Religion, Science, and Sex:

Faith, Hope, and Transcendental Love in Four African Novels

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And sex sells everything/And sex kills/Sex kills
Joni Mitchell, "Sex Kills"

Sex is epidemic in the world today, so much so that many people tend to define themselves largely, if not solely, in terms of their sexuality, in which case sexual identity threatens to become synonymous with identity as a whole. This equation is reductive, of course, but then again, what is a little reductionism in a world rife with identity politics, a world expressed in terms of such parochial political terms or solidarities as ethnicity, nationality, race, sexuality, gender, age, and so on? In fact, this epidemic of parochialism has been occasioned by the violence of Western universalism, carried into other worlds by both Christianity (missionary work) and Science (the so-called western civilizing mission or 'Enlightenment'). The great unspoken, the original, and certainly the most important, drive behind the colonization of other worlds during the modern age, as in earlier ages, however, is trade or commerce. In the modern era, this mission has been driven by the desire to find raw materials and markets for modern European industry. Incidentally, early Western Science or rather Technology enabled all three presumptive missions of religious proselytism, enlightenment, and the holy or blessed pursuit of profit (see *The Parable of the Talents*). But even as the two cooperated in the colonization of other worlds western science displaced religion, nudged it aside, in the name of modernity. Science failed, both at home and abroad, when, rather than offering enlightenment, it made the users of its material-instrumental methods merely more efficient, violent, glorified beasts, as the two World Wars and countless other violent skirmishes of the late-modern and postmodern era show. Then sex took over.

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In one context, sex stands for pure escape, a million, million little deaths, billions of little deaths, potentially occurring at the same moment in many different places. The French call sexual orgasm *le petit mort*, the little death, which expression I understand in two contrary ways, one positive (momentary diversion or escape from everyday tedium) and one negative (a desire for death or final way out of life as a whole). The attitude to sex in traditional Christianity/Gnosticism is puritanical; sex is viewed as the lowest, dirtiest, most animalistic acts of the already low or 'dirty' body/flesh, which is opposed to the pure or clean spirit. "And the Spirit became Flesh and dwelt among us" says the Christian Bible (John 1:14) with the implication that it became sullied, reduced to Dark Matter, accompanied by constant complaint (as in August Strindberg's *A Dream Play*). This demonizing of sex began to change in the late modern period, at least among the members of western high culture; that is, writers, artists, intellectuals, and the more enlightened or free bourgeois. This anti-traditional, 'free love' attitude to sex was announced in D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and bloomed in the wake of the roaring twenties of "Gay Paree" and the loves, lives, and works of the likes of Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller. "Free love" spread to the masses of the United States of America in the 1960s.

The formula appears inverting or romantic, as juvenile rebellions are wont to be; body and sex are prostrated and demonized in puritanical asceticism, apotheosized and spiritualized in hippie or alternative culture. Yet, as with anything made public, these ideas are appropriated and exploited for profit by the omnivorous drives of the modern marketplace. The apotheosis of sex today is ubiquitous, in both private spheres and the public domain of mass media, music, and advertising. It is exploited for profit, to sell the most mechanical and soulless objects, such as automobiles. In fact, sex never stands alone, for it often accompanies drugs and music. 'Sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll' is one famous slogan. Sex is the most parochial, personal, and ultimately solipsistic of all human activities, while sexuality is the most rarefied term or category of identity. As collectives, nation-states only cause problems for the individual, multiplying many times over the potential conflicts and tensions of interpersonal relations. Forget history, forget society, just get laid like an egg, both in the act of getting laid and in the very first moments outside the cloaca; before the air outside gets to work, your shell, the walls of your self, will be soft and pliable. Like an egg, you will chill and know how to rock and roll. Consider the Bonobo monkeys of the African forests, how peaceful they are from getting laid habitually, and doing it with all comers, mother, father, sister, brother, and beyond (De Waal). Just get laid, like a newborn egg, and everything will be all right.

Of course, this therapeutic conception of sex, which works so well among Bonobo monkeys, does not work as well among humans. Society begins with two people, which means conflict and the painstaking negotiation of desires and goals. But it is still worth the thought, the dream-fantasy of sex as salvation or momentary transcendence in a world that knows too much and is reminded too often by an insane mass media to pretend to innocence or faith. Our late-modern or post-modern world

is one in which, as W.B. Yeats puts it in his famous poem, "The Second Coming," "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned; / The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity" (4-9). Sex is perhaps the most common form of this passionate intensity, and even the best who lack all conviction have sex, though they might not see it as a source of salvation. In a world that has very few illusions left, sex is perhaps the only source of escape, or profound self-forgetting, if not that *petit mort*. The often unspoken expectation is that sexual or carnal love will rise to the level of divine or platonic love, or at least will substitute for the lost or forsaken love of God—"For god so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son," for, "Faith and Hope and Love we see/ Joining hand-in-hand agree/But the greatest of the three/And the best is Love," so "Beloved, let us love, for love is God."

When we turn to postcolonial novels set in Africa, we find the fallacy in the divine-platonic formulation of erotic-carnal love, that one kind is being confused with the other, and the consequences are disillusioning. Needless to say, this myth fails almost every time, disastrously so in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*, and Norman Rush's *Mortals*. On the other hand, the failure of sex is non-existent in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, because in this narrative, the mystified sexual energy is turned on and quickly harnessed and channeled into illusory prophecy and proto-feminist politics. Indeed, the apotheosis of sex into a hoped-for or wishful mode of salvation or at least escape plays a pivotal role in the transformation or rather transubstantiation of Beatrice Nwanyibuife Oko: sometime civil servant and Kangan power broker, known to some (whom she claims to be "pretentious journalists hoping to catch the attention of the new military rulers") as "the latter day Madame Pompadour" (77), she turns into Goddess, Priestess, and Savior, specifically an emanation of Chielo, priestess of the Oracle of the Caves and Hills (Achebe 105). In this guise, she becomes the source of new world meaning and order in Kangan.

