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To promote interdisciplinary studies in the fields of Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences and provide a reliable academically trusted and approved venue of publishing Language and culture research.

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## Ecocriticism and Sufi Mysticism in *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories*: an Eco-Mythological Approach

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*“The path of the mystics is a gradual awakening as it were ‘backwards’ in the direction of the root of one’s being, a remembrance of the Supreme Self”* (Lings 13).

*“The soul of the soul of the universe is love”* Rumi<sup>1</sup>.

*“I died as a mineral and became a plant, I died as a plant and rose to animal, I died as an animal and I was Man”* Rumi<sup>2</sup>.

**Abstract:** This article attempts to explore how the Mythological and Ecocritical approaches can coalesce to offer an insight into the north Afro-Arab Sudanese village world represented in Tayeb Salih’s collection *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories*. Considering that it is mostly understudied as compared to other literary works by Salih, previous critiques on *The Wedding of Zein* focused separately on either the Sufi interpretation of the text and the distorted figure of Zein, the postcolonial gothic, or the preservation of the African identity in a changing world. This article, however, investigates two main notions: first taking the regular religious Sufi analysis into another level of combining Sufi mysticism and shared universal mythological archetypes on the one hand, and Sufi mysticism and Ecocriticism on the other hand. Second, applying the perceptions of Ecocriticism that has seldom been applied to Sudanese literature in general and Salih's in particular. Concepts of the nurturing of nature, maldevelopment, and social unity in face of modernity are inspected through the lens of the coined Eco-Mythological approach.

**Keywords:** Tayeb Salih, Ecocriticism, Sufism, Mythology, Centers of Consciousness

### **Eco-Mythological Approach: An Introduction to the Issue**

There is an intimate and mutual bond between myths of a certain society and their ecological surroundings because “myths arise out of the earth – the plants, herbs, and animals which are integral parts of the human realm. They are imbedded in the ancient languages and flow according to the rhythms of the natural world” (Erdoes and Ortiz xi). Though this view may seem culturally specific, in fact there is a shared collective mythological and ecocritical memory between different societies. Searching for this “shared reality” is what the myth critic aspires to achieve in order to “discover how certain works of literature... image a kind of reality to which readers give perennial response” (Guerin et al. 182).

Hence, the significance of considering an analysis that combines Mythology and Ecocriticism is clear. This eco-mythological approach, then, brings together the complex and intertwined notions of: myth, environment, folklore, magic-realism, the nurturing of nature and celebration of the mysterious powers that dwell in it, culturally-specific yet universal myths (in other words, “shared realities”) that transcends the boundaries of time and space. In the attempt to combine them all and apply them to the novel *The Wedding of Zein and Other*

<sup>1</sup> "Rumi." AZQuotes.com. Wind and Fly LTD, 2020. 12 Nov. 2020. <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/856041>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/n-III-3901.html>

*Stories* (further referred to as *The Wedding*), by the Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih, it could be best done through the concepts of Sufism or the Sufi-Islamic mysticism.

Why studying *The Wedding of Zein and Other stories* and why Sufi mysticism in particular? The answer is because *The Wedding* as a literary work brings together most of what the eco-mythological approach is about. First, it is a representation of Sufi mysticism where elements of mythology, folk beliefs in mysterious powers of nature, and respect of the natural elements not only coexist but also are inseparable. Second, through this lens of Sufism in *The Wedding*, the ecocritical notions such as the unity between humans and their natural elements, Western maldevelopment and disrespect of nature, preservation of social identity and respect of indigenous unique and close-to-nature ways of life can be underscored. Hisham Matar, in his introduction to the 2009 New York Review Books Classics copy of *The Wedding of Zein And Other Stories*, proposes that “Salih link Sufi logic with a pastoral vision of nature” (xiv). In this vision, nature is “full of amoral determination.... It exists primarily for itself, continuously working towards its own ends. It is by no means a pretty backdrop but a psychological force. And if we see Zein with his wild abandon and wily ability to elude many of society rules, as an expression of nature’s will, then “The Wedding of Zein” can be read as a chronicle of nature’s quiet victory” (xii).

This article, however, proposes a wider and more inclusive perspective. First, it goes beyond the studies of the Sudanese folkloric and religious interpretation of Sufism to the higher level of combining Sufi mysticism with the mythological archetypes studies, where culturally-specific Afro Arab Sudanese Sufi concepts such as *Murshid*, *Murid*, *Walli*, *Karama* can be compared to universally mythological as well as psychological ones such as *The Wise Man*, *Trickster*, the *Scapegoat*, miracles, holy men, and the Jungian *Anima*. Second, Salih in *The Wedding* does not endorse the dogmatic, superficial, literal, and fundamentalist presentation of religion, but rather he promotes Sufism as a more nature-oriented interpretation of Islam. Third, this article, while adopting the link between the Sufi logic with a pastoral vision of nature, takes this study of nature to the wider realm of Ecocriticism (which has not been applied before to Salih's literature to the best of the researcher's knowledge), where the study of nature stands for spheres of social solidarity, justice, nurturing of natural elements against neocolonial modernity and Western notions of development against the logic of nature.

