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REMEMBERING EMPIRE: MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN TAYEB SALIH'S SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH AND KAZUO ISHIGURO'S THE REMAINS OF THE DAY

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Abstract

The present paper examines the reconstruction of historical consciousness in Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North and Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day. Using a qualitative, interpretative and comparative approach. The study analyzes how both novels revisit the past through retrospective narration and personal experience. Drawing on the postcolonial theories of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, it explores the relationship between empire, memory, identity, and marginalized perspectives. The analysis demonstrates that selected texts question dominant historical narratives by foregrounding individual recollection, cultural negotiation, and overlooked experiences. It further reveals that imperial legacies continue to shape selfhood and historical understanding beyond the formal end of colonial rule. By presenting identity as fluid and historical knowledge as interpretive, the novels challenge claims of historical certainty and authority.

The study concludes that both works construct a distinctly postcolonial historical consciousness in which the past remains open to revision, negotiation, and competing interpretations.

Keywords: *Historical Consciousness, Postcolonialism, Memory, Empire, Identity, Historiography, Tayeb Salih, Kazuo Ishiguro*

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Introduction

Colonialism influenced not only political and economic structures but also the production of historical knowledge. Colonial historiography often privileged imperial perspectives, while the experiences of colonized peoples remained marginalized. As a result, historical narratives frequently reflected the interests of power and authority rather than the diversity of lived experience. The emergence of postcolonial literature challenged these dominant narratives by revisiting history from alternative perspectives. Through memory, personal experience, and marginalized voices, postcolonial writers questioned the assumption that history is objective, complete, and universally shared. Literature thus became an important space for exploring the relationship between history, identity, and representation.

Tayeb Salih (1929–2009), a major Sudanese novelist and a leading figure of the first generation of postcolonial African writers, examines the cultural and psychological consequences of colonialism in *Season of Migration to the North* (1966). Written in the period following Sudanese independence, the novel explores the encounter between Africa and Europe and the lasting impact of colonial rule on individual and collective identity. Kazuo Ishiguro (1954 to the present), a contemporary British novelist, is widely known for his exploration of memory, history, and selfhood. His novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989) reflects on Britain's imperial past through the memories of Stevens, an English butler whose personal recollections intersect with broader historical change. The novel examines how individuals understand themselves within the decline of imperial authority.

Although they emerge from different literary traditions, African postcolonial literature and contemporary British literature, both novels employ retrospective narration to revisit the past and reassess inherited historical assumptions. Their narrators reconstruct history through memory and self-reflection rather than through official historical accounts, thereby exposing the limitations of authoritative narratives. The study argues that *Season of Migration to the North* and *The Remains of the Day* challenge imperial and national historiography by reconstructing history through memory, self-reflection, and marginalized experiences. Through fragmented narration, hybrid identities, and competing interpretations of the past, the novels reveal historical consciousness as a dynamic process rather than a fixed historical record.

Research Problem

How do *Season of Migration to the North* and *The Remains of the Day* reconstruct historical consciousness through memory, personal experience, and postcolonial identity, and how do these narratives challenge fixed understandings of empire, nationhood, and historical truth?

Research Hypothesis

Historical consciousness in both novels emerges through memory, self-reflection, and personal experience rather than through official historical narratives. Consequently, the novels expose the instability of imperial history and reveal identity and historical truth as contested and continuously reconstructed.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the role of memory and narration in reconstructing historical consciousness.
- To examine the relationship between empire, identity, and postcolonial subjectivity.
- To investigate how selected novels challenge official historical narratives through marginalized experiences and competing interpretations of the past.

Theoretical Framework

The present study employs selected concepts from Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to examine the relationship between history, memory, identity, and representation in postcolonial contexts. Jörn Rüsen, in History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation, defines historical consciousness as “a mental activity of interpreting the past for

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the sake of understanding the present and anticipating the future" (Rüsen 23). Historical consciousness therefore emphasizes the relationship between memory, interpretation, and historical meaning rather than viewing history as a mere collection of facts.