The make-up sex that transforms Beatrice into priestess, prophetess, goddess, and mother of Kangan is initiated when she blames the humiliation she had endured at Sam His Excellency's private dinner party on the damned "reasonableness" of her boyfriend, Chris (First Witness). In truth, she had brought this humiliation upon herself by treating the white American woman at the party, reporter Lou Cranford, like a race enemy simply because she was white and also because she appeared to have the full attention of the black alpha male at the party, namely, Sam His Excellency (68-74). Beatrice underscores her contempt for and hostility toward this other woman by referring to her as "The American *girl*" (71; my italics) or "this American *girl*": (73; my italics). Jealous of the attention Miss Cranford has received from the black men at the party, Sam especially, Beatrice fumes: "Why was I here then? To meet this American girl and arrange to give her the woman's angle. That was it! I had been dragged here to wait upon this cheeky girl from Arizona or somewhere. Fine. We shall see!" (73). But the blatantly sexual means by which Beatrice seeks to implement

her resolve to be avenged on Miss Cranford, while curing Sam His Excellency of his presumptive dose of what Beatrice calls "the Desdemona complex" at the same time, only earns her public humiliation.

Relating the attention Sam was paying white American Miss Cranford to another humiliating moment in the past when her boyfriend had passed her over for white girls at a party they were attending in London (73), Beatrice concludes,

> So I was locked in combat again with Desdemona, this time itinerant and, worse still, not over some useless black trash in England but the sacred symbol of my nation's pride, such as it was. Corny? So be it.
>
> So I threw myself between this enemy and him. I literally *threw* myself at him like a loyal batman covering his endangered commander with his own body and receiving the mortal bullet in his place.
>
> I did it shamelessly, I cheapened myself. God! I did it to your glory like the dancer in a Hindu temple. Like Esther, oh yes like Esther for my long-suffering people.
>
> And was I glad the king was slowly but surely responding. Was I glad! The big snake, *the royal python of a gigantic erection began to stir in the shrubbery of my shrine* as we danced closer and closer to soothing airs, soothing our ancient bruises together in the dimmed lights. *Fully aroused he clung desperately to me. And I took him then boldly by the hand and led him* to the balcony railings to the breathtaking view of the dark lake from the pinnacle of the hill. And there I told him my story of Desdemona. *Something possessed me as I told it.* (74; my italics)

On the balcony, Beatrice presses her luck and overreaches herself the moment she opens her mouth, when mute blood is replaced by words and thought. The moment she speaks, she reveals her mind and Sam sees through her pettiness, racism, and, above all, presumption to be able to lead him by the penis, and rejects her, saying, "'Oh, don't be racist, Beatrice. I am surprised at you. A girl of your education!'" (74). He is right on all counts. Admitting that regarding Sam His Excellency as the sacred symbol of Kangan national pride is "corny" does not rectify the problematic viewpoint, though, nor does it erase the other problems in the passage, including this so-called feminist's lack of solidarity where a woman of another race, world, and culture is concerned, her traditionalism in making a myth and symbol out of the African leader, her pettiness, her racism, and above all, her delusions of grandeur. Beatrice actually goes so far as to presume to be the Kangan or Black Esther, the native woman who uses her body and sexual prowess, offering herself to the wicked 'King,' rubbing herself against him in public like a cheap tart, to save her (black) race, her 'struggling Negro race' (as the old hymn goes)! Beatrice's lust for power, especially over men, becomes evident when one compares the italicized sections of the foregoing passage of unfulfilled sex with the terms of the putatively transubstantiating sexual intercourse she has with Chris a few days later (104-05).

Beatrice is driven back home, wallowing in self-pity, having forgotten the central, if not sole, role she had played in her public humiliation and fall from political favor and social grace. Primed with this self-serving, convenient forgetting, she accuses her boyfriend, Chris, of not calling to ask what had happened at the party "'because

you didn't want to find out if I slept in Abichi with your boss'" (103). Chris, completely baffled at Beatrice's angry accusation, asks her to stop "'screaming at [him] like some Cherubim and Seraphim prophetess or something'" (103), at which point,

> they fairly scrambled out of the sofa into the bedroom and peeled off their garments and cast them away like things on fire, and fell in together into the wide, open space of her bed and began to roll over and over until she could roll no more and said "Come in." And as he did she uttered a strangled cry that was not just a cry but also a command or a password into her *temple. From there she took charge of him leading him by the hand silently through heaving groves* mottled in subdued yellow sunlight, treading dry leaves underfoot till they came to streams of clear blue water. More than once he had slipped on the steep banks and she had pulled him up and back with such power and authority as he had never seen her exercise before. *Clearly this was her grove and these her own peculiar rites over which she held absolute power. Priestess or goddess herself? No matter. But would he be found worthy? Would he survive?* This unending, excruciating joyfulness in the crossroads of laughter and tears. Yes, I must, oh yes I must, oh yes, yes, oh yes. I must, I must, must, Oh holy priestess, hold me now. I am slipping, slipping, slipping. And now he was not just slipping but falling, crumbling into himself.
>
> Just as he was going to plead for mercy she screamed an order: "OK!" and he exploded into stars and floated through fluffy white clouds and began a long and slow and weightless falling and sinking into deep, blue sleep.
>
> When he woke *like a child cradled in her arms and breasts* her eyes watching anxiously over him, he asked languorously as she slept.
>
> "Priestesses don't sleep."
>
> He kissed her lips and her nipples and closed his eyes again.
>
> "You called me a priestess. No, a prophetess, I think. I mind only the Cherubim and Seraphim part of it. As a matter of fact I do sometimes *feel* like Chielo in the novel, the priestess and prophetess of the Hills and the Caves."
>
> "It comes and goes, I imagine."
>
> "Yes, it's on now. *And I see trouble building up for us. It will get to Ikem first. No joking, Chris. He will be the precursor to make straight the way. But after him it will be you. We are all in it, Ikem, you, me, and even Him*." (104-05; my italics)