#### “What Is Sufism?”

Martin Lings in his book *What is Sufism?* (1975) defines Sufism as: “nothing other than Islamic Mysticism, which means that it is the central and most powerful current of that tidal wave which constitutes the Revelation of Islam... this is in no sense a depreciation, as some appear to think. It is on the contrary an affirmation that Sufism is both authentic and effectual” (15-16). When he is discussing the subject matter of what he calls “The Universality of Sufism,” Lings speaks about a One Truth, a shared truth between all forms of mysticism: “All mysticisms are equally universal in the greater sense in that they all lead to the One Truth” (22). To forecast this universality, this article maps notions of Sufi mysticism onto Jungian myth criticism.

In addition, in the view point of this article, this truth could be echoed in such terms as inclusiveness, acceptance, love, and a cyclonical nature of existence; which can be seen in the famous Sufi spinning-around-oneself dance, with the Sufi raising one hand to the Sky (resembling the unseen mystic higher powers in the context of this article) and pointing to the Earth (here Nature) with the other, as if he is the connecting-point between the two realms. According to Sufis, this would eventually lead to a “concept of ‘unity of being’ (*wahdat al-wujud*).” This idea of the mystic unity of all being, whether this being is the natural elements

or other creatures or even plants, is the milestone of this Sufi Eco-Mythological study of Tayeb Salih's *The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories*.

### ***The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories***

*The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories*, originally written in Arabic by the famous Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih in 1962 and then translated by Denys Johnson-Davis in 1966, consists of a novel and two short stories: *The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid* and *A Handful of Dates*. Though it is considered a classic, it is still understudied, especially when compared to *Season of Migration to the North*, the novel for which Salih is most renowned. In his review of *The wedding of Zein*, Constance E. Berkley, one of the critics concerned with Tayeb Salih's writings, states that the setting of *The Wedding* is a fictional northern Sudanese village he names "Wad Hamid," where he focuses on the traditional rural customs threatened by forces of change (105).

#### **1. Sufism in *The Wedding of Zein***

The opening pages of Tayeb Salih's *The Wedding of Zein* refer to, as the title infers, a wedding. So, what could be so strange about such a normal human activity that takes place every day all over the world? It is the bridegroom himself; Zein, whom the village people regard as the village idiot, getting married to none other than the fairest and wisest of girls all; Ni'ma. The wedding becomes the novel's "heightened intellectual consciousness... [where] material, spiritual, or historical transformation occurs" (Berkley 110).

Following the characteristics of Zein; his physical description, social role, and relationships is of importance because he is the main representation of the Sufi concepts and how they could be mapped onto Jungian myth-critical analysis from the one hand, and ecocritical ones from the other hand. The ecological and mythological Sufi traits of Zein rest on four main pillars. First, his unusual birth and his odd body features. Second, his unifying social role as a messenger of love and a caretaker of the disadvantaged and needy. Third, his friendship with Haneen and his hatred towards the Imam. The fourth is his tremendous and devastating strength.

##### **1.1. Zein the Grotesque**

The first mythic element depicting the early stages of describing Zein's uniqueness can be traced since the very beginning of the story of Zein, starting with his miraculous birth. Unlike all the newborn coming to life crying, Zein was born laughing (33). With his supernatural birth-laugh, Zein resembles the first feature of being a Sufi holy man or a dervish (also known as Walli, pl. Awliya).

In addition, Zein has distorted and abnormal physical features which is yet another attribute of being a Sufi dervish in the public mindset. Salih gives the reader a detailed description of Zein's grotesque appearance which is essential for many reasons. First, to underscore the blurred line between the natural and supernatural, the ecocritical and mythic elements within Zein. Second, to elicit the reader's empathy towards him. Third, as Ali Abdallah Abbas comments, "because, without it, we would not be able to understand either the villager's attitude toward Zein or their willingness to allow him a measure of freedom denied to all other members of the community" (55).

As the link between Sufi-mythology and nature, Zein is associated with a giraffe, donkey and a crane, as "inscrib(ing) animalistic behavior (on Zein) induce a mixture of fear, uncertainty and sinister laughter" (Chaabane 8). To contradict what could be presumed from his name (as the word "Zein" in Arabic means the one who possesses the best attributes, notice here Salih's Ecocritical linguistic perspective<sup>3</sup>), Zein's face was devoid of any traces of

<sup>3</sup> In *The Wedding of Zein*, Tayeb Salih's linguistic perspective could be traced in his own way of selecting names. Sometimes the meaning of the name indicates the direct outer meaning of it as in the case of Haneen and

handsomeness (33-34). This resulted in that Zein, in the eyes of the villagers, is regarded as an imbecile, a village fool. All factions of society love Zein and to them he is synonymous with laughter and happiness, as “Zein’s joy is a life-giving force” (Berkley 111). This idea would lead us to the social role of Zein as a unifying element and a harbinger of joy.

### 1.2. Zein’s Sufi-Ecocritic Social Unity Role

Zein’s Sufi, Mythic, and Platonic love acts as a unifying force and a barrier breaker, not only between males and females, but also between different sects of society. This ecocritical unifying social role of the Sufi Zein has two dimensions. In a highly conservative society, where the direct contact between males and females, not to mention romance, is very rare, Zein has become a Messenger of love. This is the outer dimension of Zein’s social uniting force: “Love, first of all, would strike at his heart, then would be quickly transferred to the hearts of others” (42). Zein has an innocent heart overflowing with love and looking at his disinterested reaction after every beloved’s marriage, it seems like he loves for the sake of love itself.

In addition, his love has the ecocritical conceptual structure of an inclusive rather than exclusive uniting force against what Warren calls “value dualisms” (xi). The village of Wad Hamid is divided into many groups, including but not limited to the village men, the Koz, the people of the Oasis, and many more, who had rare direct contact with each other. However, Zein’s Sufi love power brings them together, especially with the case of Haleema from the Koz who, as a result of his uniting love force, is married to the son of the Cadi (Judge)<sup>4</sup>.