Edward Said's postcolonial theory highlights the connection between discourse, representation, and power. In *Orientalism*, he defines *Orientalism* as a system through which the West gains authority over the East, describing it as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). Colonial discourse therefore shapes knowledge about colonized societies and influences historical representation. Said argues that representation is closely linked to power because those who control cultural and political institutions often influence the production of historical knowledge. In *Culture and Imperialism*, he emphasizes the importance of narrative by stating that "The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to *Culture and Imperialism*…" (Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiii) is central to cultural authority. His work further demonstrates that imperial memory continues to shape understandings of the past even after the formal end of empire. History, therefore, emerges not as a neutral record but as a narrative construction shaped by discourse and representation.

Homi K. Bhabha's theory focuses on the instability of cultural identity in colonial and postcolonial societies. His concept of hybridity refers to the emergence of new identities through cultural interaction and negotiation. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, argues that cultural meaning is produced within a "Third Space of enunciation" where fixed identities are challenged (Bhabha 54). Another important concept is mimicry, which describes the colonized subject's partial imitation of colonial culture. Bhabha famously defines mimicry as being "almost the same, but not quite" (86). Through hybridity, mimicry, and the Third Space, Bhabha rejects essentialist notions of identity and emphasizes the fluid and negotiated nature of cultural belonging.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak examines the relationship between power and marginalized groups excluded from dominant systems of representation. Her concept of the subaltern refers to those whose voices remain outside structures of political and cultural authority. In her influential essay, she raises the question, "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 271), drawing attention to the difficulties faced by marginalized individuals in achieving representation. Spivak's work also emphasizes historical recovery through the examination of experiences omitted from official narratives. Rather than accepting dominant historical accounts as complete, she encourages attention to voices, perspectives, and histories that have been excluded from institutional forms of knowledge.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and comparative approach. It employs close textual analysis of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* to examine memory, empire, identity, and historical consciousness through the theoretical perspectives of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Empire, Memory, and the Questioning of Official History

Both *Season of Migration to the North* and *The Remains of the Day*, rather than reproducing state-centered accounts of imperial achievement, reveal the personal, cultural, and psychological consequences of colonialism. Through retrospective narration, selected texts expose the gap between official historical narratives and individual experiences of empire.

In *Season of Migration to the North*, the unnamed narrator returns to Sudan after several years of education in Europe. His return places him between two cultural worlds and encourages reflection on the continuing effects of colonialism. Although Sudan has formally gained independence, the narrator recognizes that colonial influence remains present in social and intellectual life. Describing his homecoming, he declares, "I am from here. Isn't this reality enough? Just like the palm tree planted in the courtyard of our house grew in our courtyard and did not grow in someone else's" (Salih 52). The statement reflects his search for

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belonging after his encounter with European culture. Instead of celebrating colonial modernity, the narrator's experience reveals the complex legacy of empire in the lives of formerly colonized subjects. As in *Orientalism* Edward Said argues, colonial discourse continues to shape cultural perceptions even after the end of direct political rule. The novel deepens this critique through the story of Mustafa Sa'eed. Educated within colonial institutions, Mustafa achieves remarkable success in Britain and appears to embody the colonial ideal of assimilation. Yet his life exposes the unequal relationship between colonizer and colonized. Reflecting on his experience in Europe, Mustafa observes, "In her eyes I was a symbol of all her hankerings. I am the South that yearns for the North and the ice" (Salih 30). This suggests the instability of the identity imposed upon him through colonial encounters. His relationships with English women, his intellectual achievements, and his eventual downfall reveal the psychological violence embedded within imperial power. Through Mustafa's perspective, colonial history is viewed from the side of the colonized rather than from the perspective of imperial authority. Consequently, the novel challenges dominant narratives that portray empire as a civilizing mission.

A similar questioning of official history appears in *The Remains of the Day*, though from a very different perspective. Stevens, the narrator, initially accepts the values associated with the British imperial order. His admiration for Lord Darlington is rooted in a belief that service to a great gentleman contributes to the well-being of the nation. Stevens repeatedly insists that "I can declare that he was a truly good man at heart, a gentleman through and through" (Ishiguro 45). This conviction demonstrates how official political and social values become internalized at the personal level. Stevens's understanding of history is therefore shaped by loyalty rather than critical reflection. However, as the narrative progresses, Stevens gradually confronts evidence of Lord Darlington's political mistakes and his association with pro-appeasement policies before the Second World War. These realizations force Stevens to reassess the beliefs that have structured his life. Looking back on his years of service, he admits, "All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really, one has to ask oneself, what dignity is there in that?" (Ishiguro 243). This moment is crucial because it reveals the collapse of historical certainty. Stevens begins to recognize that the version of history he once accepted was incomplete and deeply flawed. Through memory and self-examination, he reconstructs the past from a new perspective.

