

Deconstructing the Myth of Immutability: Pluralistic Representations of *Homo Religiosus* in the Arabic Novel

Mirza Sarajkić

Abstract

The focus of this article is the perception of religious characters and motifs in the modern Arabic novel. The former is characterised as *homo religiosus*, and can be presented in diverse ways. In the formative phase of novels, *homo religiosus* is generally in a fixed state of backwardness and moral corruption, a stereotype that has formed over decades, and that wholly neglects the perspective of those whose ideology has been defeated. This unjust one-dimensionality changed in the late 1960s, with authors such as Sudanese novelist Salih Tayeb, who deconstructs the stereotypical monolithic nature of religious figures in *The Wedding of Zein* (1964) and *Season of Migration to the North* (1966). Salih allows *homo religiosus* to be like other people, and points to the diversity and depth of characters of religious provenance. Egyptian writer Youssef Ziedan builds upon Salih's concept of "opening the worlds" in his 2008 novel *Azazeel*. A *bildungsroman* of a Christian religious hero, *Azazeel* is a detailed insight into the spiritual turmoil, paradoxes and temptations of a young monk who seeks true knowledge.

Key words: Arabic novel, *homo religiosus*, religion, spiritual path, Tayeb Salih, Youssef Ziedan

Introduction

In the first half of the 20th century, religious themes in Arabic novels were generally uneasy, and religious characters, whether formal representatives of religious institutions or “spiritual eccentrics”, were usually portrayed as anachronistic or incompetent stereotypes. Such representations were understandable to an extent: the collapse of dilapidated and sterile religious institutions had degraded the reputation first of religious scholars, then of devotees. Further, the dominance of a secularist ideology meant that everything religious was marginalised as backward. It is, however, incomprehensible to absolutise the black-and-white image of Arab society in which *homo religiosus* is the villain. In the novels of Naguib Mahfouz and Taha Hussein, religious characters represent symptoms of irrational loss. They are sterile, hypocritical and retrograde. But in this conventional stereotype, what is rotten is the complete absence of an alternative, or a religious or spiritual dynamic.¹ The radical monolithic nature of *homo religiosus* in the Arabic novels of the period denounces in advance any possibility of the development of religious characters, or of their charisma or plurality. The depiction of religious motifs in contemporary narratives intensified the supremacy of the modern, secular class, and of individuals or heroes. The attempt to shed more light on the overpowered and crushed stratum of Arab society became a taboo of secular culture’s progressive, modernist ideology. This exclusivity in the portrayal of religious motifs and the world they inhabit led to the stigmatisation of believers as unacceptable in society. As a rule, great literary works question life and expand our understanding of the world around us, but in the novelistic literature of the first half of the 20th century, depictions of religion in the Arab world often prescribed final judgments instead of raising questions. A valuable insight into the complexity and diversity of the world of those whose ideological dominance had passed was therefore lost. Most early novels overlooked the fractures in *homo religiosus* at the zenith of secularism, caused by his attempts to respond to a new world, and the means of his inclusion within it. As a result, both literature and society became poorer.

Shattering one-dimensionality

Since the 1960s, noticeable ruptures have appeared on the decades-old picture of *homo religiosus* as irredeemably impaired. Some new authors on the literary scene

1 I have previously elaborated the establishing pattern of *Homo Religiosus* as a sole villain and stereotype of an evil in the novels of Hussain and Mahfouz. See: Mirza Sarajkić, „Slika religije u savremenom arapskom romanu“, *Context: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 9:1 (2022), pp. 33-65.

have, however, made fresh observations in their presentations of religion and *homo religiosus* in Arab culture. Without disputing the secular ideology and their affiliation with it, these authors reveal the complex inner world of the believer, and show that the identity of *homo religiosus* can be dynamic.

The role of these authors is vital. First, they return the previously infringed function of literature as a profound questioning of the world, specifically through the contemporary novel. An antidote to the insistent and exclusive one-dimensionality of *homo religiosus*, polyphony and representative diversity return to the genre. Finally, they break the politics of what Terry Young refers to as “discourses that made it impossible to read religious phenomena”.² Young is interested in precisely this “unreadability of Islam” in dominant secular and Western ideologies. In his analysis of this approach, Wail S. Hassan notes: “Young points out that the unreadability of Islam affects not only Western media and political discourse but also postcolonial critics, whose ideological commitment to secularism begets a refusal to see the diversity of Islamic responses to colonialism and neo-colonialism. This invisibility of Islam – or the blindness of its observers – is due to postcolonial theory’s investment in the concept of absolute Otherness that it inherited from the hegemonic discourses it meant to oppose. The concept of the Other as the absolute difference is rooted, as Young notes, in nineteenth-century racial theory, but it has survived well beyond that, often implicitly positing Western modernity against unknowable, non-Western or premodern Others.”

Since the 1960s, the number of authors who pluralise the image of *homo religiosus*, and thereby contribute to the pluralisation of literary representations of religion, has increased. In this article, we focus on Tayeb Salih, as a pioneer of this representational pluralism, and Youssef Ziedan, a current author who repeatedly questions the phenomenon of faith in his novels.

Tayeb Salih and the shift of perspective

Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih (al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ) is considered a classic writer of the modern Arabic novel. He was born on July 12 1929, in the village of Karmakol in northern Sudan, and died on February 18 2009, in London. He was educated in Khartoum and London, and performed various jobs, mostly in the cultural sector, in London, Doha and Paris. He shared his rich experience of living in such different cultures in his literary works, especially his novels: *The Wedding of Zein* (1964), *Season of Migration to the North* (1967) and *Bandarshah* (1976). Salih has

2 See Robert J. C. Young, “Postcolonial Remains”, *New Literary History*, 43 (2012), pp. 19-42.

received numerous awards for these works, which have been translated into many languages. The Arab Literary Academy of Damascus declared *Season of Migration to the North* the most important Arabic novel of the 20th century, and a *Guardian* poll named it one of the hundred best works of all time.

From a literary perspective, Tayeb Salih came of age during the 1960s and 1970s, during the golden age of Arabic prose, and he was considered one of the best contemporary novelists in the Arab world. Among the many reasons for this are his layered themes and dialogue, refined style, rich language and sophisticated characterisation. Salih strikingly illuminates the Sudanese tradition, by pointing to a “magical” world that has long been neglected by contemporary reviews.

The primary themes of Salih’s novels relate to issues of cultural hybridity and aporia in social and civilisational transitions, and approaches to his literature are therefore predominantly read within the postcolonial theoretical framework.³ His novels are vivid examples of mature postcolonial writing in its adept phase. Frantz Fanon explains that in this phase of discourse the writer tries to merge with his or her society, thereby illuminating the original characteristics of the homeland and galvanising the community from which he/she comes. In this sense, Tayeb’s novels question the modes of survival of his people, detect the (im)possibility of changing nations, and unmask colonial notions and imperial performance in Sudan.

Salih’s imagological framework is broad and layered, and the issue of religion – i.e., of believers – is frequent and critical within it. Like other novelists, he does not overlook this issue, which, as previously noted, has become an uneasy space in the contemporary (emphatically secular) paradigm of global culture. The noticeable difference in Salih’s novels is his treatment of the phenomenon of faith in society. His images of believers and religious life are not an intended theme or narrative feature, and are not emphasised as incidents or decorations that reflect the other side as better and more advanced, as in the works of Hussein and Mahfouz. In Salih’s novels, all things related to religion, both positive and negative, are a natural part of the narrative landscape: an inherent feature of the depicted society.