Here, Salih uses Zein’s Sufi love to base for the mythic as well as ecocritical uniting trait of Sufism as: “Myths are by nature collective and communal; they bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities.... Myth is the expression of a profound sense of togetherness of feeling and of action and of wholeness of living” (Guerin et al.184). Eiman El-Nour in “The Owl of Modernity: Creating the Myth of an Absent Homeland” proposes that this unity in the society of Wad Hamid “affirms the tradition as the foundation for national identity, with the components and healing powers of Sufism, group solidarity and mythical traditions of the people” (8).

### 1.3. Zein’s “Two Centers of Consciousness”

With this mention of group solidarity appears another role that Zein plays in Wad Hamid, using, however, a different inward level of consciousness representing another dimension of Zein’s Sufi character. Previously, we were introduced to an outward level of consciousness of Zein, the village idiot. Nonetheless, within some other social relations, the reader gets to see the “other” Zein, a “sober” Zein. In the village of Wad Hamid live some disadvantaged and cribbed persons “whom the villagers regarded as abnormal” (45). To contradict the villagers’ view; “Zein was fond of such people” (45). These include Deaf Ashmana, Mousa the Lame, and Bekheit who was born deformed and paralyzed. Zein would take care of them; carrying heavy loads of firewood for Ashmana; and building a house and bringing food for Mousa (45-46).

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Ni'ma. Other times it infers the inner hidden features as with Zein. Third, it refers to the opposite meaning as with Seif ad-Din. Even the absence of the names has a meaning in itself as with the case of the Imam, the Omda, and the Cadi. In the case of these last three the absence of the name indicates that they represent dogmatic institutions rather than individuals.

<sup>4</sup> Though Denys Johnson-Davis gave very beautiful and precise translations of many literary works of Tayeb Salih, in very minor situations he made some translation confusion. In this case he made a transliteration of the word Cadi, which is the Arabic word for Judge, instead of using the English equivalent that could have transferred the meaning more clearly, especially to the foreign reader who is the primary target of a translated literary work.

These two levels of harmonizing love that inspires tranquility, on which the second of the Ecological and Mythological Sufi traits of Zein rest, can be understood in terms of what Martin Lings calls “two centres of consciousness” (14). He argues in *What is Sufism?* that “The full-grown Sufi is... said to have two centres of consciousness, one human and one Divine, and he may speak now from one and now from another, which accounts for certain apparent contradictions” (14). Names for these two nameless centers of consciousness can be found among many Sufi terms in Malik’s *Sufism in the West*. These two terms are: intoxication (the Sufi term for which is “*sukr*”) and sober (“*sahw*”) (5), with the *sukr* as an attribute of *fana* (i.e. extinction in the Divine, but means oneness with nature within the context of this article). Zein stands for the bond between the natural and supernatural, conscious and subconscious, the social uniting aspects of both Sufism and Ecocriticism. Inside his animal-like abnormal body and his angelic soul, all these elements coincide and reconcile. As Berkley puts it: “The Sufi potential of love within Zein is a force which binds together all of humanity within and around the village. Zein also represents the link between *Man, Nature and God*, or ‘The Gods’” (111, my emphasis).

As a mythological archetypal pattern, Zein represents “The Trickster” (i.e. joker, jester, clown, fool, medicine man [shaman]). The trickster “may serve a healing function through his transformative influence” (Guerin et al.188). It could be said that Zein’s healing function result from his own sufferings; he could see the suffering of disadvantaged Ashmana and Mousa because he was a disadvantaged himself, mainly because of his odd outer physical appearance, representing the ecocritical notion of “the Other” (Halpin 286). This could be supported by Carl Jung’s statement: “(It is) in confirmation of the mythological truth that the wounded wounder is the agent of healing, and that the sufferer takes away suffering” (256). The trickster is, then, “God, man, and animal at once. He is both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being, whose chief and most alarming characteristic is his unconsciousness (263) .... (he is) of *divine-animal* nature, on the one hand superior to man because of his superhuman qualities, and on the other hand inferior to him because of his unreason and unconsciousness” (Jung 264).

This continuous and rapid change is also echoed in the elements of nature in Wad Hamid, including the Nile, the sun, the moon, earth, frogs, fish, trees, flowers, and breeze. The rejuvenated circle of life is celebrated: “The years come and go, year follows year.” The breast of the Nile would swell up and then sink down (50). Following the vivid description of the unspoiled rural beauty, all your senses as a reader would be aroused. You would see the full-rounded face of the moon and the rise of the sun, could hear the croak of the frogs mixed with the joyful sounds of weddings’ ululations, *tunbours*, and *mizmars*, feel the tenderness of the breeze, and fill your nostrils “with a mixture of the perfume of the flower of the *talh* acacia tree... and the smell of thirsting, fertile land” (50). A beautiful sensual personification of the Nile as a mighty man and of earth as an enigmatic woman mating and giving birth to a new life, a new hope:

The Nile’s breast, like that of a man in anger, swells up, and the water flows over its banks, covering the cultivated land.... The land is motionless and moist, yet you feel that its belly encases a great secret, as though it were a woman of boundless passion preparing to meet her mate. The earth is motionless, but its bowels are astir with gushing water, *the water of life and fertility*. The earth is moist and ready; it prepares itself for giving. Something sharp pierces the bowels of the earth; there is a moment of *ecstasy*, of pain, of giving... the seed flows in, just as the female womb embraces the embryo in

tenderness, warmth, and love... the earth will split open and send forth vegetation and fruit. (50-51, my emphasis)

This depiction of nature creates oneness between humans and their nature. Salih's word-choice is precise while describing nature and the mystic Sufi traits associated with it. An example is the word "ecstasy. This state of half-conscious is another word to depict the two centers of consciousness associated with Sufis.