The apotheosis of sex and woman in the foregoing passage needs no further comment, except perhaps the thought that sex does not enlighten but rather puts the mind to bed. Furthermore, sex that seeks to empower one partner at the expense of another is not a means to transcendence of the problems of life; on the contrary, it perpetuates them. Be that as it may, it is Chris and Beatrice's prerogative, not to mention that of the third-person narrator, to choose to mystify a fairly ordinary human act, sexual intercourse, into a self-transforming journey through sacred groves. It is another thing, however, to ask a modern, skeptical reader to accept Beatrice's sudden transformation into a priestess and prophetess by means of a very ordinary, common act such as sex. It is difficult to disregard the fact that she anoints herself as such and her henpecked lover acquiesces in the dangerous charade. This problem extends to the omniscient narrator and the novel as a whole when Beatrice's post-coital prophesies are fulfilled to the letter by the end. "'The thing is no longer a joke,'" Beatrice insists in reaction to Chris' unspoken but presumably skeptical response

to a prophecy of coming events (105). As if to prove right her claims to divinity, the novel ensures that Ikem is the first to be killed in classic shot-while-trying-to-escape-fashion (156). Knowing that he was next on the list of the euphemistically named "State Research Council," Chris escapes into the barrenness of the road moving north toward Abazon, Ikem's native region, and dies in that no-man's land (200). Just before he dies, Chris learns that Sam simply disappeared, possibly at the convenience of Colonel Johnson Ossai, head of the State Research Council and new head of the Kangan political hydra (197).

The deaths of these men leave Beatrice as the only surviving member of the powers-that-were in old Kangan; the only female among this elite triumvirate, Beatrice is now invested with the prophetic and political power needed to form a brave new world order composed of a human mosaic (201-16), thanks to the mystified power of sex. No, thanks. Everything about Beatrice proves that she is not ripe enough to play the role that falls to her at the end of the novel: she is petty, self-involved, traditionalist, racist, manipulative, presumptuous, and, above all, power-hungry. In this last regard, she is no different from the tyrants who have ruled and ruined postcolonial Africa for years, no different, then, from Sam His Excellency and the gaggle of sycophants who propped him up, her own boyfriend Chris included. Above all, the ironic effect of the iron determinacy of sex that the novel suggests can transform Beatrice into goddess, priestess, and prophetess is in fact a loss of faith in the narrative as a balanced and convincing account of actual human possibility. After all, at the turn of the twenty-first century, scientific rationality has existed for nearly five hundred years and the world today sorely needs it, in spite of the probability that the slow slide backward toward magical thinking arises out of disillusionment with the limits and hypocrisies of western Reason itself.

The underpinnings of Chris and Beatrice's long scene of trashy (novel) sex are reminiscent of the romanticizing of sex (disguised as love) in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* but opposite to the pathological conception of sex in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. The specific performance of sex in these two realistic postcolonial African novels highlights a turning away from historical realities toward dream reality or an escape that ends in further alienation, nihilism, and, in the case of Season, a number of violent deaths. Out of Eros, then, comes Thanatos, Death by way of erotic-sexual desire. Related to this theme is that of the exoticizing commodification and consumption or fetishization of the non-native, foreign, or alien other, at times even the historical enemy, by various means, but most commonly by means of "sleeping with the stranger." Naturally, this romantic-sexual situation is fraught with historical and cultural politics: two people from different cultural backgrounds and unequal social classes get entangled in more than just the sexual act that is often euphemized as "love-making."

There are two probable, non-equivalent sets of motivations involved in the sexual encounter of westerner and non-westerner. From the perspective of the (often male) member of the historically dominated and thus coded "weaker" culture or group

there is the possible desideratum of paying the colonial debt by means of seducing the woman/wife of the dominant male. In other words, "the colonized fucks back!" For the woman/wife from the dominant historical group or culture there is the possibility of "the myth of the Big Bamboo," the ironic consequence of the white man's attempt to denigrate the colonized Black/Negro/African (in particular) by exaggerating both his penile dimensions and sexual prowess. In this unfortunate comparison, the white man is hardly Long John Silver! In David Henry Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly*, for instance, one female character, Renee, argues that (western) empires and civilizations are created by men who seek to compensate for "pricks the size of pins" (2.6.55-56).

The full scenario of sexual colonialism-imperialism and decolonization is hardly unilateral, however; within it, historic revenge faces its opposite, rue or regret; the desire for atonement opposes the desire for revenge; defying and hurting the family or native land conflicts with proving one's worth or climbing up racially and socially, as witness what Frantz Fanon describes as the desire for "lactification" on the part of the Black/Negro, for instance (*Black Skin, White Masks*). Above all, the specific social milieu tends to intrude and overshadow the personal, most private intercourse between two people. In the end, therefore, the two human individuals involved in this most private of acts, sex, are often displaced and even erased by their collective or group histories. This displacement happens between the central lovers in Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Gordimer's *The Pickup*, and Norman Rush's *Mortals*. The fact that the publication gap between the first novel and the other two is over thirty years proves the adage that, in human affairs, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

Karl Marx once said religion was the opium of the masses and went on to propose materialism as a new religion, a religion that is deeply rooted in the science-propelled Enlightenment Project. But that old reliable and only god, Time, reveals the emptiness of this new religion, showing that the ability to learn the secrets of nature so as to colonize and dominate it has not made humanity any less ignorant, hungry, violent, caught in emotional and physical pain. Of course, humans cannot live without a religion or faith in something bigger than themselves that would infuse their petty lives with meaning. So far, the only thing that comes close to pretending to take the place of Science, which took the place of God and Religion in the first place, is Sex. Yet, sex is not an alternative to destructive, decadent contemporary culture; on the contrary, it is rather a confirmation of the extreme individualism (solipsism) and self-involvement (narcissism) that define this age of decadence. In this day and age, to quote the song by Joni Mitchell, "Sex sells everything. Sex kills" ("Sex Kills").

Sex Kills. And I am not even speaking of the most recent, often sexually transmitted, mode of epidemic human death, AIDS, but rather of the kind of desperate separate peace or solipsistic solution people pursue when the problem is clearly collective and cultural, a question of a wrong orientation toward life, a question of consumerism and commodity fetishism that rot both body and mind. Yet, to the

extent that this is a death-obsessed world (see Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*), and insofar as for many the most stable and ultimate form of meaning is found in the monument-making that follows death (see Jean Genet, *The Balcony*), death-dealing sex is a fitting godly enterprise. In rooting the moment of Beatrice's prophecy in sex, therefore, Achebe taps into a complex vein of contemporary thinking, but this step also means tapping into one of the central impediments of this present-day mind, which tends to lazy solutions and to unreal solidarities that fail to materialize into revolutions. In lieu of religion (God) and science (Reason), each of which has failed in its turn at the crucial task of providing meaning and producing solutions to the problem of human existence, Achebe's novel taps into the dead end mystification of sex.