Salih’s work does not suggest a monolithic or fixed image of believers and religion. Rather, his notion is a powerful contradiction of an established model of believers in contemporary Arabic literature. This characteristic permeates all Salih’s novels and short stories, beginning with *The Wedding of Zein*.

3 See John E. Davidson, “In Search of a Middle Point: The Origins of Oppression in Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*”, *Research in African Literatures*, 20:3 (1989), pp. 385-400; Yosif Tarawneh and Joseph John “Tayeb Salih and Freud: The Impact of Freudian Ideas on *Season of Migration to the North*”, *Arabica*, 35:3 (1988), pp. 328-349; Fatima Muhaidat and Lana Waleed, “The Psychological Plight of the Colonised in Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*”, *Higher Education of Social Science*, Vol. 14:1 (2018), pp. 93-102; Joseph John and Yosif Tawarneh, “Quest for Identity: The I-Thou Imbroglio in Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*”, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 8:2 (1986), pp. 161-177.

The Wedding of Zein: A happy marriage of community and religion

The main character and the crucial event in his narrative are given in the title of Salih's first novel. The action is set in the village of Wad Hamid, a topos of great importance to Salih, because it is homeland, his place of origin, and the locus of impending modernist change. The life of Zein, an unusual and noble young man from provincial Sudan who is immersed in the spirit of modernisation, forms the backbone of the plot. This backbone is enriched with scenes from the village's social life, whose set of secondary stories reveals a vibrant rural society, a community with a plural mentality, its identity framework, and the existential-ideological changes it undergoes.

In *The Wedding of Zein*, the provincial space is promoted to one of poetic and representative difference. This is in contrast to the description of the village in Taha Hussein's *The Days*; while Hussein establishes the province as a monolithic and exclusively retrograde space, Wad Hamid is a place of pluralism that abounds in colourful characters. As stated previously, issues of cultural metamorphosis, modernisation, and tradition have already been addressed in detail in the literature. This paper will therefore focus on the ideological framework of the community, and the position of religion within it.

In Wad Hamid, several ideological currents meet, collide and overlap. The imam and Sheikh Haneen are the stated representatives of the religious community in the village, the former representing the official religion and the latter the Sufi congregation. Less formal representatives are a group of middle-aged villagers who have gathered around Hajj Ibrahim, and those who follow Ibrahim Wad Taha and Mahjoub. The former is the father of Zein's eventual bride Ni'ma, who strives to maintain order and harmony in Wad Hamid; the latter two represent a rebellious current that wants change, and are labelled liberal and secular. The protagonist Zein is an ideological mirror, in which the distinctive features of these social groups are reflected and refracted.

Weirdness as a peculiarity, not an obstacle

Although Zein is unusual in appearance, behaviour and birth, Salih gives him a central position in the narrative. Zein stood out from the other children from the very beginning:

At first, as is well known, children meet life with screams. With Zein, however, it is recounted – and the authorities for this are his mother and the women

who attended his birth – that no sooner did he come into this world than he burst out laughing. And so it was throughout his life.⁴

Zein is also marked by unusual physical characteristics, with a face that is both comical and causes pity. His name means “decoration”, but he is unfortunately not attractive by any standards. He has only two teeth, one in the upper jaw and one in the lower.

Zein had an elongated face with prominent bones to his cheeks, his jaw, and under the eyes. His forehead was rounded and jutted out; his eyes were small and permanently bloodshot, their sockets deeply set in his face like two caverns. His face was completely hairless, with neither eyebrows nor eyelashes, and on attaining manhood no hair had sprouted on his chin or upper lip.

This face of his was supported by a long neck (among the nicknames given to Zein by the children was ‘the giraffe’) which stood on two powerful shoulders that straddled the rest of the body, forming a triangle. The two long arms were like those of a monkey, the hands coarse with extended fingers ending in long, sharp nails (Zein never pared them). His chest was concave, his back slightly hunched, while his legs were long and spindly like those of a crane. His feet were splayed and bore the traces of ancient scars (Zein disliked wearing shoes), and he remembered the story behind each one of them.⁵

Because of all this, Zein is considered a child or a neutral social entity, a position that enables him to permeate all the pores of his community. His benevolence, naivety and liminal social status allow him (and us) to hear the conversations of all the village’s groups, and thereby gain an in-depth insight into their workings. Because, unlike the other men in the village, Zein is allowed to be near women, his character reflects the overall plurality of the local perception of the world. This positioning has a price: Zein’s uniqueness is lost, except in the pragmatic sense, which casts him as a village entertainer, or a reliable mediator for marriage. From the perspective of his rural community, he is a man for everything but himself.

Despite this, Zein is determined to get married, and his choice is ultimately his cousin Ni’ma, who is considered the most beautiful and by far the smartest girl in the region. Ni’ma has already had several suitors, some of them wealthy and prominent, but refused them all, against her parents’ will, believing that her life’s mission required her to make extraordinary sacrifices. This shows itself to be her marriage with the poor and inconspicuous Zein: “She used to dream that one day she would make some great sacrifice, though she did not know what form it would take, and then she would experience the same strange sensation that came over her when reading the *Chapter of Mary*.”⁶

4 Tayeb Salih, *The Wedding of Zein And Other Stories*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (New York: New York Review Book, 2009), p. 36.

5 Salih, *The Wedding of Zein And Other Stories*, p. 37.

6 Salih, *The Wedding of Zein And Other Stories*, p. 49.

Eventually, Zein's and Ni'ma's unusual visions of life happily converge.

Zein, though, has another, more enigmatic side to his personality. Far from the eyes of the villagers and the hustle and bustle of daily life, he becomes an enigmatic hero to those on the fringes of society. So it makes his behaviour hard to understand. He has a unique way of dealing with such persons, and his care and attention touch them. When asked about his friendship with Zein, the lame Musa answers, with tears in his eyes: "Zein is always welcome! Zein is a good young man!" Others in the village slowly begin to accept the possibility that Zein is one of the mysteries of God's creation. Ali Abdalla Abbas states explicitly that Zein is "not a religious person", and places him exclusively in the "strange and mystical" space. An image of his spirituality or religiosity emerges in this hidden space,⁷ but has no founded argumentation in the novel's main text. Zein's mother says that her son is a saint, or a spiritual champion, a claim supported by his unique closeness to Sufi Sheikh Haneen. Unlike those who ridicule Zein, Sheikh Haneen always treats him with great affection, and calls him "Blessed." The special relationship is mutual: as much as Zein enjoys joking and laughing with the others in the village, he always stops to run and greet Haneen. Zein's behaviour is different in his company, more mature and dignified. When others ask him about his friendship with Haneen, Zein simply says: "Haneen is a blessed man!"⁸

Sheikh Haneen: The spiritual path as transformation and social deconstruction

Haneen is the most pious person in the village of Wad Hamid. He dedicates his life to obeying God, spending half the year in the village and the other half in the desert to the south, praying and fasting. Haneen's character is most often interpreted as that of a typical spiritual ascetic, with a mysterious way of life. His only possessions are a water jug and a prayer rug, and his best friend is Zein, whom he hugs and kisses on the head whenever he sees him. Abdalla Abbas points out that Zein's neighbourly love is the cause of Haneen's affection for him:

Zein is a "blessed one of God" first because he uses his privileged position in the village to become a love-messenger, a go-between, who brings young men and women together in a highly conservative society which does not allow members of the two sexes to mix freely ...⁹

7 See Ali Abdalla Abbas, "Notes on Tayeb Salih: *Season of Migration to the North* and *The Wedding of Zein*", *Sudan Notes and Records*, Vol. 55 (1974), p. 56.