## 2. Haneen and the Imam: The Two Opposite Poles

Coming to the aid of the needy is not the only case when Zein turns into his state of *Sahw*. Seeing three more people makes him sober: The Imam, Haneen, and Ni'ma. The two extremely contradictory relationships: between Zein and the Imam on the one hand, and between Zein and Haneen on the other, represent the third pillar on which the Ecological and Mythological Sufi traits of *The Wedding* rest.

### 2.1. The Imam as a Patriarchal Authority

Though Zein is full of love, there is only one person whom Zein really hates – the Imam (93). The Imam represented the fundamentalist, institutionalized view of Islam. The primary impression of him is detachment: "He made no effort to get along with people or become interested in what they had to say" (88). While the village men cared about their nature the most, he paid not the slightest attention. He ignored their everyday preoccupies related to the natural elements and change of seasons. He was not concerned, as they were, "with the time for sowing wheat and the ways of irrigating it, fertilizing it, cutting and harvesting it. He wasn't interested in whether the barley in Abdul Hafeez's field was a good crop or a bad one, whether the water-melons in Wad Rayyes's field were large or small, or why the season for pollinating the date palms had been delayed" (88). He was interested in what he might have thought as universal, cultural and more important intellectual issues. For example: "He used to follow the news on the wireless and in the newspapers and liked to argue about whether or not there would be a war, were the Russians stronger than the Americans, what Nehru had said, and what Tito" (88). The Imam represents the prejudicial patriarchal dichotomy between man and natural elements, a notion suggesting that nature should be in an inferior position. Here lies the first rift between the natural villagers and the cultural Imam. This patriarchal subservient view of nature and the people closely attached to it as of lesser importance is the main premise that Ecocriticism is to fight.<sup>5</sup>

As much as the villagers hated the Imam, he hated them back. He would use his "eloquent tongue" to show his contempt, lashing them with his fire and brimstone 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*" (89, my emphasis).

This usage of language as a weapon could be connected to Karren Warren's ecocritical notion of patriarchal "Linguistic Perspective." She explains that within patriarchal contexts, the use of language could function to devalue nature. That explains why the village men after attending the preaching, "each, looking at his field with its date palms, its trees and crops, would experience no feeling of joy within himself. Everything, he would feel, was incidental, transitory" (89). It also explains why the mention of the Imam's name has the connotation of "something old and gloomy, like the strands of a spider's web" (87). He contradicts the harmony between the villagers and their nature.

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5 In her article "Ecological Feminist Philosophies: An Overview of the Issues" Karen J. Warren argues that the roots for this culture/nature polarizing dichotomy and value dualism that lie within patriarchal ideologies base for alienation and subordination, and it is what environmental ethics is to expose and dismantle (xii).

## 2.2. Haneen and Zein: The Murshid and The Murid

Haneen represents the mythical side of the spiritual world— a side that the Imam does not recognize (94). Haneen is the second person around whom Zein is in his sober/*Sahw* state. “Zein, on seeing Haneen approach would leave off his horse-play and idle talk and would hasten up to embrace him,” and whenever Haneen sees Zein he “would embrace him, kiss him on the head and call him ‘The blessed one of God’” (45). The friendship between Zein and Haneen is one of the main reasons— in addition to his deformed looks and his dual *Sahw/Sukr* consciousness— which made the village men consider Zein as a Sufi dervish: “Zein’s mother put it about that her son was one of God’s saints, and this belief was strengthened by Zein’s friendship with Haneen” (44).

The best way to describe the relationship between Zein and Haneen is the Sufi relationship between the *Shaykh/Murshid* (i.e. the leading person) and his *Murid* (i.e. follower or student), where the *Murshid* (here Haneen) works as a teacher and a guide to the *Murid* (Zein) to guarantee the spiritual continuity which permitted the orders’ presentation as an unbroken chain of succession *Silsila* (Malik 6-7). Abbas argues that Haneen represents “a redefinition of the word “holy” and the religious values associated with it. Haneen is called a holy man... because of his ability to see through appearances” (56). Haneen represents the Arab archetypal figure of a Sufi saint or *Walli*, a man who is devoted to his religion and who elevates himself from the ephemeral joys of life. “The cluster of attributes characteristic of the Sufi —intoxication, slavery, poverty, unconventionality or marginality, lack of worldliness or possessions,” proposed by Harrow (66), are all applicable to Haneen.

## 2.3. Zein vs. Seif ad-Din: the Saint vs. the Sinner

One day Zein was attacked and hit on the head by Seif ad-Din, the wicked son of a wealthy kind man. Though the direct meaning of his name is “the guarding, defending sword of religion” (notice again Salih’s use of names), ironically, he was a disobedient, drunkard son. Upon seeing Seif ad-Din, Zein “seized hold of his man, had raised him high in the air and thrown him to the ground. Then he tightened his grip on his throat” (61). Here, we are introduced to the fourth and final element of Zein’s Ecological and Mythological Sufi traits; his supernatural tremendous and devastating strength. Though all his six friends at once tried to stop him, they were not successful, for “there flowed into Zein’s lean body an immensely terrifying strength with which no one could deal.... They all knew that *this emaciated body* concealed an *extraordinary, super-human strength* and that Seif ad-Din— the prey upon whom Zein swooped— was doomed” (61-62, my emphasis).