The depiction of sex in Tayeb Salih's *A Season of Migration to the North* (1969), written nearly twenty years before *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), is not at all romantic or divine; on the contrary, it is perverse, sadistic, even bestial. Yet the initial expectation is the same, that sex is a means to disalienation, reconnection to lost or unattained personal desires, and that if this quest fails it is due to the central seeker-supplicant's lack of ripeness or readiness for such love. The seeker in this case is Mustafa Sa'eed Othman, a predatory lover who blames his cold and heartless nature on the upbringing he received from his cold and distant mother (19-21), though that coldness also fits with the western education and culture he desires so desperately. As he says, "my mind was like a sharp knife, cutting with cold effectiveness…I was busy with this wonderful machine with which I had been endowed. I was cold as a field of ice, nothing in the world could shake me" (22). Mustafa Sa'eed's raging desire for English women is a quest to marry his desire to be shaken out of the cold torpor of his mechanical mind with a conflictive love of all things English. The only problem is that he is trapped in the angry, resentful, predatory nature he blames on the emotional unavailability of his slave-mother. Mustafa Sa'eed says, "I would do everything possible to entice a woman to [my] bed. Then I would go after some new prey. My soul contained not a drop of sense of fun—just as Mrs. Robinson had said" (30).

To others who expect something great out of him, however, Sa'eed puts a revolutionary or rather liberationist spin on his decadent and perverse sexual exploits. An African minister of Education the narrator had met at a conference convened in Khartoum, Sudan, to discuss ways of "unifying educational methods throughout the whole [African] continent" (117-18) says of Sa'eed:

> "He used to be my teacher. In 1928 he was President of the Society for the Struggle for African Freedom of which I was a committee member. What a man he was! He's one of the greatest Africans I've known. He had wide contacts. Heavens, that man—women fell for him like flies. He used to say 'I'll liberate Africa with my penis,' and he laughed so widely you could see the back of his throat." (120)

Sa'eed is something of a legend in the eyes and minds of fellow Sudanese (50-59, 120), one of the foundations of this fame and renown being the fact that "'Mustafa Sa'eed was the first Sudanese to marry an Englishwoman, in fact he was the first to marry a European of any kind'" (55). Thus, his uncontrolled and indeed neurotic pursuit

of white British-European women would appear to give credence to his wild, albeit apocryphal, proposal to liberate Africa with his penis. Yet, very early in *Season*, it becomes clear that the social or collective themes of colonialism and post-colonialism are passing, secondary themes or issues, the main theme of the novel being the necessary yet ambiguous, even dangerous, nature of *personal or individual* desire, especially desire of the lowest bodily or fleshly kind, carnal desire. Placed beside the raging lust of Sa'eed and Wad Rayyes, traditional love as represented by the narrator has little chance (98-104).

Indeed, just as Science displaced Religion as the guidepost of the modern world, Sex displaces Science in the late modern or postmodern/postcolonial one. Thus, Sa'eed pursues sexual desires or lust like a madman, while the narrator, Sa'eed's most conspicuous other who is yet alike in important ways (which is to say, who serves as his dramatic or literary foil), shrinks from the relatively 'high' desire of love. Tragically, the results are nearly the same: the beloved dies, and so does the lover eventually, in the case of lust; the narrator barely manages to avoid this end only at the very last minute, on the very last page of the novel (169). Wad Rayyes is a kindred spirit of M. Sa'eed, who is, in fact, fascinated with him: "Wad Rayyes' face was more in evidence than the others—eight drawings of him in different poses. Why was he so interested in Wad Rayyes?" (151). Both men are sex fiends; both consume women voraciously and spit them out, as seen for instance in Wad Rayyes' boastful account of his sexual conquests, beginning with the rape of a slave girl not unlike Sa'eed's mother (74-80).

Nothing is known of the fate of the countless women Wad Rayyes rapes or seduces, marries, and then divorces; it is likely that most them survive the best way they can because the seed of erotic death is only sown when this predator's lust is unrequited, as happens with Hosna Bint Mahmoud, Mustafa Sa'eed's Sudanese wife and, later, presumptive widow (124-29). Sa'eed's sexual destruction of women also begins in early adolescence, when, at the age of fourteen or so, he seduces and abandons a classmate. Her parting words, "'You are not a human being...You're a heartless machine'" (28), run off him like the proverbial water off the feathers of a duck. He goes on to Cairo, there to lust after Mrs. Elizabeth Robinson, wife of his guardian patron and host. Sa'eed suggests that his taboo-laden adolescent desire for Mrs. Robinson is caused by not knowing motherly love, having received none from his mother, who never really spoke to him, much less embraced him, not even on the day he left home for Cairo, the last time she set eyes on him, and he on her (21). Whatever its cause, this pathological desire for Mrs. Robinson is obviously a case of objectification of the other as a exoticized symbol of the desired western, specifically British, culture and civilization.

When his orientalist guardian, Mr. Robinson, introduces Sa'eed to his wife, the latter reports the fateful encounter to the narrator of the novel, who has been forced to become Mustafa's captive listener and co-conspirator:

> At that moment, I stood on the station platform amidst a welter of sounds and sensations, with the woman's arms around my neck, her mouth on my cheek, the smell of

> her body—a strange, European smell—tickling my nose, her breast touching my chest, I felt—I, a boy of twelve—a vague sexual yearning I had never previously experienced. I felt as though Cairo, that large mountain to which my camel had carried me, was a European woman just like Mrs. Robinson, its arms embracing me, its perfume and the odour of its body filling my nostrils. In my mind her eyes were the colour of Cairo: grey-green, turning at night to a twinkling like that of a firefly…On the day they sentenced me at the Old Bailey's to seven years' imprisonment, I found no bosom except hers on which to rest my head. (25)

The association of woman and city (as symbol of western or westernized, i.e., 'northern,' civilization) is a habit with Mustafa; as he testifies elsewhere, "I saw Lloyd George lay the foundations of a public welfare state. The city was transformed into an extraordinary woman, with her symbols and her mysterious calls, towards whom I drove my camels till their entrails ached and I myself almost died of yearning for her. My bedroom was a well-spring of sorrow, the germ of a fatal disease" (34). To the lustful male lover, the city, that common symbol of western civilization (illustrated in "L.A. Woman" by The Doors) is an extraordinary woman, though not like the chaste and motherly Mrs. Robinson, but rather like the perverse and nihilistic Jean Winifred Morris. Indeed, Jean Morris is merely the worst of a number of masochistic British women Mustafa Sa'eed seduces and destroys, or who destroy themselves, thereafter. Death is in the air, in the water, entering the hearts and minds of these white women of the North whom the seeker from the South desires at his own peril.