Several critics have observed that both novels challenge authoritative historical narratives through personal recollection. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said argues that "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging" (Said xiii) plays a central role in shaping historical understanding. In both texts, narration becomes a means of questioning inherited interpretations of empire and recovering perspectives excluded from official accounts. While Salih exposes imperial history through the experiences of a colonized subject negotiating the legacy of empire, Ishiguro examines the same history through the consciousness of a loyal servant whose faith in imperial values gradually collapses. Despite their different cultural contexts, both novels demonstrate that historical understanding emerges through personal experience and reflection rather than through official historical narratives. History therefore appears not as a fixed and objective record but as a contested process of interpretation and reassessment.

Memory, Narrative Reconstruction, and Historical Consciousness

Both the novels present memory as an important means of understanding the past, as the narrators reconstruct history through recollection, interpretation, and self-reflection. In both novels, historical consciousness develops through acts of remembering, suggesting that history survives not only in archives but also in personal narratives.

In *Season of Migration to the North*, descriptions of Mustafa Sa'eed's secret room can be read as a private archive of colonial history. After Mustafa's disappearance, the narrator gains access to a room filled with books, papers, and personal possessions that preserve traces of Mustafa's life and experiences. The room contains evidence of a complex relationship

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between Sudan and Britain that cannot be fully understood through official historical accounts. The narrator reconstructs Mustafa's life through fragments of memory, testimony, and documentary evidence, a process that reflects both Mustafa's resistance to colonial stereotypes and the narrator's effort to make sense of that resistance. The room therefore preserves a personal history that challenges dominant representations of colonial relations. The narrator gradually pieces together Mustafa's story from fragments, memories, conversations, and documents. His understanding of the past remains incomplete, yet this incompleteness becomes significant because it reveals how historical knowledge is often constructed. The narrator does not discover a final truth about Mustafa; instead, he continually interprets and reinterprets available evidence. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that historical understanding is mediated through representation rather than direct access to reality. The narrator's reconstruction of Mustafa's life demonstrates this process, as memory becomes an alternative form of historiography.

Similarly in *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens's journey across the English countryside provides the framework through which he revisits his past. The narrative moves constantly between present travel and remembered experience, emphasizing that history is reconstructed through reflection. Stevens believes that memory allows him to assess the meaning of his life and professional service. Looking back on his career, he repeatedly returns to moments that shaped his understanding of dignity, loyalty, and responsibility. Through these recollections, the novel presents history as something continually revised rather than permanently fixed. The instability of memory becomes particularly evident in Stevens's recollections of Miss Kenton. As he revisits their conversations and shared experiences, he begins to recognize emotions and possibilities that he had previously ignored. At one point, she writes to Stevens, "the rest of my life stretches out like an emptiness before me" (Ishiguro 49). Steven's recognition of the emotional possibilities he sacrificed emerges through his reading of Miss Kenton's letter and his subsequent reflections on their shared past, demonstrating how memory continually reshapes the meaning of earlier experiences. Stevens's memories therefore reveal that the meaning of the past is never stable and can alter with time and reflection.

Critics have noted the close relationship between memory and historical understanding in narrative fiction. Linda Hutcheon observes that "…we know the past (which really did exist) only through its textualized remains" (Hutcheon 119). Her observation is particularly relevant to both novels, where the past survives through stories, documents, recollections, and interpretations rather than through direct historical access. Although their cultural contexts differ, both novels present their narrators as unofficial historians. The narrator in *Season of Migration to the North* reconstructs Mustafa's life through fragments of memory and testimony, while Stevens reconstructs his own past through retrospective reflection. In both cases, historical consciousness emerges through narrative reconstruction rather than objective documentation. History becomes a process of remembering, interpreting, and reassessing the past rather than simply recording it.

Hybridity, Identity, and the Fragmented Self

The selected novels reject fixed notions of identity and portray the self as a product of cultural, historical, and social forces. Rather than presenting identity as stable or essential, the novels depict it as fluid, negotiated, and often divided. Through characters who inhabit multiple cultural positions, both texts reveal the complexity of postcolonial subjectivity.

