

The Narrator's Silence: Rereading Hosna's Tragedy In Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*

Itsna Syahadatud Dinurriyah

UIN Sunan Ampel

✉ itsnadinurriyah@uinsa.ac.id

Abstract:

This paper explores the intersection of silence, complicity, and gendered violence in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, focusing on the narrator's role in the tragic fate of Hosna Bint Mahmoud. While the narrator is often positioned as a reflective observer, his silence and inaction, in the case of Hosna Bint Mahmoud's forced marriage and tragic death, expose a deeper moral paralysis shaped by colonial epistemologies and masculine complicity. His responsibility for Mustafa Saeed's, Hosna's late husband's, children is also a critical narrative of the Islamic perspective on orphans' wealth. This study argues that the narrator's Western education and internalized colonial values produce a fragmented identity, leaving him unable to challenge local gendered violence or resist the patriarchal norms he critiques. The novel ultimately critiques both colonial modernity and patriarchal tradition, calling for a decolonial, feminist consciousness that centers ethical responsibility and gender justice, and applies Islamic rules.

Keywords: silence; complicit masculinity; Islamic rules

Abstrak:

Makalah ini mengeksplorasi persimpangan antara keheningan, keterlibatan, dan kekerasan berbasis gender dalam novel Musim Migrasi ke Utara karya Tayeb Salih, dengan fokus pada peran narator dalam nasib tragis Hosna Bint Mahmoud. Meskipun narator sering diposisikan sebagai pengamat yang reflektif, keheningan dan ketidakaktifannya, dalam kasus pernikahan paksa dan kematian tragis Hosna Bint Mahmoud, mengungkap kelumpuhan moral yang lebih dalam yang dibentuk oleh epistemologi kolonial dan keterlibatan maskulin. Tanggung jawabnya terhadap anak-anak Mustafa Saeed, mendiang suami Hosna, juga merupakan narasi kritis tentang perspektif Islam mengenai kekayaan anak yatim. Studi ini berpendapat bahwa pendidikan Barat narator dan nilai-nilai kolonial yang diinternalisasi menghasilkan identitas yang terfragmentasi, membuatnya tidak mampu menantang kekerasan berbasis gender lokal atau melawan norma-norma patriarki yang dikritiknya. Novel ini pada akhirnya mengkritik modernitas kolonial dan tradisi patriarki, menyerukan kesadaran dekolonial dan feminis yang berpusat pada tanggung jawab etis dan keadilan gender, serta menerapkan aturan-aturan Islam.

Kata kunci: keheningan; maskulinitas yang terlibat; aturan Islam

INTRODUCTION

Season of Migration to the North is an Arabic novel written by a Sudanese writer, Tayeb Salih, in 1966. This novel is considered one of the most important works in modern Arabic literature, which examines themes of colonialism, identity, and cultural conflict between Africa and Europe through the lens of postcolonial Sudan. Denys Johnson-Davies helped introduce Salih to international audiences by being a translator of this novel.

The story unfolds through a nameless narrator returning to his Nile village after studying in Europe. He meets Mustafa Sa'eed, a mysterious stranger whose life reflects the tensions between East and West, who later becomes known as Hosna's husband. As Sa'eed's tragic history revealed, one of them is his seduction of many girls; the narrator grapples with his own hybrid identity and the lingering effects of colonial domination. He realizes that he is Sudanese; however, he brings his knowledge from Europe, which is opposed to African culture.

Exploring colonialism, identity, and culture, this study exhibits the intersection of the narrator's silence, the complicity of his masculinity, and gendered violence, particularly experienced by Hosna. Hosna bint Mahmoud is a female protagonist who is the widow of Mustafa Sa'eed. She refuses to remarry, a condition that challenges social expectations. As a widow with two kids, she is supposed to accept a man's proposal to support her life, both financially and for her safety. In the narrative, she declines to marry Wad Rayyes. 'If they force me to marry, I'll kill him and kill myself.' (Salih, p.68). She decides to kill Rayyes and then commits suicide.