London is north of Cairo, which is north of Khartoum, Sa'eed's native city, and each northwards movement increases the force of westernization, symbolized by the British woman. Sa'eed's last name, Othman, is an allusion to Shakespeare's Moor, Othello, and foreshadows his fatal attraction to Jean [Morris], his own personal Desdemona. Long before he meets this white Nemesis or Angel of Death, however, he has donned the mask and played the role of Oriental lothario, slave and lover to the hilt, with Isabella Seymour (38-44, 140-41), Sheila Greenwood (34-35, 138-40), and Ann Hammond (142-47, 156). He tells Isabella Seymour, for instance, that "'I'm like Othello—Arab-African'" and then goes on to regale her with a wildly fantastic or exotic account of his house and life "'on the bank of the river Nile, so that when I'm lying on my bed at night I put my hand out of the window and idly play with the Nile waters till sleep overtakes me'" (38-39). Moreover, during his trial at Old Bailey's, he muses vaingloriously, "'Yes, my dear sirs, I came as an invader into your very homes: a drop of the poison which you have injected into the veins of history. "I am no Othello. Othello was a lie"'" (95).

To the extent that Othello, the Moor of Venice, serves this city-state faithfully, stands outside its boundaries to keep its "Turks" or frightening others at bay, and then kills himself when he learns that he himself has gone blind, mad, and turned "Turk" when he killed Desdemona, Sa'eed is right to say he is no Othello. At another point in the course of his trial, Sa'eed represses the urge to contradict his attorney's legal strategy of labeling Sa'eed's victims masochists and death-seekers, to say to the

court, "'I am the desert of thirst. I am no Othello. I am a lie. Why don't you sentence me to be hanged and so kill the lie?'" (33). Like Jean Winnifred Morris, who manipulates him into killing her and so releasing her from an equally unbearable life, Sa'eed lacks the will to live, has no sense of fun or joie de vivre, but lacks the courage to kill himself; he would rather commit "suicide by means of court." Yet in the end, Sa'eed is an Othello, his mysterious disappearance in the water of the Nile—very likely a suicide—being the final service he does the British Empire in atonement for taking the lives of his British wife, Jean, and leading three other British women to kill themselves. We witness Othello's suicidal words: "In Aleppo once, / Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk / Beat a Venetian and traduced the state, / I took by the throat the circumcised dog / And smote him thus—. *He stabs himself*"(V.ii. 406-10). Sa'eed leaves no such suicide "note" behind but that is not to say he does not commit suicide.

Like the three masochistic, death-desiring British women before her, Jean, Sa'eed's Desdemona, is a sexual stand-in for Mrs. Robinson, who is in turn a surrogate for Sa'eed's unavailable mother. At the same time, both white women are the diametric opposites of this original, Oedipal mother, a symbol of the west and north, the goal of Sa'eed's journey toward cold western rationality and death. Mrs. Robinson is a symbol of Cairo, which is located north of Khartoum, but south of London, the home base of the British Empire and as such the ultimate locus of white, euro-western power and culture. The death-dealing sexual games Sa'eed plays with the four British women marks the catastrophic return of his unfulfilled desire for Mrs. Robinson, who is a transferential projection of his cold biological mother, Fatima Abussadek, "a slave from the south, from the tribes of Zandi or Baria" (54). Jean changes the ending of this deadly sex game by switching roles with her would-be predator, though, with her death, she switches the roles back again, her the prey to Sa'eed her predator.

Mustafa and Jean's sadomasochistic love-romance and marriage presents the novel's central idea of sexual desire as perversity, as misanthropic ecstasy, a kind of rapture that is also a rupture of Being (33-34, 154-65). "Love is a battlefield," as Pat Benatar sings. The first thing Mustafa says about Jean is fatally unambiguous: "'Everything which happened before my meeting her was a premonition; everything I did after I killed her was an apology, not for killing her, but for the lie that was my life. I was twenty-five when I met her at a party in Chelsea'" (29). An oft-repeated phrase precedes this statement of fate: "And the train carried me to Victoria station and to the world of Jean Morris" (29; cf. 31, 33, passim). "'You're ugly,' Jean Morris said to me on the second occasion" they met, reports Sa'eed, who locates this second meeting at one of many such meetings of British intellectuals in various London vicinities (30). The courtship that follows is pure S&M, reminiscent of the bondage game of dominatrix and slave; Jean plays hard-to-get but soon pretends to tire of the chase, gives in, and orders Mustafa to marry her:

> So I married her. My bedroom became a theatre of war; my bed a patch of hell. When I grasped her it was like grasping at clouds, like bedding a shooting-star, like mounting the back of a Prussian military march. That bitter smile was continually on her mouth.

> I would stay awake all night warring with bow and sword and spear and arrows, and in the morning I would see the smile unchanged and would know that once again I had lost the combat. It was as though I were a *slave Shahrayar you buy in the market for a dinar encountering a Scheherazade begging amidst the rubble of a city destroyed by plague.* (33; my italics).

On the basis of sexual frustration from failing to get Jean Morris to express interest in him, much less to climb ecstatically into his bed as the other three British women do, Mustafa comes to believe that she is the only woman for him, and so marries her. The basis of both courtship and marriage is clearly devoid of logic, as also of Mrs. Robinson's "sense of fun," illustrating the fact that even when it is disguised as transcendental love, carnal love or sex is not a means of salvation and transcendence but of death, particularly in the hands of those who desire death in the first place. Generally, moreover, carnal love or sex is merely what it is, a glaring manifestation of the irreducible animal essence of the human being, the bodily or fleshly basis of earthly human existence. At its orgasmic conclusion, sex provides a temporary means of escape from this everyday reality, perhaps even a little taste of death, the final, irreversible escape. Yet one of the possible ramifications of sex, reproduction, tends to mire people in elemental body and flesh, in the collective, historical shortcomings of the multiplying species. This embodiment is the full 'meaning' of sex, as opposed to its selected, reduced, rarefied, and mystified appearance in the light of love and romance. It seems that the body will always win in the end.