8 al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ: ' *Urs al-Zayn*, p. 20.

9 Abbas, "Notes on Tayeb Salih", p. 56.

Zein's concern for the neglected and rejected is a reflection of Haneen's relationship with him. Their friendship grows into a spiritual awakening, in which the protagonist experiences a metamorphosis through Wad Hamid as a whole. Inspired by the life of his friend and teacher, Zein transforms from village entertainer to servant in need. He does so far from the eyes of the villagers, emulating the way Haneen spends most of his life.

The spiritual journey and transformation in which Haneen guides Zein is visible at the central point of the plot, when the latter angrily attacks Seif ad-Din, his archetypal rival. Zein belongs to the world of goodness, modesty and empathy, while Seif ad-Din is arrogant and violent, the debauched son of a local rich man. When Zein has a chance to kill Seif ad-Din, Haneen stops him:

Amidst their clamour they heard a snorting sound emanating from Seif ad-Din's throat and saw him striking out at the air with his long legs. 'He's dead, he's killed him,' shouted Mahjoub. But suddenly a new voice, that of Haneen, rose calm and serene above the hubbub: "Zein the blessed, may God be pleased with you." Zein released his grip and Seif ad-Din fell limply to the ground. The six men also dropped down in a heap, for Haneen's voice had surprised them and they had been taken unawares by Zein's sudden immobility – it was as though there had been a wall in front of them that had suddenly collapsed.¹⁰

This episode highlights Zein's ability to defeat his ego, shown through the power to eschew justified vengeance against the evil man who plunged an axe into his head without a second thought. It is precisely the spiritual path on which Haneen leads his best friend: the first stop is a charity that is not made public; the second a service to those no one wanted to see; and finally, most challenging of all, to give up the right to revenge. To reach that spiritual peak, Zein must numb his ego, and find the spiritual strength to recognise the potential for good in even the most zealous member of society.

At the end of this spiritual journey, Zein is rewarded: Sheikh Haneen blesses him, and tells him that his long-awaited (and seemingly impossible) dream will come true: "Tomorrow you will marry the best girl in the village."

The consequences of Zein's feat do not bring grace to him alone – the whole village enjoys the fruits of faith, because faith in God is impossible without faith in man. Zein's mercy warms the souls of many villagers, who rationally interpret the event in the context of the ambiguities and mysteries that surround Zein and Haneen. Their purely rational approach means that their world "simply cannot be understood by others in the village."¹¹

10 Salih, *The Wedding of Zein And Other Stories*, p. 55.

11 See Ghazoul, Ferial J. and Harlow, Barbara, *The View from Within: Writers and Critics on Contemporary Arabic Literature* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1994), p. 106.

Even the members of Mahjub's group admit that Sheikh Haneen performed a miracle by saving both Zein and Seif ad-Din. Inspired by his good deed, they pay homage to him and kiss his hand. Sheikh Haneen then blesses each of them, and the whole village. That blessing long remains in the collective memory of Wad Hamid, where after that day things changed for the better: "The village had never experienced such a fruitful and happy year, so it was soon called Haneen's year."¹² Even the government suddenly adopts far-reaching and positive measures for Wad Hamid: multiple substantial projects give residents good incomes over an extended period, and their children receive advanced education in new schools.

Hassan Wail notes that this feat of *homo religiosus* becomes so far-reaching that it allows for the overall rehabilitation of society.¹³ Haneen and Zein's spiritual achievement becomes universal welfare, in which the seemingly irreconcilable social forces of secular and religious, and poor and rich ultimately reconcile. An extreme example of this is the transformation of Seif ad-Din, who practically returns to life by uttering martyrdom. Death represented his materialistic phase in this vivid symbolism, while the return to faith was marked as life-giving, a new opportunity that belonged to the future, not the past. Religion, personified in Haneen and Zein, is not an anachronistic and restraining relic, but the empowerment of a social ideal. Seif ad-Din is again illustrative: after the confrontation with Zein, he turns to faith, asks forgiveness from his family, and regularly goes to the mosque to pray. Faith for him is an experience of self-awareness and action in society, and his transformation is not exclusively private: he renounces the right to control the family inheritance, and transfers it to his oldest uncle, until he can perform the duty properly. Here, too, we see Haneen's influence in the effort to achieve the supreme spiritual ideal of the individual, and the overcoming of arrogance, ego and selfishness.

The imam and the sterility of religious institutions

It is inconceivable to depict a Sudanese province without an official religious representative. In most such novels, this figure is the local imam, who formally represents the religion. Like in the novels of Taha Hussein and Naguib Mahfouz, in Salih's novel official religious structures are described as relics of an outdated system. These are rigid people, in their appearance, behaviour and speech.

12 Šaliḥ, 'Urs al-Zayn, p. 49.

13 See Hassan, Wail S., *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction*, Syracuse (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), p. 68.

The imam of Wad Hamid's mosque represents the formal religious structure. He is a talkative misanthrope, full of negative energy. The scope of his work and interactions is limited to the religious rituals of prayer and funerals.

He was, in the opinion of the village, an importunate man, a talker and a grumbler, and in their heart of hearts they used to despise him because they reckoned him to be practically the only one among them who had no definite work to do: no field to cultivate and no business to occupy him, but lived off teaching children for a set fee collected from every family – a fee grudgingly paid. In their minds he was connected with things they sometimes liked to forget: death, the after-life, prayers. In their minds there clung to his person something old and gloomy, like the strands of a spider's web; when his name was mentioned, they automatically recalled the death of someone dear to them or were put in mind of the dawn prayer in the depths of winter, the making of ablutions in cold water that brought cracks to one's feet, the leaving of a warm bed for the blast of the frost and the walk to the mosque in the half-light of dawn.¹⁴

One of the imam's few positive traits is that he is an ardent speaker with "an eloquent tongue", and "a great talker", but even this is overshadowed with the negative connotation that he is all talk, and does nothing concrete or inspiring. In addition, his eloquence would grow rapturously into uncontrolled criticism of the villagers during his Friday sermons:

He used to chastise them harshly in his sermons as though avenging himself on them with an outburst of words of exhortation about the Judgement Day and punishment, Heaven and Hell-fire, disobedience to God and turning to Him in repentance – words that passed down their throats like poison. Each would leave the mosque after Friday prayers boggle-eyed, feeling all of a sudden that the flow of life had come to a stop.¹⁵

The result was disastrous: the villagers would return from prayer depressed, their hope and joy diminished. Salih's emphasis of the imam's eloquence in opposition to his passivity and social numbness highlights the character's hypocrisy.

This hypocrisy is recognised by the Wad Hamid community, which is divided in its attitude towards the imam: "The village was made up of clearly divided camps in relation to the imam (they never called him by his name, for in their minds it was as though he were not a person but an institution)."¹⁶

Some of the older villagers, who performed their prayers and other religious duties with or without the imam, were respectful towards him. They respected him out of courtesy and veneration for the religious institution, and regularly donated money to the imam for his services during Eid, weddings, or other similar rites.