All hope to save Seif ad-Din faded. All attempts to stop Zein failed. Someone screamed: “He’s dead, he’s killed him” (62). And when the horror reached its climax, a new voice whelmed. It was the voice of Haneen, which “rose calm and serene above the hubbub: ‘Zein the blessed, may God be pleased with you’” (62). Suddenly, Zein stops and releases Seif ad-Din who falls motionless on the ground. A trembling voice calls: “Thanks be to God” (62); Seif ad-Din is still alive!

Then Haneen made peace between Zein and Seif ad-Din, and he made his first prophecy. Addressing Zein he said: “Tomorrow you’ll be marrying the best girl in the village” (64). The eight men who were present at that day; “each silently took hold of Haneen’s hand kissed it” (65). After that Haneen said his second prophecy, a prophecy which drastically altered the lives and future of not only these eight men but of the whole village as well: “God bless you, God bring down His blessings upon you” (65). This climatic incident is of extreme importance because it: a) shows the final mystic Sufi trait of Zein, b) sets forth the final stage of the *murshid/murid* relationship between Zein and Haneen, c) results in a

sequence of miracles/*karamat* that started by Seif ad-Din's repentance, followed by an age of prosperity for the whole village, and topped by the miraculous wedding of Zein and Ni'ma.

This incident, in addition, shows the Mythological archetypal images of both Haneen and Seif ad-Din. Here Haneen represents The Old Wise Man (savior, redeemer). As described by Jung, the archetypal Wise Man is the

personification of the spiritual principle, representing "knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness, and intuition on the one hand, and on the other, moral qualities such as goodwill and readiness to help, which makes his 'spiritual' character sufficiently plain.... He even tests the moral qualities of others and makes gifts dependent on this test.... The old man always appears when the hero is in a hopeless and desperate situation from which only profound reflection or a lucky idea... can extract him (exactly what Haneen did at the time of the hopeless situation of Zein attacking Seif ad-Din, when no one could stop Zein but him). But since, for internal and external reasons, the hero cannot accomplish his himself, the knowledge needed to compensate the deficiency comes in the form of a personified thought, i.e., in the shape of this sagacious and helpful old man (the guiding role of Haneen as the *murshid/shaykh* and Zein as the learning student *murid*). (217-218 *Archetypes* qtd. in Guerin et al. 188)

Furthermore, Seif ad-Din, who reaches the verge of death and after that is restored to the righteous, represents The Sacrificial Scapegoat archetype. He is the antihero in *The Wedding*, who "must die to atone for (his) sins and restore the land to fruitfulness" (Guerin et al. 190).

A succession of supernatural events associated with social as well as ecological prosperity and vegetation followed. Overwhelming fertility included every creature in the village; women who had given up hope of ever being pregnant suddenly have children; cows and sheep gave birth to two and three at the same time; and the dated was so plentiful that the villagers could not find enough sacks to carry it. To the villagers' amazement, it SNOWED! No one would have ever imagined that snow could have fallen on a desert town below the Tropic of Cancer, a phenomenon no one had any geographical explanation for (77, 78, 80).

It is worth noting that the Sufi text here is not limited to the metaphysical incidents; rather, it is a mixture of mythic and religious supernatural powers connected to the elements of nature. Notice how the "miraculous" events that followed Haneen's prayer are related to the abundance in the fruits and crops and to fertility whether of the land, animals, or the women, and how the Sufi mythic event is the reason for ecological growth and nourishment. Sufi mysticism, then, is not about sitting lazy in one place waiting for the miracle to happen, or the sky to rain silver and gold, but about production, work, and striving.

The biggest miracle of all, is the far-fetched marriage of Zein to Ni'ma that became the subject matter of amazement between the people of the village. "Haneen's words were not idle ones," said one villager, "he said to him (Zein) 'Tomorrow you'll be marrying the best girl in the village'." Another replied: "Yes, by God, that's so.... The best girl in the whole village. What beauty! What manners! What modesty!" (81). Why is this marriage miraculous, and why Ni'ma is considered the best girl in the village? The next section would explore this.

#### **2.4. Ni'ma: The Jungian "Anima"**

Ni'ma, whose name means that she is a "bless," is Zein's cousin and the third and final person around whom he is in his *Sahw* state. She is a rebellious and determined girl. Yet, she is full of mercy. She used to think: "As the Nile floods its banks, storms rage, the date palms produce their fruit each year, as the corn sprouts, the rain pours down, and the

seasons change, so would her marriage be” (54). The attachment of Salih and his characters to their nature and its elements is notable here. It is always there in their imagination and to it everything is compared. In marrying Zein, Matar argues, “she is sacrificing herself to nature” (xii).

When it comes to the archetypal images, Ni'ma represents the Jungian *anima*. According to Jung, the anima is a magical feminine being (25), it is the magic breath of life and flame (26), the image of the wonderful and immortal soul (26), she is the goddess and the mother (29). All these characteristics can be attributed to her femininity. In *The Wedding*, we always see Ni'ma full of life, fire, and determination. Salih's linguistic use of power verbs mirrors Ni'ma's perseverance. She is determined when she “forced” her “father” to put her into the elementary school (52). Her unusual significance or power that could entitle her to be a symbol of the anima is her religious drive. In addition, the fact that Ni'ma was the only girl that Zein never mentioned or spoke of, to the extent that if he sees her in a road, he will change it so as not to meet her, as if he is running from her, or to be more accurate, according to Jung, he is running from himself, from *his anima* that he sees personified in Ni'ma.