In *Season of Migration to the North*, Mustafa Sa'eed represents the hybrid identity produced by colonial encounter. Raised in Sudan and educated within the British colonial system, he develops an intellectual and cultural identity shaped by both African and European influences. Reflecting on his early education, Mustafa remarks, "The school was a large building built of stone, with a high fence and large iron gate" (Salih 17). The description of architecture suggests a contrast between colonial institutional space and his native surroundings. His education introduces him to Western knowledge and values, creating a consciousness that cannot be confined to a single cultural tradition. Mustafa therefore exists between cultures

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rather than fully within either of them. Homi Bhabha argues that cultural identity emerges within an 'in-between' space where different cultural influences intersect. Mustafa's life illustrates this condition of hybridity, as his identity is formed through the interaction of colonial and indigenous cultures. The instability of identity becomes more visible through Mustafa's relationships with English women. In England, he consciously performs the role of the exotic Oriental desired by European society. He recognizes that these women are attracted not simply to him as an individual but to the cultural image they associate with him. Mustafa can be read as appropriating colonial stereotypes into a strategy of resistance, using them to challenge and manipulate the expectations of his colonial audience. His actions reflect what Bhabha describes as mimicry, a condition in which the colonized subject imitates aspects of colonial culture while simultaneously disrupting its authority. As Bhabha notes, mimicry produces a subject that is "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 86). Through Mustafa, the novel demonstrates how colonial identities remain unstable and contested.

A different form of identity construction appears in *The Remains of the Day*. Stevens understands himself primarily through his professional role as a butler. Rather than expressing an individual personality, he defines dignity through discipline, restraint, and service. He states that "dignity has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits" (Ishiguro 43). The statement suggests that identity is something performed rather than naturally possessed. Stevens's sense of self depends upon maintaining a professional role that governs his actions, emotions, and relationships. However, this carefully constructed identity becomes increasingly fragile as Stevens reflects on his life. His commitment to professional duty has required the suppression of personal desires and emotional attachments. As he confronts the consequences of these choices, the certainty that once defined his identity begins to dissolve. Stevens gradually realizes that the role through which he understood himself cannot fully explain the losses and regrets that shape his life. His retrospective narration reveals that the identity he once regarded as stable is in fact, proves to be unstable and open to revision.

Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, argues that cultural identity is never complete but is continually produced through processes of negotiation and reinterpretation. Both novels illustrate this instability by portraying characters whose identities remain unfinished and contested. Neither Mustafa nor Stevens achieves a secure sense of self because both are shaped by historical forces that exceed individual control. While Mustafa embodies the hybridity created by direct colonial encounter, Stevens represents a subject whose identity depends upon the values of a declining imperial order. Despite their different circumstances, both characters reveal that identity is not fixed but continually negotiated through culture, history, and experience. The novels therefore present postcolonial subjectivity as fragmented, hybrid, and constantly in the process of becoming.

Marginalized Voices and the Fragmentation of Historical Truth

Both the novels challenge the authority of official historical narratives by recovering experiences that remain absent from dominant accounts of the past. Rather than focusing on political leaders or major historical events, the novels draw attention to ordinary individuals, silenced voices, and personal experiences. In doing so, they reveal that historical truth is fragmented, contested, and shaped by multiple perspectives.

In *Season of Migration to the North*, the most powerful challenge to patriarchal and social authority emerges through Hosna Bint Mahmoud. After Mustafa Sa'eed's death, Hosna refuses a forced marriage to Wad Rayyes, who was an old man. Despite her repeated objections, the village ignores her wishes and attempts to impose the marriage upon her. Once Hosna clearly declares: "If they force me to marry, I'll kill him and kill myself" (Salih 80). Her resistance represents an attempt to assert personal agency within a social structure that denies women the right to determine their own futures. Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern is relevant here because Hosna's voice is repeatedly ignored despite being clearly expressed. Her tragic death exposes the consequences of silencing marginalized voices and reveals forms of oppression often excluded from official histories. The novel also preserves

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the experiences of ordinary villagers whose lives rarely appear in formal historical narratives. While political histories focus on colonial administration, nationalism, and independence, Salih's narrative records everyday concerns, local traditions, and community relationships. These village experiences provide an alternative perspective on history by foregrounding lives that remain largely invisible within official accounts. Through such characters, the novel recovers forms of historical experience that would otherwise be forgotten.