14 Salih, *The Wedding of Zein And Other Stories*, p. 73.

15 Salih, *The Wedding of Zein And Other Stories*, p. 74.

16 Salih, *The Wedding of Zein And Other Stories*, p. 75.

Another group openly opposed the imam. These were

... young men under twenty who were openly antagonistic to the imam. Some of them were students. Others had travelled abroad and returned, while yet others, feeling the flame of life scorching hot in their blood, paid no heed to a man whose business it was to remind people of death. This was the group of adventurers – among whom were those who drank wine in private and gathered secretly at “the Oasis” on the edge of the desert; it was the group, too, of the educated who had read about or heard of dialectical materialism, the mutinous, and the lazy who found it difficult to perform their ablutions at dawn in the depths of winter. Strange to say, the leader of this group was Ibrahim Wad Taha, a man in his seventies; but he was a poet.¹⁷

These were natural opponents of imams and religious institutions, because they were a secularised generation who saw the imam as a barrier to progress and development, according to their progressive-secular ideology.

Zein harboured animosity towards the imam most of the time:

Yet on the question of the Imam he made up a camp all on his own. He treated him with rudeness and if he met him approaching from afar he would leave the road clear for him. The Imam was perhaps the only person Zein hated; his mere presence at a gathering was enough to spoil Zein’s peace of mind and start him cursing and shouting. The Imam would react to Zein’s outbursts with dignity, sometimes saying that people had spoiled Zein by treating him as someone unusual and that to regard him as a holy person was a lot of rubbish, that if only he had been brought up properly he would have grown up as normal as anyone else.¹⁸

But even the imam changes after Zein’s spiritual zenith, which is the critical event in both the village and the novel. He attends the celebration, looks enchantingly at the women, approaches and reconciles with Zein, and conducts the marriage ceremony.

The character of Ni’ma is significant for many reasons, and deserves separate analysis. She is a strong female character, which is meaningful because she is also highly religious. Ni’ma outgrows the conventional perception of a woman in her situation, and although she is so beautiful that the villagers turn their heads to look at her, she pays no attention to their stares.

She does this uniquely, by immersing herself in tradition. Ni’ma is committed to learning the Qur’an, in which she finds the two basic drivers of her life: to continually expand her knowledge, and to sacrifice herself for the common good. She

17 Salih, *The Wedding of Zein And Other Stories*, p. 75.

18 Salih, *The Wedding of Zein And Other Stories*, p. 78.

even makes her father enrol in school, so that he can study the Qur'an too, and she ultimately gives her beauty to Zein, the one who performs the noblest deeds.

Zein's spiritual evolution makes Salih's novel a bildungsroman, whose focus is the maturation of a complex character. Zein's wife Ni'ma occupies a special place, because she is a female representative of the religious experience: an excellent example of *religiosa feminina* in the modern Arabic novel. Ni'ma's main characteristics are her love, open-mindedness and piety. Ni'ma makes a real difference in her community, because she looks at the world around her almost entirely from the perspective of the Holy Book and draws parallels between the two, especially concerning the Qur'anic chapter Maryam. The character of Ni'ma allows a more detailed analysis of the female religious and spiritual experience, and through her and other characters in his novels, Salih changes the established matrix of presentation and opens new interpretive possibilities.

In *The Wedding of Zein*, Salih leaves room for change in his representation of the formal religious institution. This is not the case in the novels of Hussein and Mahfouz, in which the impairment of the formal (and informal) *homo religiosus* necessarily worsens. In Salih's novels, the efforts of other religious figures transform the anachronism, distastefulness and sterility of the formal religious representatives. Such characters are those with deep spiritual upbringings, like Haneen, or those who have mastered their ego, like Zein, or who are sincerely devoted to the divine message, like Ni'ma. In this way, the principle of dynamics overcomes the established stereotypical presentation of religion and *homo religiosus*.

Season of Migration to the North: Change and Deconstruction in the Religious Imagology of Tayeb Salih

In reference to his novels *The Wedding of Zein* and *Season of Migration to the North*, Tayeb Salih said in an interview: "I started the *Season* where I finished Zein's wedding!"¹⁹ The author's position reveals that the issue of the perception of religion deepens in *Season of Migration to the North*.

The novel tells the story of two characters: Mustafa Sa'eed and an unnamed narrator. Both characters were born in Sudan and educated in England, and the latter has just returned from his studies. He describes the experience of re-adapting to his poor southern homeland, after studying in an affluent northern centre of power. Mustafa Sa'eed occupies a unique place in his life as the two have had similar experiences, which makes it easy for the narrator to identify with his older

19 Muḥammad Šāhin, *Taḥawwulāt al-šawq fī mawsim al-ḥiğra ilā al-šimāl* (Bayrūt: al-Mu'asasa al-'arabiyya li al-dirāsāt wa al-našr, 1993), p. 197.

compatriot. Most of the plot is set in the village of Wad Hamid, which, although it is relatively traditional, contains constant reminders of impending modernity: mechanical pumps that irrigate agricultural land, and frequent trains to Khartoum, where the narrator lives.

Season of Migration to the North is told mostly through intense images of the narrator's experience. In a series of episodes that feature the hybrid experience of the new Sudanese generation in a period of gradual transition, Mustafa Sa'eed dies, and the narrator continues to struggle with aporia related to the identity and existence of himself and his community. Salih masterfully depicts the sequences of events and intense experiences of his heroes, combining real and imaginary, and past and present.

The presentation of religious experience is also transmitted through at least three groups. As the main protagonists, the narrator and Mustafa Sa'eed are the most prominent representatives of the religious experience. In contrast, the third religious representative is found within the village's traditional indigenous community, and includes the narrator's grandfather and the cruel Wad Rayes. Through this community, Salih portrays the heterogeneous nature of religion and tradition in provincial Sudan. The indigenous community is mainly composed of characters who consider religion an inseparable part of their identity. Their attitude towards it, though, varies from formal commitment, as in *The Wedding of Zein*, to utter negligence. Bint Mahjoub has a special place in the group, and through her the author again emphasises the female experience and perception of the world. This idea of a group of characters that are a heterogeneous representation of tradition and religion is constant in Salih's novels, from *The Wedding of Zein*, through *Season of Migration to the North*, to *Bandarshah*. In *Season of Migration to the North*, the focus of the analysis of *homo religiosus* is on the main characters: the narrator and Mustafa Sa'eed.

Mustafa Sa'eed: The impossibility of secular and religious puritanism

Mustafa Sa'eed represents the first Sudanese generation to be exposed to colonial rule since childhood. Sa'eed was born in 1898, when Great Britain broke the resistance of the Sudanese, and placed the country under colonial control. Salih describes how Sa'eed is allowed to go to school early in his childhood: the Empire educates him in Cairo, and then in London, where he completes his education and gets a job in economics. He then seeks to assimilate English culture, and absorbs all that is imperial; he gains the respect of the imperial elite, but the project of his cultural

reevaluation collapses at its peak. The formal reason for this is Sa'eed's numerous affairs with British women, in which he hides in a futile attempt to erase his previous identity. Sa'eed has an insatiable desire to win over these women who, in most cases, commit suicide shortly after spending the night with him. Eventually, at the narrative's climax, he kills his wife Jean Morris, and is sentenced to seven years in prison. In doing so, Sa'eed crosses the line: from being the most brilliant example of colonial civilisation, he becomes the primitive barbarian from the East.