### 3. The ‘Urs of Zein: The Phoenix’s Death and Rebirth of the Myth

Zein's wedding is a rehabilitation of every person whom people used to think is lesser than themselves; everyone who is considered and treated as the marginalized “other,” a restoration which resembles a pure ecocritical purpose. Furthermore, Zein's wedding serves as a gathering, a meeting point, a uniting ceremony: “There was not a house in which a party of people was no being put up” (109). People came from upriver, from down river, across the Nile, from fringe villages, on horses and donkeys and in lorries (111-112). Contradictions reconciled, paradoxes came together and there were no exclusions on that day. Everyone was accepted, even the Imam. These entirely complex, intertwined, barrier-breaking, inclusive rather than exclusive celebrations are all characteristics of Ecocriticism. In addition, Constance Berkley argues that “El Tayeb Salih uses the wedding scene to show that music, dance and joyousness are as much a part of his people's cultural ethos as is their *Sufi* belief in the transitoriness of all that is human and worldly. Love is the blessing which sustains life” (113).

The meaning of the phoenix's death and rebirth of the myth is that from the ashes of the dead Haneen would arise Zein as the new *walli*, and this wedding of his is actually a Sufi celebration for him as well. It is Zein's second birth and this time Zein the *walli* is born to replace Zein the imbecile. Now the initiation of Zein as the new *walli* is now complete, and “the dual consciousness is finally completely realized in this last image of the harmonious relationship between the human and the divine” (Harrow 68).

#### “Our Death is our Wedding with Eternity”<sup>6</sup>

According to Salih's short story *The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid* (further referred to as *The Doum*), the *karamat* of Wad Hamid does not come to an end by his death; on the contrary, it is only starting. Hence the second form of the death-and-rebirth archetype of the *walli*. The first *karama* after his death is the mythic tree that miraculously grew on top of his grave. It is a miraculous tree because first, no one planted it, “most probably it grew up by itself, though no one remembers having known it other than as you now find it” (6). Second, it grows in an unproductive stony land higher than the level of water of the river Nile. Mythically, it is standing there “like the pedestal of a statue, while the river twists and turns below it like a sacred snake, one of the ancient gods of the Egyptians” (6). The doum tree

<sup>6</sup> <https://rumisgarden.co.uk/blogs/traditional-meditations/rumi-our-death-is-our-wedding-with-eternity>

drives its sacrality from the holy man buried beneath it, and, in return, through it his sacrality takes form.

In addition, the doum tree has a mythological significance. In *A Handbook*, it is argued that the mythological archetypal symbolism of the “Tree” is that it “denotes life of the cosmos: its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes. It stands for inexhaustible life, and is therefore equivalent to a symbol of immortality” (Cirlot 328 qtd. in Guerin et al. 189). The doum tree to the villagers is as old as life itself. In *The Doum*, the narrator considers this immortal rejuvenate tree as an idol: “Look at it, my son, look at the doum tree: lofty, proud, and haughty as though — as though it were some ancient idol” (4). This earthly emotion could be understood in light of Berkley’s explanation: “In order to validate the people’s emotional relationship to the unseen powers of the doum tree—the symbol of their earthly reality, El Tayeb Salih introduces scenes where the characters relate their personal experiences with the powers of the doum tree” (108).

### **The Same Soil Brought Us All**

As an Ecocritical feature of the Sudanese people in general, Salih expresses the close relationship between the people and their natural elements: the tree, the animals, the Nile, etc. Personifications of the mythic doum tree which is an integrated part of the people’s lives all over the day are presented. The author proudly asks to behold its magnificence and magnitude:

Here it is: The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid. Look how it holds its head aloft to the skies; look how its roots strike down into the earth; look at its full, sturdy trunk, like the form of a comely woman, at the branches on high resembling the mane of a frolicsome steed! In the afternoon, when the sun is low, the doum tree casts its shadow from this high mound right across the river so that someone sitting on the far bank can rest in its shade. At dawn, when the sun rises, the shadow of the tree stretches across the cultivated land and houses right up to the cemetery.... Wherever you happen to be in the village you can see it; in fact, you can even see it from four villages away. (3-4, 6)

This oneness with the trees and sensitivity towards all life forms is stated also in *A Handful of Dates*, the other short story in the collection. Masood, one of the villagers, warns the men to watch out for the heart of the palm tree: “Once he shouted up at the boy perched on the very summit of the date palm who had begun hacking at a clump with his long, sharp sickle: ‘Be careful you don’t cut the heart of the palm’” (26). He was once talking to a young boy playing with a branch of a young palm tree: “Palm trees, my boy, like humans, experience joy and suffering” (27). The boy, as a result, “pictured the palm tree as something with feeling, something possessed of a heart that throbbed” (27).

This Ecological respect for all living things, and even the sense of equality between themselves and all forms of creation, including their animals, that the same life force runs within everything, represents the main aspect of the Sudanese innate Ecocritic awareness. In *The Doum* the narrator informs us: “We and our animals are alike: we rise in the morning when they rise and go to sleep when they sleep, our breathing and theirs following one and the same pattern” (13).