A similar recovery of marginalized perspectives appears in *The Remains of the Day* through the character of Miss Kenton. Although Stevens narrates the story, many important dimensions of the past become visible only through her experiences and observations. Throughout the novel, Miss Kenton's emotional life remains largely unacknowledged because Stevens consistently suppresses personal feelings in favour of professional duty. Her letters later reveal a history that Stevens failed to recognize when it was unfolding. Reflecting on her life, Miss Kenton admits, "And you get to thinking about a different life, a better life you might have had. For instance, I get to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr. Stevens. And I suppose that's when I get angry over some trivial little thing and leave. But each time I do so, I realize before long- my rightful place is with my husband. After all, there's no turning back the clock now. One can't be forever dwelling on what might have been" (Ishiguro 239). This statement exposes a hidden emotional history that exists alongside Stevens's official narrative. Her perspective demonstrates that important aspects of the past remain obscured when events are filtered primarily through Stevens's limited viewpoint.

The instability of historical truth becomes even more apparent through Stevens's conflicting memories. As he revisits past events, his interpretations repeatedly change. Experiences that once seemed clear gradually acquire new meanings, while long-held assumptions are called into question. Stevens's narrative therefore reveals that memory is selective and that historical understanding is subject to continual revision. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, argues that narratives play a central role in shaping historical knowledge because history reaches us through acts of representation rather than direct access to the past. Stevens's recollections illustrate this process by demonstrating how different interpretations can emerge from the same events.

Many critics have observed that postcolonial literature frequently challenges official historiography by recovering neglected perspectives and marginalized experiences. Spivak's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?" remains particularly relevant to Hosna's experience, while both novels more broadly draw attention to voices that exist outside dominant structures of authority. Their narratives suggest that history cannot be fully understood without considering those who have been excluded from traditional historical accounts. While Salih foregrounds marginalized voices through Hosna and the ordinary villagers of Wad Hamid, Ishiguro reveals hidden histories through Miss Kenton's silenced experiences and Stevens's incomplete memories. In both novels, personal narratives challenge official versions of the past and expose the limitations of singular historical explanations. Historical truth emerges not as a fixed reality but as a contested field of competing voices, memories, and interpretations.

Conclusions:

The study has demonstrated that Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* challenge official historical narratives and offer alternative ways of understanding the past. The analysis demonstrated that historical consciousness in both novels emerges primarily through memory and retrospective narration and the continual reinterpretation of past experience. Rather than presenting history as a stable record of facts, Salih and Ishiguro reconstruct the past through personal recollections, fragmented narratives, and individual interpretation. The narrators function as unofficial historians who revisit and reassess past experiences, showing that historical understanding is shaped as much by memory as by documented events.

The study further demonstrated that empire survives beyond political structures through cultural experience, social values, and personal consciousness. In the selected novels, the

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legacy of colonialism and empire continues to influence the ways individuals understand themselves and their relationship to the past. Colonial and imperial histories therefore remain active forces that shape memory, identity, and historical interpretation long after the formal end of colonial rule.

The discussion also established that identity is neither fixed nor complete. Through Mustafa Sa'eed's cultural hybridity and Stevens's performative professional identity, both novels portray identity as hybrid, fragmented, and continuously negotiated. The characters' struggles reveal the lasting impact of colonial and imperial histories on individual subjectivity and demonstrate that identity is produced through cultural interaction and historical experience rather than through stable origins.

Another significant finding is the role of marginalized voices in challenging official history. Characters such as Hosna Bint Mahmoud and Miss Kenton reveal perspectives that remain absent from dominant historical narratives. By foregrounding ordinary lives, marginalized experiences, and overlooked perspectives, both novels expose the limitations of authoritative accounts of the past and recover histories that would otherwise remain invisible.

Finally, through memory, postcolonial identity, and competing narratives of empire, *Season of Migration to the North* and *The Remains of the Day* reconstruct history as a dynamic process of interpretation rather than a fixed record of the past. Both novels produce a critical historical consciousness that challenges imperial authority and reveals history as unstable, contested, and continuously reimagined. In doing so, they demonstrate the capacity of literature to recover neglected experiences, question dominant narratives, and offer more inclusive understandings of history and human experience.

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