After serving his sentence, Sa'eed returns to Sudan and settles in Wad Hamid. He lives the simple life of a devoted peasant, who hides his recent past. Unable to decontaminate his colonial experience, Sa'eed commits suicide several years later.

Sa'eed's fundamental problem is the impossibility of achieving a pure identity, and as a result cultural (de)contamination and hybridity are common themes in analyses of this novel.²⁰ Salih draws our attention to the emergence of a new religious representative in the narrative: a character who returns to his original tradition and religion, after reaching the peak of the advanced modern world. In this context, Mustafa Sa'eed's path is the opposite of that of the protagonist in Taha Hussein's *The Days*. The young hero of Hussein's autobiographical trilogy survives the misfortunes of provincial Egypt to reach the bright, almost ideal areas of Paris that were the symbol of the progressive West at the time. Sa'eed experiences the same misfortunes, with much more devastating consequences, when he returns from the ideal space of a brave new secular world. The contrasts and clashes of the narrative images in these significant Arabic novels impart valuable messages.

In Salih's narrative, the world is complete in an ideological sense: the white man of the secular West rules Sudan and civilises it. The image of paradise is evident, even as troubles loom within it. After a brilliant career, Mustafa Sa'eed is a failure in the project of secularising the Arab man. In the foreground of Salih's narration of Sa'eed remains an established myth in Arabic literature about the irresistible call of the modern and advanced world (the North), whose goal is achieved through Oriental and secular methods of education. This is a theme in the novels of Haykal, Hussein, Mahfouz and others, but Salih's novelty is that he introduces the process in reverse: the hero (Mustafa Sa'eed) returns from "the centre of the things", to use Dos Passos' words.

The return of religion and spirituality is, from Salih's perspective, a complex process of reflection that arises from living at the centre of materialism and secular ideology. When he realises it is impossible to achieve the ideal of a pure identity, to belong to an exclusive puritan culture, Sa'eed returns to his homeland. In provincial Sudan he tries to correct his thinking, and ultimately does not make the same mistake: he gives up the idea of a pure identity. This is indicated by the

20 See 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*, 28:3 (1997), pp. 128-140.

library filled with works by Western authors, which Sa'eed keeps in his country house. The concepts of cultural hybridity and ideological pluralism symbolised in Sa'eed's library are realised when the hero returns to a spiritual way of life, but his second life in this religious-traditional reconstruction still fails. The constant reinventions and suppression of cultural norms within Sa'eed create a Frankenstein-like palimpsest of identity. After his early infection with, and infusion of, imperialism, Sa'eed's return to the originality and naturalness of his homeland is not possible. He becomes Othello, driven by disciplinary intrigues to kill his own wife, and then himself. That artificial seed proves fatal during Sa'eed's rehabilitation, and Salih uses this to show that radical secularisation has not only become a "natural process", but is self-destructive and fatally contaminating.

The character of Mustafa Sa'eed is a dynamic and complex rendering of *homo religiosus*. Sa'eed's process of becoming a religious man takes a contrasting trajectory with that of the established ideological matrix, which removes him from the failed space of the south and implants him in the advanced West. In such a way, the effect of secularisation is perfected. Salih's novel describes an opposite ideological direction, with all the complexities that brings. In the example of Mustafa Sa'eed, this direction is not black and white and predictable, as it is in many earlier Arabic novels. Sa'eed's return to religion fails for several reasons, and unlike Hussein's *The Days, Season of Migration to the North* does not have a happy ending. In a similar way, and perhaps more damagingly, the process of secularisation ends when Sa'eed loses the battle to reconcile the divergent elements of his identity and upbringing. Despite this loss, the struggle to reconcile the parallel forces of secular and religious identity remains the central motif of the novel, and the narrator's experience in that struggle is as crucial as Mustafa Sa'eed's.

The narrator: The (im)possibility of the medial position

The narrator's life story in *Season of Migration to the North* is similar to that of Mustafa Sa'eed, and to that of Salih himself. The narrator is educated in England but returns to Sudan, where he wants to get a job, start a family and move forward.

The narrator takes a medial position from the very beginning, and does not belong to the typical conservative current framed by provincial views. He understands the uniform views of progressives and traditionalists, because he shares both experiences. His devotion to his village, family and religion is unquestionable, and he is not crucially defined by his education in England.

He knows that scientific progress and cultural openness are necessary for survival in the modern world, but is deeply concerned about a radical lecture

on one of these two ideologies. An attempt to resolve this aporia is at the novel's thematic core.

As he observes his home village and contemplates the inevitable changes, the narrator pays serious attention to Mustafa Sa'eed, and conveys the details of his life meticulously. By gradually revealing Sa'eed's personality, the narrator slowly begins to identify with him, which leads the latter to the idea of ending his life in the same way as the former. During a symbolic swim to the North, however, the narrator changes his mind, and calls for help at the last moment.

The problems raised by being medial are a fundamental determinant of the novel's protagonist. The narrator often puts himself in a mediating position between the fragility of identity and the crisis of modernisation. This difficult period still pulses in the Arab world, and almost exclusively divides its society into advanced, Westernised, and progressive, versus backward, traditional and regressive. The narrator inhabits the middle of this ideological divide, and realises that either approach to life is fatal. With Sa'eed as his example, the narrator is reluctant to give up his belief, and is firm in his mind that there is a place between traditionalism and modernism. His narration is predominantly a mediation between the dichotomies of homeland and foreign land, province and metropolis, us and them, South and North, margin and centre, spirituality and materialism.

Accordingly, fluctuations, unresolvedness and feelings of floating prevail in the novel, and the narrator's mission is to point this out from his medial position. Until the end, the narrator "floats" through events, hoping he will find a golden middle point. He is in constant fluctuation among the groups in Wad Hamid (from the indigenous community to his grandfather, to Bint Mahjub, to Mustafa Sa'eed and his wife), but does not make a final judgment on any. In his perception, they are all part of an ideological and cultural mosaic that should survive in harmony, despite their myriad unpleasant traits and inappropriate behaviours. The novel ends accordingly, in fluctuation and the never-ending effort of the hero.

The narrator's behaviour is a reflection of his spiritual state, but also of his ideological perspective. *Homo religiosus*, through the narrator's example, is placed in a medial position, between worlds and ideologies. From Salih's perspective, the modern believer is not fixed: he is not in a superior position, as the traditionalist current proclaims, but neither is he the amorphous model of impairment and cultural discomfort, as progressive secularism defines him. His spiritual struggle is realised through the constant effort to preserve the medial space of possibility, and the spirit of negotiation between social forces. The world is in a constant state of either survival or dismissal, continuation or interruption, staying in or leaving the homeland, in which the question of revolution or evolution looms large. These are the most common images and most accessible choices with which to

trace the world in numerous discourses, but Salih shows us that taking a pre-determined position is not the solution. In the religious context, only the struggle is of definite value. This involves constant re-examination of one's own presupposed values, the exclusion of cancel culture, and the placement of radical demands on oneself and the world. The narrator succeeds in this, no matter how tragic his end may seem, and it is this success that separates him from Mustafa Sa'eed.