This study addresses these gaps by positioning Hosna's speak up and death at the center of analysis and by reframing the narrator's silence as a form of complicit masculinity, drawing on R.W. Connell. It further advances existing scholarship by integrating decolonial theory to demonstrate how coloniality persists not only in global or political structures but also in everyday gender relations and moral decisions. By synthesizing subaltern theory, decolonial thought, and masculinity studies, this research offers a more comprehensive understanding of how silence functions as a mechanism of both epistemic and gendered violence in the novel. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the convergence of these frameworks to reveal the narrator's silence not merely as absence, but as an active site of power, complicity, and ethical failure.

These are the research questions discussed in this study:

1. How does Hosna speak about herself?
2. Why does the narrator keep silent on Hosna's rejection of the wedding proposal?
3. How does complicit masculinity influence the narrator's thoughts on Hosna's tragic death?
4. How does the Islamic perspective see this problem?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a triangulated theoretical framework combining Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, decolonial theory as articulated by Aníbal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo, and R.W. Connell's notion of complicit masculinity to examine *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a critical reading of silence, gendered violence, and postcolonial power structures, particularly in relation to the character of Hosna and the narrator's ethical position. To further contextualize the analysis, this study incorporates an

Islamic ethical perspective as a complementary lens to critique the cultural practices depicted in the novel. While the narrative is situated within a Muslim-majority society, the treatment of Hosna reveals a tension between ethical principles in Islam and localized patriarchal customs.

Drawing on Spivak's (1988) foundational question, "Can the subaltern speak?", Spivak's concept of the subaltern provides a critical lens through which women's voices are filtered, translated, distorted, or even erased by dominant systems such as colonialism, patriarchy, and academia. This theory matches Hosna's case since she is forced to follow traditional culture in her region. Furthermore, Spivak also stresses that the subaltern woman is silenced twice, either by colonial power or by local patriarchy (2010, p.287-300). Both are done by the narrator; thus, he does not provide any help on Hosna's tragedy.

This condition is further illuminated through decolonial theory, particularly Quijano's (2000) concept of the colonality of power and Mignolo's (2011) notion of epistemic disobedience. Quijano exposes the difference between colonialism and colonality. For him, colonialism is a historical period of direct political domination, and colonality is the ongoing logic of domination. In colonialism, there is a global classification of people based on race: Europeans are superior, rational, modern, whereas non-Europeans are inferior, primitive, irrational (2000, p.533). In addition, Mignolo argues that modern knowledge is dominated by Eurocentrism, Western rationality, and colonial histories of knowledge production. Therefore, he opines on delinking these dominant systems and valuing marginalized, local, or non-Western epistemologies (2011, p.3). In the novel, Mustafa Sa'eed represents the internalization of colonial logic, especially in his relationships with women, which mirror domination and control. Meanwhile, the village's insistence on Hosna's remarriage reflects how patriarchal authority is naturalized as cultural tradition.

Within this framework, the narrator's position is critically examined through Connell's (1995) concept of complicit masculinity. The concept exhibits that men who do not actively dominate or oppress women can still benefit from and support patriarchal systems indirectly. They do not abuse women but stay silent when other men do (1995, p.77-81). Unlike Mustafa Sa'eed, who embodies a more overtly dominant and violent masculinity, the narrator represents a quieter, passive form of masculine power. His failure to intervene in Hosna's forced marriage demonstrates how masculinity operates not only through action but also through inaction.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives reveal that silence in *Season of Migration to the North* is deeply political. Hosna's silencing reflects the epistemic limits imposed on subaltern subjects, while the narrator's silence exemplifies how masculinity can operate through complicity. At the same time, the persistence of colonality demonstrates that gendered violence cannot be separated from broader historical and epistemological structures. The novel thus exposes the entanglement of postcolonial identity, patriarchal power, and ethical responsibility, positioning silence as both a symptom and a mechanism of domination.