### **The Ecocritic Notion of “Mal(e)development”**

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in their book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010) suggest that: “One of the central tasks of postcolonial ecocriticism as an emergent field has been to contest – also to provide viable alternatives to –

western ideologies of development” (27). That is the case because, within these western ideologies of development, “what goes by the name of development is a maldevelopment process” (Shiva 44). To add to Shiva’s notion of maldevelopment, Catriona Sandilands in her book *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (1999) coins the term “mal(e)development” referring to the maldevelopment that is done by males (51). Here, the notion “mal(e)development” supports Shiva’s argument that development is actually a new project of western patriarchy: “‘Development’ was to have been a post-colonial project, a choice for accepting a model of progress in which the entire world remade itself on the model of the colonising modern west, without having to undergo the subjugation and exploitation that colonialism entailed” (1).

As is often the case, most of these mal(e)development projects tend to take place only on sacred indigenous lands. Salih in *The Doum* tells of a governmental “agricultural scheme... [t]hat was in *the time of foreign rule*” (4, my emphasis). The emphasis is added here to underscore that this “agricultural scheme” actually echoes the “radical Third-Worldist critiques that tend to see development as little more than a disguised form of neocolonialism” (Huggan and Tiffin 27). Huggan and Tiffin also argue that the settlers, who rarely respected the cultures and philosophies of indigenous cultures, have “tended to conceive of themselves as conferring (or imposing) the gifts of civilisation upon the benighted heathen with little or no interest in receiving his or her philosophical gifts in return” (7).

Within this patriarchal, neocolonial, mal(e)developmental view of the governmental agricultural scheme, in order for it to be put through and a water pump to be installed, the “doum tree,” that the people hold sacred, must be cut down; “they said that the best place for setting up the pump was where the doum tree stood” (4). On hearing what the man said about cutting down the doum tree, as a spontaneous, innate Ecocritic reaction, the villagers stood up as one man and surrounded the foreign-rule-governmental man and shouted that should any attempt to cut the doum tree happen, they “would fight the government to the last man” (4). The government man cried out: “All right—doum tree stay—scheme no stay!”<sup>7</sup> (4). As a result, neither the agricultural scheme nor the pump came to pass, but the villagers, to their joy, kept their doum tree.

However, the neocolonial powers that tend to enforce mal(e)development on indigenous cultures would not stop. Even after these cultures get their (false) independence, post-colonial powers would still be actively present in new guise. Salih presents a second scheme to eradicate the doum tree “[a]t the beginning of *home rule*” (8, my emphasis). A civil representative came to them and “told (them) that the national government wished to *help* (them) and see (them) *progress*” (8, my emphasis). This “progress” is nothing but the aforementioned stopping place for the steamer, and, of course, “there was only one suitable place—where the doum tree stood” (9). On this “destruction (that) is taking place in the name of ‘development’ and progress,” Vandana Shiva comments that “there must be something seriously wrong with a concept of progress that threatens survival itself” (xiv).

Nevertheless, a closer, wiser, more considerate, Eco-friendly look would have found out that these are not “either/or matters” (Huggan and Tiffin 137). A reconciliation could be reached and that, as Salih advocates: “There will not be the least necessity for cutting down the doum tree. There is not the slightest reason for the tomb to be removed. What all these people have overlooked is that there’s plenty of room for all these things: the doum tree, the

<sup>7</sup> Here, the villagers cannot speak English and the government man is a foreigner who can hardly speak Arabic. So, he uses little and inarticulate Arabic words to convey his message, and this is echoed in Denys Johnson-Davis’s use of inarticulate English words in his translation.

tomb, the water-pump, and the steamer's stopping place" (19). Modernity and Ecological awareness can co-exist in an all-inclusive vision of society without any need for one to eliminate the other if, and only if, it is truly sought.

### **"The Owl of Modernity" and National Identity**

The doum tree of Wad Hamid serves as an Ecological and Mythical identity definer and preserver, as

what gives nationalism its power are the myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of ethnic heritages and the ways in which a popular living past has been, and can be, rediscovered and reinterpreted by modern nationalist intelligentsias. It is from these elements of myth, memory, symbol, and tradition that modern national identities are reconstituted in each generation, as the nation becomes more inclusive and as its members cope with new challenges. (Smith, qtd in El-Nour 2)

As much as museums act as guardians of "the local history and the great deeds of the past," the doum tree of Wad Hamid serves as what "can be said to be a museum" for its people (2). Here, the doum tree is museum that is safekeeping the tradition of the village, its identity, its source of pride, a preservative of the history, and a symbol to look up to and remember your greatness. Chaaban elaborates that the doum tree is "an identity marker... (that) stands for an archive of artefacts able to trigger memories both individual and cultural where past, present, and future come together" (3). Berkley emphasizes this notion by indicating that Salih "uses it (the doum tree) to symbolize the Sudanese village which is considered the guardian of ancient Sudanese cultural traditions.... El Tayeb Salih wishes to preserve the legendary myths of its origins. His utilization of the orally transmitted myths and legends is a calculated artistic device designed to call forth those positive aspects of the villagers' characters which should be preserved" (107).