Joseph John and Yosif Tarawneh note, however, that the life of Mustafa Sa'eed is marked by "egotistic ambition", which leads him "on a reckless course of self-destruction"²¹. In the context of previous considerations, this highlights the ultimate achievements of the paradigm of radical secularisation under the auspices of the colonial-imperial project. Salih speaks somewhat ominously about the impossibility of ideological decontamination after a comprehensive spiritual and identity articulation process. As much as Mustafa Sa'eed provokes pessimism, the narrator is an effective counterbalance. The decision to "choose life" – his first free choice as a man – promises to lead him to a future enriched by participation in the life of others. The narrator's reason for choosing life – "because there are a few people I want to stay with for the longest possible time and because I have duties to discharge"²² – implies a newly gained moral enlightenment, an Other-rather than self-directed consciousness, a mature altruism that has replaced the naive idealism of his earlier days. The narrator has not only found himself, he has also found his telos – his meaning and purpose in life. The world has changed, and so has he, but life is "good" because love has been restored, faith found, hope gained, and there is ground under his feet – "the ground of all the earth".²³ John and Tarawneh are well aware of this vital symbolism of the narrator, who "has found a teleological home in an enduring sense of fellowship with all men everywhere".²⁴ This is the universalist attitude towards the world around him, but primarily towards himself and others, which is emphasised in the holy books. Achieving such an ultimate (spiritual) goal requires constant struggle, and does not guarantee results. The last picture of the narrator swimming in the rapids of the mighty Nile can be viewed as part of Salih's "objective correlation", or as his vision of *homo religiosus* in the 20th century.

A more detailed insight into the complex world of *homo religiosus*' spiritual struggle is found in Youssef Ziedan's novel *Azazeel*, which is the subject of the next part of this paper.

21 John, Joseph and Tarawneh, Youssef, "Quest for Identity: The I-Thou Imbroglia in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 8:2 (1986), p. 176.

22 al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ, *Mawsim al-ḥiğra ilā šimāl* (al-Qāhira: Dār al-'ayn, 2004), p. 168

23 Ṣāliḥ, *Mawsim al-ḥiğra ilā šimāl*, p. 168.

24 Ṣāliḥ, *Mawsim al-ḥiğra ilā šimāl*, p. 168.

Youssef Ziedan and the perception of faith as a constant struggle

In 2009, eminent Egyptian novelist Youssef Ziedan won the International Prize for Arabic Prose (IPAF), better known as the “Arabic Booker”, for his iconic novel *Azazeel*. The plot is set in the turbulent period of Christianity’s consolidation, during the ideological transformation of the Roman Empire. The main character, Egyptian monk Hypa, is a witness to the dogmatic cacophony of that time, which he conveys on parchment. Centuries later, his writings are “resurrected” in *Azazeel*. The novel’s chronotope and secondary topics (related to the nature of the divine logos soon after publication) are its prominent places: i.e., the reason for its numerous controversies. *Azazeel*’s thematic backbone is the life story of Hypa, which reflects the diversity of his spiritual growth. Hypa writes about his early childhood and his first memories of the south of Egypt and the Akhmim Temple, and takes the reader on a journey through his Stations of the Cross, from the ancient city of Aswan through Alexandria, Mount Sinai and Jerusalem, all the way to Aleppo and Antioch. Hypa presents his experiences of these cities, and numerous monasteries, through a collection of 5th-century parchments written in Syriac, discovered in Syria in the late 20th century, and translated into Arabic in 2004, as explained in detail in the translator’s prologue at the beginning of the novel. The text is a notable historical bildungsroman, through which we learn the details of the spiritual path and unusual life of the monk Hypa, and that preserves “a record of a remarkable career, an unintended history of the events of his troubled life and the vicissitudes of the turbulent age in which he lived”.²⁵ Through this layered individual biography, Ziedan presents the quintessential example of *homo religiosus*. The experience of faith as the primary theme predictably provoked attacks and condemnations of *Azazeel* from both literary and religious spheres, especially from Coptic Church officials who objected to its allegedly deliberate distortion of the “historic truths of Christianity”.²⁶

As in other earlier cases of this kind, these reactions neglected the novel’s theme, and the complexities of a profoundly conscious and conscientious individual, torn by inner doubts and confusion on the eve of a new world order.

25 Youssef Ziedan, *Azazeel*, trans. Jonathan Wright (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), p. 8.

26 For more about Coptic views of the novel and its controversies, see: Al-’Anbā’ Bīshūy, *al-Radd ‘ala al-buhtān fī Riwāya ‘Azāzil* (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Anṭūn, 2009); ‘Abd al-Masīḥ Basīṭ, *Riwāya ‘Azāzil: Hal hiya al-ġahl bi al-tārīḥ am tazwīr li al-tārīḥ?* (al-Qāhira: Qism al-Lāhūt al-difā’ī, 2009); Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?”, *Critical Inquiry* 35:4 (2009).

Homo religiosus and the faces of the deceptive ego

One of the fundamental issues in the interpretation and reception of *Azazeel* lies in analyses of Hypa's nuanced character: the novel is an intense self-perception, framed in the images of his (geographical and spiritual) homeland.

The narrative episodes are transversals of Hypa's spirituality, through which we discover his identity. His spiritual path is presented in its wholeness; when he speaks about himself, he highlights his unhappy childhood, in which he witnessed the murder of his father and the remarriage of his mother, who "had betrayed his father to her relatives, the ignorant Christians."²⁷ Hypa's first memories are deeply immersed in religious experiences, during a period of ideological change in Egypt.

After the betrayal and murder of his father, driven by profoundly religious motives, Hypa wanders from a small monastery in Asyut and a deacon from Qus, to his uncle in Nag Hammadi, through the Akhmim church, to Alexandria and Jerusalem and Aleppo. Apart from those in his first memories, all the places Hypa visits are religiously marked.²⁸ In this way, Ziedan imparts an experience of *homo religiosus* that is primarily formed within a familiar or domestic circle.

Through his travels, the young monk persistently seeks knowledge, and tries to dispel his spiritual confusion and the forces of lust. Deep prayers often mark his memories:

My Lord, do You hear me? I am Your faithful servant, the perplexed, Hypa the monk, Hypa the physician, Hypa the stranger as people call me in my land of exile. And You alone, my Lord, know my true name, You and those in my first country, which witnessed my birth. Would that I had never been born ...²⁹

Hypa's prayers reveal a sincerely spiritualised person, who is in constant inner turmoil. This believer does not present himself as a blissful individual or a monolithic identity, but as a ruined soul in constant search of cognitive serenity. *Homo religiosus* has been a conscientious believer since the beginning of the novel, and is deeply confused by the world around him. He feels like a stranger and an exile, to the point that he does not know his real name. The tone of nihilism in his prayers is understandable, and raises intertextual references to holy books, and the spiritual states of religious role models such as Moses, Mary or Job. In this prayer, Hypa explains:

27 Ziedan, *Azazeel*, p. 52.

28 For analyses of the space in the novel *Azazeel* see: Sally Gomaa, "The Uses of Geography in Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel*", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 39:4 (2017), pp. 957-972; Ahmad M. S. Abu Baker, "Natural Objects in Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel*: An Environmental Perspective", *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 5:3 (2016), pp. 72-85

29 Ziedan, *Azazeel*, p. 11.

But I am not a saint: I am a physician and a poet who dresses as a monk, whose heart is filled with love for the universe and who expects to pass the remaining years of his life without sin, so that his unblemished soul can ascend to the heavens where the light of divine glory shines. Those were the limits of my life ...³⁰

Here, the world of *homo religiosus* is identical to the world of an “ordinary” man: before Hypa lie the traps of bodily lust and spiritual discord. As Saba Mahmood points out:

It is no accident that Hypa’s struggle to be an ascetic monk is fraught with the calling of the flesh, a calling that he both appreciates and resents, battling its force while acknowledging the succor it provides for his soul ...³¹

A pluralistic image of spiritual role models

The completion of Hypa as *homo religiosus* is achieved through memories of his thorny life’s path, and through his relationship with his religious teachers, or spiritual fathers, Bishop Cyril of Alexandria and Bishop Nestorius of Antioch. Hypatia, a philosopher of Neoplatonic provenance, is also necessary for Hypa’s spiritual evolution. While the latter may be an unconventional element of *homo religiosus*’ maturation, Hypatia is so important to the protagonist that he names himself after her.