METHOD OF STUDY

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis through close reading to examine *Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North*, with particular attention to the narrator's silence, the complicity of masculinity, and the gendered violence experienced by Hosna. This method is used to interpret

texts by examining language, themes, symbols, and structures in depth rather than measuring them numerically. In Norman Fairclough's *Critical Discourse Analysis* (1995), language reflects power and ideology. Important for analyzing colonial discourse, gender, and domination. In addition, Catherine Besley (1985) connects interpretation with ideology and meaning-making. Meanwhile, close reading is utilized as a method to uncover how meaning is constructed at the level of language, narrative structure, and omission. Rather than treating the novel as a mere sequence of events, this approach focuses on how specific moments, such as Hosna's refusal of forced marriage, her appeal to the narrator, and the subsequent acts of violence, are narrated, framed, and, crucially, silenced.

The analytical process begins with the selection of key passages that foreground interactions between Hosna and the narrator, as well as narrative segments that depict communal attitudes toward marriage and gender roles. These passages are examined in detail to identify patterns in diction, tone, and narrative positioning. Particular emphasis is placed on instances of hesitation, indirect speech, and absence, through which the narrator's silence is rendered not as neutrality but as a meaningful narrative strategy. Such silences are treated as textual evidence, revealing the ways in which non-response and passivity contribute to the maintenance of patriarchal authority.

To systematize the analysis, the selected passages are coded into thematic categories, including silence, masculinity, violence, and resistance. These categories enable the identification of recurring patterns across the text, which are then interpreted through relevant theoretical frameworks. Drawing on R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, the study examines how the narrator's educated and seemingly rational persona masks a form of complicity that sustains gendered power relations. At the same time, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the subaltern is employed to analyze Hosna's position as a speaking subject whose voice is structurally unheard, despite her explicit resistance. Additionally, decolonial theory, particularly Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power and Mignolo's notion of epistemic disobedience, can help us understand society's reaction to Hosna's tragedy.

Through this method, the study moves from micro-level textual analysis to broader ideological critique. Close attention to linguistic detail—such as the narrator's use of passive constructions, modal uncertainty, and narrative distance—reveals how silence operates as an active form of participation in the perpetuation of violence. In this way, qualitative textual analysis through close reading enables a nuanced understanding of how masculinity, power, and gendered violence are embedded not only in the events of the narrative but in the very language through which those events are conveyed. Then, it is reflected in the Islamic perspective since the setting is in an Islamic country.

DISCUSSION

A. Hosna's Bravery to Speak Up

As a subaltern woman, Hosna is structurally excluded from meaningful participation in decisions that determine her life, particularly in the context of her forced marriage. This study interprets Hosna as a subaltern subject whose voice is structurally constrained and ultimately erased. Although Hosna explicitly resists her forced marriage, her refusal is dismissed by the male authority figures in the village. As she states, *"I'll kill him and kill myself if he comes near me"* (Salih, 2009, p.68), her words articulate resistance, yet they fail to produce meaningful intervention. Her speech does

not translate into agency, illustrating Spivak's argument that the subaltern cannot be heard within dominant epistemic structures. Hosna's eventual death—killing Wad Rayyes and then herself—becomes a tragic form of expression that underscores the limits of speech within patriarchal and postcolonial systems. Thus, her silence is not an absence of voice, but the result of epistemic violence that renders her resistance unintelligible.

Through the lens of the subaltern concept, Hosna does, in fact, *speak*—but her speech is structurally foreclosed from recognition and agency. Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot “speak” not because of a literal absence of voice, but because dominant systems of power render that voice inaudible or unintelligible. Hosna's articulation of selfhood appears most clearly in her refusal of forced marriage, where she asserts her will in stark and violent terms. Her statement is a direct expression of autonomy, desire, and resistance. It demonstrates that Hosna is not passive; rather, she is fully aware of her situation and actively rejects it.

