetition] of dead matter from which human subjects are apart” (Coole and Frost 2010, 8) nor the purely symbolic backdrop of literary epiphany. Rather, the convergence of time, place and non-human matter catalyzes the narrator’s revelation. The narrator is not afforded any gracefully symbolic exit from the river, nor does the novel reconcile him with his family. Instead, tragedy turns to farce, the narrator struggling in the water until he is forced to shout for aid: “Like a comic actor shouting on a stage, I screamed with all my remaining strength, ‘Help! Help!’” (Salih 2009, 139). However, instead of repeating the theatricality of Mustafa’s fate, the narrator explicitly declares the theatricality of his actions: his decision is comedic, shorn of the grandiose metaphors that consumed Mustafa. We are thus left with the emergence of the Nile itself, the representative of “a world whose vectors seem [... to] “emanate from the things themselves, like the patterns of the constellations, [...] signaling ‘the self-disclosing of matter’” (Coole 2010, 104). Fittingly, the narrator’s decision exemplifies joint decision-making between human and non-human matter, one of a number of “functional synergies” that are “the source of many ‘economies’ in the natural world” (Corning 2002, 23). What we receive is not the overdetermination of the doubled *figure* within the text, but the double *writing* that Salih performs by employing theatricality, metaphor and symbol in order to critique their totalizing presence.

In seeking a critical linkage between emergence theory and postcolonial literature in *Season of Migration to the North*, this article has offered something of a critique of the “cultural turn that privileges language, discourse, culture, and values” (Coole and Frost 2010, 3). However, if emergence “functions not so much as an explanation but rather as a descriptive term pointing to the patterns, structures, or properties” of a phenomenon’s “macro-level” (Goldstein 1999, 58), its relationship to other branches of knowledge should likewise be cooperative, a means of accessing a dimension of postcolonial experience consonant with other forms of intellectual inquiry. Emergence thus dramatizes the material complexity of colonial and postcolonial experience: at once ethical, embodied and ontologically open. The irruptive nature of the novel’s representation of experience touches on the position of the postcolonial scholar, for whom the task of literary inquiry must also be the task of challenging the boundary conditions of the critical environment.

Notes

1. This frame narrative obviously evokes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, though Salih's narrator is an active participant in the novel, in contrast to the detached man who provides an audience for Marlow's reflections on his time in Africa.
2. Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) theory of the rhizome, which might on the surface seem to be closely aligned with emergence theory, is still focused on using the botanical example of the rhizome to confirm the viability of a non-hierarchical patterns of thought. The rhizome, in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, is a convenient (and persuasive) model for theorizing the spread of ideas, but is not part of any sustained attempt to account for the relationship between human and non-human matter. Moreover, for Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizomatic model eliminates temporality by dispensing with beginnings and endings. Emergence theory, by contrast, is acutely aware of temporality in its very engagement with the question of causality.
3. See Harlow (1985) among others.
4. Corning (2002) refers to this phenomenon as the "synergy minus one" process, in which one tests "for the presence of synergy by removing an important part and observing the consequences" (23).

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