The Oedipal origin and basis of M. Sa'eed's deadly seduction of women, his perverse direction of Eros into the service of Thanatos, becomes unmistakable in his thoughts and reactions as he describes the day when Jean called his petulant bluff to kill her by laughing in his face. He says,

> I experienced a feeling of ignominy, loneliness, and loss. *Suddenly I remembered my mother.* I saw her face clearly in my mind's eye and heard her saying to me "It's your life and you're free to do with it as you will." I remembered that the news of my mother's death had reached me nine months ago and had found me drunk and in the arms of a woman. I don't recollect now which woman it was; I do, though, recollect that I felt no sadness—it was as though the matter was of absolutely no concern to me. I remembered this and wept so much I thought I would never stop. I felt Jean embracing me and saying things I couldn't make out, though her voice was repellent to me… (159; my italics)

In the end, Mustafa Sa'eed does exactly what Jean Morris requires of him, which is to be the means to a final escape that would deliver her from an unbearable life and kill the seed of destruction within her, whose origins she does not know. Sadly, even at the crucial moment of rapture and rupture Sa'eed lacked the courage to take the step to his own final escape: "I began crushing my chest against her as she called imploringly: 'Come with me. Come with me. Don't let me go alone.'" But even though she says she loves him, "and I believed her," and in spite of the fact that he says he loves he loves her in return, "and I spoke the truth" (165), Sa'eed does not go with Jean. The

tragic, cataclysmic result is that "the universe, with its past, present, and future, was gathered together into a single point before and after which nothing existed" (165). This is the nihilistic destination or endpoint of carnal love or sex in *Seasons*, and it stands in stark contrast to the final point of platonic or motherly love as symbolized by Mrs. Robinson.[1]

At the Old Bailey's, on that fateful occasion when Mrs. Elizabeth ("Mitzi") Robinson visits him, Sa'eed is given the rare opportunity to return to the origins of his occulted, perverted, Oedipal desires, to correct or exorcise them. He gets the rare second chance to put his head on the bosom of the Mother for whom he had developed this taboo desire, to be simply her son in a natural or acceptable way, and to hear her say, "'Don't cry, dear child…patting [his] head'" (25). Sa'eed fails to take advantage of this rare opportunity to restore the balance, however, as witness the nihilistic turn of his life once he has returned to his native Sudan. After spending seven years in a British jail, he settles in the small village at the bend of the Nile, halfheartedly marries, has two sons, but hides from his family in a green-themed mausoleum above whose mantelpiece stands the portrait of the deadly beloved, Jean Morris (154-55). Ultimately, he leaves his wife and two sons by means of a drowning that is very likely an act of suicide, the final escape from his unbearable life, and continued pursuit of his Angel of Death, Jean Morris.

Insofar as Sa'eed's life is all about death, entirely about how to put his cold, cold heart on ice at last, however, Jean Morris is also his Angel of Mercy; channeling the essence, spirit, or force of his cold, cold mother, Jean sows the seed of death in him once again. What makes him merely die a Voodoo Death or go on living like a zombie in a British jail for seven years and then spend the rest of his life in that village at the bend of the Nile is his lack of courage. Rather than admit to the court that he was as much Jean Morris' victim as she was his, for instance, Sa'eed keeps silent and watches, hoping that justice will miscarry and grant him his unspoken desire for death. The court delivers justice by accident, giving Sa'eed seven years in jail, thereby fulfilling one of the paradoxes of sadomasochistic logic at the heart of the novel. The sadist normally loves to give pain but refuses to hurt the masochist, who craves pain, because withholding pain would pain the masochist more than giving it. The masochist cries, "Hit me! Hit me! I am a masochist," but the sadist resists, saying, "No, I will not hit you. I am a sadist." Jean does the same thing to Mustafa, or rather he does it to himself.

Needless to say, the representation of sex in *Season* is nothing like the mystical/mystified form it takes in *Anthills of the Savannah*, *Season*'s perspective of the female beloved as the male lover's Angel of Death being the more rare of the diametrically opposed representations. Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001) is closer to *Season* than it is to *Anthills*, though its initial perspective on carnal love or sex is romantic and transcendental (to use Andrew Sullivan's term), even mystical and mystifying. *The Pickup* recounts the tale of the lives, loves, and vital lies or life-enabling pretenses of Julie Summers, a westerner who possesses a lot (enough to repudiate what she

has or is entitled to but also embrace it when she needs to) and Ibrahim ibn Musa, a non-westerner who has not, who is deprived enough to sacrifice everything to have some of the fruits of western culture and civilization that Julie repudiates. Sex in this novel is presented as the means of transcending such historical realities as native country or national identity, individual personality, and modes of belonging such as class, race, culture, and civilization. To quote Andrew Sullivan's insightful review of the novel, "It's extremely hard to write beautifully about the power of sex, of its capacity to elevate humans out of worlds that would divide them, of its occasionally transcendent quality. But Gordimer writes about it so easily we barely notice the accomplishment" (Sullivan 10).