Cyril: Formal teacher, or autarch of formal religion?

Saint Cyril of Alexandria (375-444), Patriarch of Alexandria and papal legate to the Council of Ephesus (431), is the young monk’s formal teacher and role model. The reader has a central insight into his character through Hypa’s impressions, when he first encounters the patriarch during a sermon.

The bishop’s awesome aspect stunned and amazed me. It was the first time I had seen him, and after that for the next two years I would see him every Sunday morning without exception. I also saw him the day of the private meeting, which I will relate if the occasion arises to speak of it. When I saw the bishop for the first

30 Ziedan, *Azazeel*, p. 163.

31 Saba Mahmood, “Azazeel and the Politics of Historical Fiction in Egypt”, *Comparative Literature*, 65:3 (2013), p. 279.

time I was astonished, because he looked down on us from a pulpit with walls covered in gilt. That was just one level, and above it there was an enormous wooden cross holding a statue of Jesus made of coloured plaster. From the forehead, hands and feet of the crucified Christ flowed blood coloured bright red. I looked at the ragged piece of cloth on the statue of Jesus, then at the bishop's embroidered robe. Jesus's clothes were old rags, torn at the chest and most of the limbs, while the bishop's clothes were embellished with gold thread all over, so that his face was hardly visible. Jesus's hands were free of the baubles of our world, while the bishop held what I think was a sceptre made of pure gold, judging from how brightly it shone. On his head Jesus had his crown of thorns, while the bishop had on his head the bright gold crown of a bishop. Jesus seemed resigned as he assented to sacrifice himself on the cross of redemption. Cyril seemed intent on imposing his will on the heavens and the earth.³²

This shows that Hypa is not thrilled on the occasion of the long-awaited meeting with his religious leader: rather it confusion in the soul of the young believer, who thirsts for the truth.

As Cyril stands beneath the figure of Christ, he differs from him almost entirely in terms of the most sacred symbol of his faith. Jesus is a humble shepherd, surrounded by his people; Cyril stands high above the other believers, with a shining staff in his hand. Jesus' robe is modest, while Cyril is wrapped in gold, and wears a crown. Here, the image of the patriarch is not equal to the exemplariness of Jesus.

Cyril is also the antithesis of Christ's teaching and spiritual vision, a contradiction that is apparent in the way the patriarch speaks. The tone of the bishop's address is high, and in constant tension. His speech is closer to a military shout than a solemn act of Eucharistic celebration. In one of his sermons, Cyril calls for relentless resistance and violence against all those who refuse to join him, be they adherents to the Egyptian religion, Jews, philosophers or Christians who follow the patriarch Antioch. Unlike Jesus, Cyril's mission on earth is not peace, but war and extermination. The nightmarish atmosphere at the heart of his religious institution throws Hypa into deep despair, and the young monk is forced to continue his search for spiritual consolation and knowledge.

Nestorius: A genuine role model on the spiritual path

Hypa's perseverance on this path takes him to Jerusalem, and Bishop Nestorius. Their first encounter also takes place during a sermon, where Hypa immediately notices the differences between Nestorius and Cyril: during the sermon, Nestorius sits with his congregation and monks, and listens carefully to them as brothers.

³² Ziedan, *Azazel*, p. 112.

His clothes are no different from those of the other believers. Even at this first meeting, Hypa is impressed:

His figure showed dignity and genuine goodness. His wide eyes were of a colour which blended green and honey, full of curiosity and intelligence. His white face was slightly flushed and his neat beard was pleasantly blond, with some grey hair which added to his radiance. His manner had a divine serenity which many monks lack, both young and old.³³

After this first meeting, Hypa is anxious to talk to Nestorius again, and sees the bishop's gatherings as unique spiritual festivals. In them, he realises that those whom Alexandria considered evil heretics and lost followers of the wicked, Nestorius sees as brothers in thought and knowledge. While Cyril considers the Neoplatonists of the time to be personifications of Satan, Nestorius reads their writings, respects their contribution, and considers them enlightened. Nestorius sharply opposes Cyril's war cries, and insists on faith as the ultimate expression of kindness and love for people and the world:

Killing people in the name of religion does not make it religious. It was this earthly world that Theophilus inherited and later bequeathed to his nephew Cyril. Don't confuse matters, my son, for those are people of power, not people of faith, people of profane cruelty, not of divine love.³⁴

A dichotomy exists between Hypa's formal religious leader, Cyril, and his newly-discovered spiritual leader, Nestorius. From it grow two opposing perceptions of the world within the same religion: Cyril believes that religion is about violence and relentless struggle, while Nestorius understands faith as a universal kindness to all around him. Hypa is torn between these contrasting perceptions, and at the end of the novel he realises that Cyril's violence has emerged victorious, when Nestorius is overthrown and expelled. Hypa finds a solution in escape from the world, and is eventually ordained in a monastery near Aleppo.

Hypatia: The Other as the complement of faith

In search of answers to calm his soul and complete his knowledge, Hypa attends gatherings held by Hypatia, a prominent 5th-century philosopher and mathematician in Alexandria. Although the Alexandrian church labels Hypatia's followers perverted souls and worshippers of the antichrist, Hypa wants to hear her teachings. He meets Hypatia for the first time in the Alexandrian amphitheatre, and records his impressions:

³³ Ziedan, *Azazeel*, p. 30.

³⁴ Ziedan, *Azazeel*, p. 142.

Hypatia. When I write her name now, I can almost see her in front of me, standing on the platform in the large hall like a celestial being who had descended to earth from the mind of gods to bring them a divine message of compassion. Hypatia had what I had always imagined to be the appearance of Jesus the Messiah, combining grace with majesty. Her limpid eyes were slightly blue and grey. Her forehead was broad and radiated a heavenly light. Her flowing gown and her bearing had a dignity to match the aura which surrounds deities. From what luminous element was this woman created? She was different from other women, and if it was the God Khnum who shapes men's bodies, then from what fine clay did he shape her, and with what heavenly essence did he mould her?³⁵

Hypa's fascination is evident in his description of the famous philosopher. Her appearance and words fill the soul of the young monk to such an extent that he identifies her with Jesus himself, thereby comparing Hypatia to the highest ideal in Christianity. She is very close to her audience, and grateful to all those in the conversation. Hypatia's vision is inclusive and universal: she believes that "understanding is, in fact, an intellectual process, it is also a spiritual process, because the truths we arrive at through logic and mathematics unless we feel them with our souls, will remain raw facts, and we will fall short of grasping how magnificent it is that we perceive them."³⁶

This holistic vision of the world is the opposite that of Cyril, who is only interested in naked political or secular power. Hypatia is therefore defeated and publicly burned in a savage campaign of Cyril's proselytising horde. This act shakes the protagonist to such an extent that he leaves his homeland forever. Before departing, he takes a new name (Hypa) in memory of his teacher, or "Jesus' sister" as he describes her in his memoir.