This use of oral myths resembles Dreese's views in *Ecocriticism* mentioned at the beginning of this article that "the symbolic meanings of animals and places within the natural world that (the writer) uses to dismantle existing Western notions come from these myths that shape (his/her) world" (74). This mission of preserving the cultural and traditional identity of the village, embodied in the doum tree, lies on the shoulders of the villagers who were up to the responsibility with all their might, and, in return, they were helped by their natural elements to keep strangers away. Gigantic and savage sand-flies and horse-flies would mercilessly "bite, sting, buzz, and whirr" (1) preventing any outsiders either colonial, local governmental, or even dogmatic men-of-religion, protecting the village – though in a harsh way – from the interference and proposed/supposed reforms and projects that would harm their sacred tree: "The flies assisted them too— the horse-flies" (4). For this reason: "They were so lucky to be able to keep their values intact, celebrate their cultural identity" (El-Nour 8).

In addition: "The doum tree of Wad Hamid has become the symbol of the nation's awakening" (18). This happened when a tyrant government tried to impose the stopping place for the steamer, against which they all rose, and as a sequence some villagers were arrested and put into jail, then quickly released after mass gatherings and rejections. Whenever these so-called developers face any public opposition they always resorted to the strategy of expropriation. This imposition of modernity is best represented by Huggan and Tiffin's expression of the side effect of universalism: "(to) abuse humanity in humanity's name" (206). This unfair black-side of modernity and the obvious disregard of the villagers spirituality is seen in the fiery speech by one of Salih's Parliament characters: "To such tyranny has this government come that it has begun to interfere in the beliefs of the people, in those holy things held most sacred by them... and in a voice choked with emotion, he said:

‘Ask our worthy Prime Minister... how it was that he permitted himself to send his troops and henchmen to *desecrate* that pure and holy place!’” (17-18, my emphasis).

What helped the villagers in their fight against the devastating Ecological and Mythological side effects of modernity, Chaaban affirms, is: “The deeply-seated spiritual significance of the doum tree shaping the life of the villagers inhibits them to tolerate changes of modernity” (2). This notion is also elaborated in El-Nour proposition that: “The story affirms the tradition as the foundation for national identity, with the components and healing powers of Sufism, group solidarity and mythical traditions of the people.... Here the route for modernity came through mythical tradition and as a direct outcome of it” (8). She continues on the only way a relationship between myth and modernity in *The Doum* could be achieved: “For Salih, modernity can only find its legitimization through myth. He believes this myth is a fundamental reality, and modernity is only sought as an enhancement. Sufism with its mythical narrative of *karamat* (miracles) and *barakat* (blessings) holds the fabric of the society together, and is ultimately an endless source of happiness” (8-9).

### **The Phoenix Flies One Last Time: The Death of the Myth**

Salih merges between natural elements and myths and uses this Eco-Mythological blend as a way of preserving the people’s “traditional source of psychis/spiritual security, i.e. the doum tree” (Berkley 108). In this Eco-Mythological presentation, the origins of the myth of the Sufi saint Wad Hamid and his tree/tomb is related to the sudden appearance of the natural elements. Unlike the normal gradual way of forming a social community from being small then grow larger; “It is as though this village, with its inhabitants, its water-wheels and buildings, had become split off from the earth.... And ever since our village has existed, so has the doum tree of Wad Hamid” (14).

They are interdependent, the myth and the tree. The myth lasts as long as the tree is there, and the tree lasts as long as the myth is there. If one dies, the other would follow, and may be then the new generations who got educated in the modern schools whose “souls foreign to our own,” would forget about Wad Hamid and “go to sleep and don’t see the doum tree in their dreams,” and “then perhaps the water-pump will be set up and the agricultural scheme put into being—may be then the steamer will stop at our village—under the doum tree of Wad Hamid” (19).

This pessimistic, and unfortunately inevitable, death of the myth as a result of the persisting uncontrollable forces of modernity is the main purpose of the writings of contemporary writers such as Tayeb Salih as one last hope to hold the Afro-Arab Sudanese traditions together. In *The Doum*, this clutch-hold of modernity could cut the *silsila* of the death-and rebirth continuum either by turning the *murid* into another member of the flock of society, or by letting go of the validity of the myth in terms of the two extremes; total modernity and acceptance of foreign ideas to one’s society or the spread of other fundamental, institutional religious extreme notions that hold mythic beliefs as polytheist. The fear of myth/identity-loss is expressed by Philip Wheelwright:

This loss of myth consciousness I believe to be the most devastating loss that humanity can suffer; for as I have argued, myth consciousness is the bond that unites men both with one another and with the unplumbed mystery from which mankind is sprung and without reference to which the radical significance of things goes to pot. Now a world bereft of radical significance is not long tolerated; it leaves men radically unstable, so that they will seize at any myth or pseudomyth that is offered. (qtd. in El-Nour 2)

### **Conclusion**

*The Wedding of Zein and Other Stories* is a vivid portrait of the life of the Afro-Arab Sudanese village. It represents Salih's preservative screenshot of this village world untouched and uncorrupted by the hands of modernity as an attempt to hold tightly to whatever is left from its traditions. It depicts the Sudanese people who are profoundly attached to their nature and who choose to follow the true essence of love in the Sufi mystics rather than the dogmatic views of institutional religion. In *The Wedding*, elements of Sufi mysticism and Ecocriticism combine together to fulfill this purpose of Salih's in the face of the inevitable rapid change in the world that allowed for the misunderstanding of the Sudanese people, especially by outsiders, either foreign or domestic. This can be seen in the last sentence of *The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid* begging the visitor, representing every reader, to think kindly of them: "Tomorrow, without doubt, you will be leaving us. When you arrive at your destination, think well of us, and judge us not too harshly" (20).

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