The theme of transcendent (carnal) love, as Sullivan calls it, is found in a poem by William Plomer, three lines of which serve as epigraph to the novel, while at the El Lay (L.A.) café the Old Poet delivers the whole first section. The essential portions of the poem are, "Let us go to another country / Not yours or mine / And start again / …. / Hope would be our passport, / The rest is understood / Just say the word" (88-89). Clearly, the poem is about the impossible, or wishful at best; hope is the key, and for most, hope is like a drug, indeed is a drug. Blind, desperate hope is what the old poet is mongering when he delivers this poem in response to the first major complication of the novel, the deportation order from the South African Home office. The very next words of the novel, spoken by Ibrahim ibn Musa, are placed at the beginning of the next paragraph, perhaps to blunt its otherwise sharp purpose:

> Dumb.
>
> Might as well be. When they are talking about matters you know better than they do or ever will. You are dumb if you can't speak—speak their language as they do. You have to use your lips and tongue for the other purpose, your penis and even the soles of your feet, caressing hers in the bed, *in place of your opinions, convictions*. (90; my italics)

The words underscore the unreality of transcendental (carnal) love, its presentation as another country in which the problems of reality can be overcome, especially where this love is manifest as 'country matters,' as carnal love or sex. Ibrahim's view of love is clearly at variance with that of Julia, his white South African lover. Ibrahim is getting set to immigrate to the USA in pursuit of bourgeois dreams to "make a success" (51, 62-63) like Julie's father and his suburban coterie (39-49) and she, anti-bourgeois as she imagines herself to be, knows she will not be going with him. At this point, Julie muses: "His conviction that 'love' is a luxury not for him has found its proof. Yes" (261). Until that eleventh-hour moment of disillusionment, however, her dominant view of love (or rather sex, love's more attainable carnal equivalent) is hopeful, romantic, and transcendental, as witness its utterance at crucial points in the novel (96, 130). Indeed, so seductive and ubiquitous is this view of carnal love that it leads Andrew Sullivan to the erroneous conclusion that in *The Pickup* sex overcomes the problems and difficulties of history and culture, time and space.

Sullivan sums up the plot of the novel when he writes: "Gordimer shows us, scene by scene, gesture by gesture, their [Julie and Ibrahim's] almost comic misreading

of each other [until] we realize that what they share and what had brought them together—a loathing of where they are from—is tearing apart. There is no place they can fully be themselves together. Their world and time have doomed them."[2] Yet in the very next sentence he says, "Only sex saves them….What keeps Julie and Ibrahim together, what cements their relationship, is the wordless communication of sex" (10). The fact of the matter is that the wordless communication of sex is no communication at all; generally speaking, sex is merely a means of consuming another, the violence of this consumption exacerbated by the muteness or rather incoherent verbalizations of sex, its self-indulgent and sometimes deceptive moans and groans. Even if sex were a bona fide mode of communication, coherent to boot, it is certainly not fitting to a historically burdened, complex, multi-cultural relationship such as Ibrahim and Julie's. The previously discussed passage (90) suggests that sex never served to reveal one to the other, not even at the beginning of the relationship. In fact, Ibrahim regards sex as a speaking with other, mute parts of his anatomy that results in the repression of the more substantial manifestation of self or identity, an identity formed by uttered "opinions, convictions."

Privileged white South African that she is, Julie Summers conceives self or identity as an almost-academic matter of self-image or public mask as constituted by an anti-bourgeois openness to others (10-12) and a rejection of the materialistic ways and world of her father and his well-heeled circle (38-49, 62-63). By the end of the novel, when the fissures in Julie and Ibrahim's relationship have appeared, scene by scene, gesture by gesture, sex is definitely not salvific or redemptive; it has no power whatsoever, except in fact to deepen the initial fissures even further. Julie's private intimation of this non-equivalence of desires represents for her the first secret complication in her relationship with Ibrahim: "For the first time, the difference between them, the secret conditioning of their origins, an intriguing special bond in their intimacy against all others, is a difference in a different sense, an opposition" (38). The all-too-common mistake manifest in the foregoing passage is to take individual difference to be a construct of "the secret conditioning of… origins," that is, as a facet of collective upbringing, when in fact it is more a matter of personal "opinions, convictions" (90), as Ibrahim correctly observes.

In any case, the chapter in which Julie reaches her tragic understanding of the personal, exclusive, self-defining nature of difference ends with the following poetic observation: "She is ashamed of her parents: he thinks she is ashamed of him. Neither knows either, about the other" (38). Poetry aside, the only way for one lover to know about the other is through honest, courageous, verbal exchange, through statement, question, and response, not through the guttural moans and groans of pantomimic sex. Tragic is the confusing of one with the other, as Julie does but Ibrahim does not, though his calculating view and practice of love leave as much, if not more, to be desired.

Ibrahim and Julie quarrel "for the first time since the first cup of coffee together" (95) when, without consulting him, she buys two air tickets as solution to the problem

of imminent deportation. Ibrahim really looks at her for the first time, which is to say, above all, that for the first time he tries to picture her self-defining mind, opinions, convictions, and comes to the conclusion that "She's a child, they're all children" (93). He rejects as impossible her desire to follow him to his unnamed country: "Madness. Madness. I thought she was intelligent. *Stupidity*. That's it. That's final" (95), thus provoking the first quarrel that ends in sexual intercourse, but only because Ibrahim's ego is stroked enough by Julie's "devotion" to arouse his penis. His patronizing mind tells him that

> […] she knows *nothing*. That is true but he sees, feels, has revealed to him something he does not know: this foreign girl has for him—there are beautiful words for it coming to him in his mother tongue—devotion. How could anyone, man or woman, not want that? Devotion. Is it not natural to be loved? To accept a blessing. She knows *something*. Even if it comes out of ignorance, innocence of reality.
>
> The capacity returned to him, for this foreigner makes him whole. That night he made love to her with the reciprocal tenderness—call it whatever old name you like—that he had guarded against—with a few lapses—couldn't afford its commitment, in his situation, must be able to take whatever the next foothold might offer. That night they made love, the kind of lovemaking that is another country, a country of its own, not yours or mine. (96)

Sullivan bases his argument of the transcendental power of love on the foregoing passage, but "what's love go to do, got to do with it?" Ibrahim lets down his guard because Julie's devotion resonates with his Muslim upbringing, but perhaps more importantly because she represents the next foothold in his life-journey. Her devotion to him makes him whole, and this welcome servicing of his beaten-up ego fires up his libido, causes him to tear down his walls momentarily, before he tears off her underpants, but what has love got to do with it? The solution Gordimer's novel presents to the universal and timeless problem of alienation or dislocation, as Sullivan terms it (10), does not last, does not survive Julie and Ibrahim's disillusioning return to the land of his birth. Gordimer appears to be aware of something Achebe fails to see, that sex is only a means to momentary escape at best, an occasional but fleeting concourse with death at worst, a welcome reminder of both alienation and mortality, which may be why the French call sexual orgasm *le petit mort*. Sex does not, indeed cannot, perform the mystical, transcendental function that some writers try to force on it.