The demonic as an inseparable part of religious identity

The crucial determinant in Hypa's spiritual maturation into a distinct *homo religiosus* is hidden deep in his soul. While his life experience and his expected and unexpected teachers of faith essentially define the monk's spiritual path, the key to his self-knowledge is within himself all along. During his vivid recollections, Hypa frequently addresses the novel's eponymous spiritual interlocutor. At the opening, Ziedan quotes the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad: "Each of you has your own devil, even myself. But Allah helped me, so the devil became obedient".³⁷

35 Ziedan, *Azazeel*, p. 104.

36 Ziedan, *Azazeel*, p. 105.

37 *Sahih Muslim*, „Characteristics of the Day of Judgment, Paradise, and Hell“, Book 52, Hadith 62.

Azazel usually appears when Hypa is alone, and as a result we get to know him through mystical dialogues:

“Azazel, you’ve come!”

“Hypa, I’ve told you many times that I don’t come and go. It’s you who conjures me when you want to, because I come from within you and through you. I spring up when you want me to shape your dream, or spread the carpet of your imagination or stir up for you memories you have buried. I am the bearer of your burdens, your delusions and your misfortunes. I am the one you cannot do without, and nor can anyone else.”³⁸

At the very beginning, Hypa sees Azazel in the classic way, as a terrible demonic being who constantly haunts the believer. In his early descriptions, Azazel, in addition to bearing one of the devil’s names, represents the constant presence of the wicked in humankind, which is an inseparable part of the self. Later, Hypa questions the nature of this ever-present being of deception and evil, and in one of their last conversations asks him directly: “Who are you?”

Azazel answers:

“Don’t you recognise me, really?”

The mysterious presence had started to speak and when it spoke its face faded and lost its features, which before had vacillated between one face and another. I did not know what to say in response, but I was no longer afraid of having it around me.

“I’m not around you, Hypa. I’m inside you.”³⁹

Azazel tells Hypa that he will only find the answer if he thinks carefully about himself. The latter’s subsequent discovery is frightening:

This time the voice was a clearly articulated whisper, then the features of the face appeared again, clearer and more distinct. It looked like me and the voice was my voice. This is another me, other than me, trapped inside me.⁴⁰

Azazel’s voice and facial features are identical to Hypa’s: Azazel is, in fact, the monk’s undiscovered or repressed self. With this discovery, the reason for the novel’s title becomes clear. Hypa’s doubts and confusion stem, for the most part, from his repressed self, and his stubbornness keeps the tension throughout. Hypa’s constant search entirely represents the core of *homo religiosus*, and the ultimate immersion of the protagonist in himself proves to be a crucial moment in his spiritual experience.

To find himself, Hypa needs to destroy the external structures that define his spirituality: his disappointment in Cyril, the defeat of Nestorius and the murder of Hypatia. Only great crises can acquaint us with our ultimate spiritual and

38 Ziedan, *Azazel*, p. 77.

39 Ziedan, *Azazel*, pp. 268-269.

40 Ziedan, *Azazel*, p. 269.

physical potentials, and Hypa's peak of faith is reached in the hour of his supreme discomfort. Ziedan portrays this uneasiness as an encounter with oneself, with the potential of evil being part of the personality rather than an external religious device. He demonstrates this at the novel's close, when Hypa confronts the devil's archetypal promise of immortality, which he resolutely rejects. Reconciled with his demon, but not obedient to diabolic promises, Hypa achieves his much-desired completeness and spiritual maturity. The final symbol is the whiteness of the blank page that Hypa leaves behind. Ziedan, through the character of Hypa, thereby offers one of the most detailed understandings of *homo religiosus* in contemporary Arabic literature.

Conclusion

Through the characters of his novels, Tayeb Salih presents a multidimensional image of *homo religiosus*, and thereby crucially abolishes the monolithic descriptions of the religious phenomenon in most preceding novels. *The Wedding of Zein* and *Season of Migration to the North* contain multiple variants of *homo religiosus*, from traditionalists and formal religious representatives, through spiritual hermits and Sufis to modern Sudanese who are the result of an ideological colonial experiment. The essence of Salih's distinctive contribution to the literary representation is reflected in the dynamisation of the image of not only *homo religiosus*, but of the world in general. Not all indigenous characters in Salih's novels are automatically anachronistic and committed to the faith, just as his youth are not exclusively progressive and secular. Salih also depicts strange types of *homo religiosus*, such as the believer *in reverse* like Mustafa Sa'eed, and the narrator, who is an irreconcilable inhabitant of the amorphous middle ground. The faith and life of *homo religiosus* is a turbulent and dynamic space, in which only the constant struggle for integrity is certain.

Youssef Ziedan presents this struggle in more detail, on the canvas of ancient history. Ziedan's merit is that he relocates the problem of *homo religiosus* from a hitherto predominantly Muslim perspective, and tells the story of a young 5th-century Christian monk's search for spiritual maturity. Ziedan emphasises that the temptations of *homo religiosus* are the same in all religions, and include the deconstruction of formal religious authorities, the redefinition of the Other, and the painful but redemptive acceptance of the fullness of spiritual identity. The latter implies the dark side of the religious experience, where Azazel resides as an integral part of the believer's personality.

Young and Hassan believe that literature in general, and in particular "Middle East Studies remains the only field equipped to provide the kind of nuanced

knowledge of Muslim societies and of Islamic history that can provide alternative theoretical knowledge and serve as a basis for an informed postcolonial perspective at the present time".⁴¹ Arabic literature expands this scope, and deepens the insight into the sophisticated field of all denominations of religious experience, and in that sense simultaneously and holistically deconstructs and completes the artistic and social representations of *homo religiosus*.

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Dekonstruiranje mita o invalidnosti: pluralistički prikazi *homo religiosus* u arapskom romanu

Sažetak

Fokus ovog članka je percepcija religijskih likova i motiva u savremenom arapskom romanu. Religijski likovi u arapskom romanu predstavljani su na različite načine. U formativnoj fazi romana *homo religiosus* je predstavlja kao fiksno mjesto nazadnosti i moralne korupcije. Ovaj se stereotip formirao decenijama i potpuno je zanemario svjet ljudi čija je ideologija poražena. Nepravedna jednodimenzionalnost ovakvih

likova mijenja se krajem šezdesetih godina dvadesetog stoljeća. Sudanski autor Tajib Salih u svojim romanima *Zejnova svadba* i *Vrijeme seobe na sjever* mnogostruko dekonstruira stereotipnu monolitnost religijskih likova. Salih ne samo da otvara mogućnost *homo religiosus*-u da bude poput ostalih ljudi, nego i ukazuje na šarolikost i dubinu svijeta kod likova religijske provenijencije. Salihov koncept „otvaranja svjetova“ će se maksimizirati kod egipatskog pisca Jusufa Zejdana. Njegov roman *Azazeel* svojevrsan je *bildungsroman* religijskog junaka u kršćanskoj perspektivi. Zejdan donosi u svom romanu detaljan uvid u sva duhovna previranja, paradokse i kušnje mladog monaha koji traga za istinskim znanjem.

Ključne riječi: arapski roman, *homo religiosus*, religija, duhovni put, Tajib Salih, Jusuf Zejdan