

Tayeb al-Salih was born in 1925 in northern Sudan. He is one of the Arab world's most celebrated novelists, who excelled at portraying characters torn between east and west. He pursued graduate studies in the UK and lived in various European and Arab capitals, rarely returning home. His works reflected the Arab and African quest for identity, especially in the period of the 1960s. His 1966 masterpiece, *Season of Migration to the North*, depicts this conflicted identity between being Arab and African, but also between the rural and urban lifestyles. Salih also wrote *The Wedding of Zein* (1969) which was made into a movie. He died in February 2009. The following excerpt from his most famous novel depicts the narrator's struggle in the river as he tries to reconcile his Western education with Sudanese traditions.

FROM SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH

TAYEB AL-SALIH

I entered the water as naked as when my mother bore me. When I first touched the cold water I felt a shudder go through me, then the shudder was transformed into a sensation of wakefulness. The river was not in full spate as during the days of the flooding nor yet was it at its lowest level. I had put out the candles and locked the door of the room and that of the courtyard without doing anything. Another fire would not have done any good. I left him talking and went out. I did not let him complete the story. I thought of going and standing by her grave. I thought of throwing away the key where nobody could find it. Then I decided against it. Meaningless acts. Yet I had to do something. My feet led me to the river bank as the first glimmerings of dawn made their appearance in the east. I would dispel my rage by swimming. The objects on the two shores were half visible, appearing and disappearing, veering between light and darkness. The river was reverberating with its old familiar voice, moving yet having the appearance of being still. There was no sound except for the reverberation of the river and the puttering of the water-pump not far away. I began swimming towards the northern shore. I went on swimming and swimming till the movements of my body settled down into restful harmony with the forces of the river. I was no longer thinking as I moved forward through the water. The impact of my arms as they struck the water, the

movement of my legs, the sound of my heavy breathing, the reverberation of the river and the noise of the pump puttering on the shore – these were the only noises. I continued swimming and swimming, resolved to make the northern shore. That was the goal. In front of me the shore rose and fell, the noises being totally cut off and then blaring forth. Little by little I came to hear, nothing but the reverberation of the river. Then it was as if I were in a vast echoing hall. The shore rose and fell. The reverberation of the river faded and overflowed. In front of me I saw things in a semicircle. Then I veered between seeing and blindness. I was conscious and not conscious. Was I asleep or awake? Was I alive or dead? Even so, I was still holding a thin, frail thread: the feeling that the goal was in front of me, not below me, and that I must move forwards and not downwards. But the thread was so frail it almost snapped and I reached a point where I felt that the forces lying in the river-bed were pulling me down to them. A numbness ran through my legs and arms. The hall expanded and the answering echoes quickened. Now – and suddenly, with a force that came to me from I know not where, – I raised my body in the water. I heard the reverberation of the river and the puttering of the water pump. Turning to left and right, I found I was half-way between north and south. I was unable to continue, unable to return. I turned over on to my back and stayed there motionless, with difficulty moving my arms and legs as much as was needed to keep me afloat. I was conscious of the river's destructive forces pulling me downwards and of the current pushing me to the southern shore in a curving angle. I would not be able to keep thus poised for long; sooner or later the river's forces would pull me down into its depths. In a state between life and death I saw formation 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. Then, for an indeterminate period, quiet and darkness reigned, after which I became aware of the sky moving away and drawing close, the shore rising and falling. Suddenly I experienced a violent desire for a cigarette. It wasn't merely a desire; it was a hunger, a thirst. And this was the instant of waking from the nightmare. The sky settled into place, as did the bank, and I heard the puttering of the pump and was aware of the coldness of the water on my body. Then my mind cleared and my relationship to the river was determined. Though floating on the water, I was not part of it. I thought that if I died at that moment, I would have died as I was born – without any volition of mine. All my life I had not chosen, had not decided. Now I am making a decision. I choose life. 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. It is not my concern whether or not life has meaning. If I am unable to forgive, then I shall try to forget. I shall live by force and cunning. I moved my feet and arms, violently and with difficulty, until the upper part of my body was above water. Like a comic actor shouting on a stage, I screamed with all my remaining strength, 'Help! Help!'

QUESTIONS

1. Look at the various descriptions and functions of the river. How do they change in the course of this excerpt?
2. How does the narrator's struggle in the river symbolize his conflicted identity?
3. Do some research on the Nile river: how many countries does it traverse? In which direction does it flow?