In fact, it may be more the truth to say that when people turn to sex as desperately as Julie and Ibrahim do in *The Pickup*, Mustafa Sa'eed and countless others do in *Season*, and Chris and Beatrice do that one time in *Anthills*, they are signaling through flames the fact that God is dead, science or rationality bogus, and no other source of meaning exists but sex, the most accessible and pleasurable means of existence. The same may be said of the lesser seers, such as writers of pulp-Romance novels, who hold sex up to the masses as the new opiate, as an existential analgesic. Yet sex that presumes to do what it cannot do ends up being cynical and nihilistic.

On some level, the lovers may be aware of the emptiness of modern life, the loss of rites of continuity such as lamented in T. S. Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land*, but rather than face this fact—bare-naked, forked, and honest to the point of existential pain—they elect to deny it and fixate on personal-solipsistic or interpersonal-domestic escapes from reality, on romantic fantasies as well as the fantasy of domestic bliss.

The inexorable failure of carnal love as a means of transcending everyday problems and the general burden of history or existence is sounded most forcefully of all in Norman Rush's novel *Mortals* (2003). The narrator says of the central character, Ray Finch,

> And it was an insight he was having about the sex act with a beloved, and the insight was that *the poets were wrong and that sex was not a metaphor for loving, for entering a beloved, unifying with her, making a unity.* It was difficult to put it clearly. But sex was not a good metaphor for loving because there was a form of connection between real lovers that made sex look like an approximation of it. *People like Lawrence were responsible for getting the less important thing moved up to the head of the line where it didn't belong.* (Rush 500; my italics)

Ray is right, which is why the blanket-under-the-stars sexual intercourse with his much-beloved but lost wife, Iris, fails to rekindle their dying love (698-706). The sex had been prefaced by discussion of Iris's sexual affair with Morel, in which this black lover is reduced into a pornographic prop, a sort of verbal foreplay (690-97). In any case, the sexual act that follows is not spontaneous, at least not on Iris' part: "She pointed to the back. There was a thick pink acrylic afghan on the seat, along with a canister of towelettes. She had planned this" (700). At one point, Ray says that it "felt like rowing":

> He thought, We are all rowing toward death, keeping it behind us but rowing toward it and not looking at it while we study our pitiful accomplishments receding. In sex you might forget death….
> This was not going to be dawdling sex or karezza or any halfway sex fun practices they fooled around with. (703)
> …..
>
> He was in and he was going to fuck her until she said to stop in the name of God.
> And he needed to think of his semen bolt as a pearl of great price, a pearl, a containable thing [as well as the mineralized result of antihistamine secretions meant to ease the taken-in sand irritants in the shell or under the skin of an oyster]. (704)

Ray turns Iris over into the missionary position so he can fuck her hard until she reaches her second orgasm and he his first, but in order to do this, "he thought of Guatemala, the agency, Boyle, to cool himself." Then his final thrust: "And then the knot at the root of his cock dissolved in fire, melting. He shouted when he came. Then she was snorting, trying to say something. She was telling him to stop. She had come a second time and she wanted him to stop. They disengaged, shaking" (706). Ray has won the battle (of lust), but both have lost the war of love, or rather the war *on* love. Of Ray in the wake of orgasm, the narrator says,

> He felt leaden. Because he didn't know what the message was, the message of what they had just done together. Or he felt leaden because there was no message. She looked ravaged, tired, not the way he wanted her to look after what they had done.
> When he bent down to gather up the afghan she said, "leave it." (706)

Obviously, the sexual act will not be remembered with a souvenir. When Iris asks Ray, "'What are we going to do?'" he understands her to be asking, "'What are we going to do once we've done what we're going to do and it isn't working out so magnificently, when we have regrets, if we do. That's what you mean'" (706). Iris does not disagree.

The important question this sexual fiasco raises is why so many people today expect sex to erase real life problems as well as speak to them of soul and spirit, as gods of ancient myths and religion used to do. Why do they expect an ordinary, fleshly act like sex even to carry divine revelations? The most likely answer is the general dearth of meaning in the world today, the lack of connectedness to things, even (or especially) those things that we consume voraciously, desperately. The accepted word for this state of affairs is "alienation," a word that is not unique to the modern period, contrary to conventional sociological wisdom, and which, moreover, covers such a gamut of secular-material and spiritual ills, including the loss of origins, place, self, and faith in old things and ways, that it may as well be useless for contemplation. Nevertheless, something of the sense or feeling of this word lies at the root as well as the tender, troubled heart of all four novels discussed in this essay.

Endnotes

1. The comparative dates of publication of Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) and Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel's hit soundtrack to the Mike Nichols film, *The Graduate* (1967), leads one to wonder whether the naming the older woman who inflames the passions of a young boy, or at least much younger man (in the film, Benjamin is 21, and fresh out of college, hence the title) Mrs. Robinson in the novel is a deliberate echo of or allusion to the film and soundtrack. Of course, unlike the older woman in the Simon and Garfunkel song and Nichols film, the Mrs. Robinson of Salih's novel makes no attempt whatsoever to seduce the fifteen-year old Mustafa Sa'eed. In fact, she is Undine, the very picture of pure motherly love.

2. This non-equivalence of individual desires (not clash or conflict of collective cultures, as in the more common formulation) can be seen in the not dissimilar inter-cultural relationship between Maire Chatach and George Yolland in Brian Friel's play *Translations*. Here, the Irishwoman, Maire, desires to improve herself and become worldly by acquiring English, the language of the British colonizer, at the expense of Gaelic and such 'dead languages' as Greek and Latin (15-16, 25-26), resembles Ibrahim's desire to learn English by reading the newspaper with something that approaches religious fervor. His desire, though, is colored by "an intense concentration and a discipline of disbelief as first principle in testing the facts" (34) and by his wanting, above all else, to be like the money-obsessed bourgeoisie, that is, Julie's father, Nigel Akroyd Summers, and his suburban friends (37-49, 51, 62-63). Similarly, Julie's detestation of and studied opposition to her father and his suburban friends (18, 22, 26, passim) and her choice of Ibrahim's nameless country and village over her own country, South Africa, echoes George Yolland's love of Ireland and Baile Beag, together with the native Irish language, Gaelic (38-39, 42, 50-53).

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