However, in Spivakian terms, Hosna's speech fails to function as “speech” within the social structure that surrounds her. Her words do not circulate as legitimate discourse; they are dismissed, ignored, or overridden by patriarchal authority. The village elders proceed with the marriage regardless, effectively transforming her voiced resistance into social silence. Thus, Hosna's self-articulation is not absent but *unheard*, a condition produced by what Spivak calls epistemic violence (p.35). Her subjectivity is denied recognition, and she is reduced to an object of exchange within male-dominated cultural norms.

Moreover, Hosna's final act (killing Wad Rayyes and then herself) can be interpreted as an extreme form of “speaking” when discursive avenues are closed. Yet even this act does not restore her voice within the symbolic order; instead, it confirms the tragic limits of subaltern agency. She becomes legible only through violence and death, not through dialogue or recognition. In this sense, Hosna's “speech” reveals the paradox at the heart of Spivak's argument: the subaltern attempts to speak, but the structure ensures that her voice cannot be properly heard, acknowledged, or acted upon.

Therefore, Hosna speaks about herself through resistance, refusal, and ultimately violence, but her speech is systematically nullified. Her case exemplifies how subaltern expression is not a matter of voice alone, but of the conditions that determine whether that voice can be recognized as meaningful within a given power structure.

B. The Narrator's Silence

The narrator in this novel plays a crucial role in the silencing of Hosna, not through direct violence but through passive complicity. From the perspective of the subaltern, inability to “speak” is not due to a lack of voice but to the absence of structures that allow that voice to be heard and acted upon (Spivak, p.160). Hosna clearly articulates her refusal of forced marriage—“I'll kill him and kill myself if he comes near me” —yet her statement fails to produce intervention. The narrator, who is in a position to mediate or disrupt this outcome, acknowledges the inevitability of the situation, stating, “She'd marry him whether she likes it or not” (Salih, 82). This moment is critical: rather than challenging the patriarchal decision, he resigns himself to it, effectively allowing Hosna's voice to be nullified.

Moreover, his silence and reflective stance can be read as an attempt to preserve his moral self-image while avoiding confrontation with his complicity. Rather than recognizing Hosna's death as

a consequence of systemic gendered violence in which he is implicated, he frames it within broader existential or social ambiguity. This interpretive move dilutes the specificity of her suffering and reinscribes the very epistemic conditions that, as Spivak argues, prevent the subaltern from being truly heard (p.228). Thus, the narrator's actions show his mode of understanding: it enables him to acknowledge tragedy without disrupting the colonial-patriarchal structures that produced it. In this sense, his response to Hosna's death exemplifies how coloniality operates through everyday thought processes, where silence, reflection, and inaction converge to sustain the erasure of subaltern women.

C. The Narrator's Masculinity

The narrator himself recognizes the violence of this system, yet he fails to challenge it. This moment reveals the endurance of coloniality at the level of everyday life, where domination is reproduced not only through institutions but through social complicity. The absence of epistemic disobedience ensures that both colonial and patriarchal structures remain intact.

This inaction can be understood through the concept of complicit masculinity, which describes forms of masculinity that sustain hegemonic power without overtly enacting dominance (Connell, p.79). The narrator does not force Hosna into marriage, yet his silence enables the conditions under which such coercion occurs. His position as an educated returnee and confidant of Mustafa Sa'eed gives him symbolic authority, yet he chooses not to exercise it. In doing so, he becomes ethically implicated in the reproduction of patriarchal violence.

Furthermore, this complicity reflects what Quijano (2000, p.545) terms the coloniality of power, in which domination persists through normalized social practices, including gender relations. The narrator's failure to intervene demonstrates the absence of what Walter Dignolo (2011) calls epistemic disobedience—the refusal to accept oppressive norms as natural or inevitable. Instead, he internalizes and reproduces these norms through silence. Thus, the narrator contributes to Hosna's silencing not merely by omission but by participating in a broader structure that renders her speech ineffective. His silence is therefore not neutral; it is an active force that sustains the erasure of the subaltern.

The narrator's response to Hosna's tragic death is deeply shaped by complicit masculinity, which in turn reflects the persistence of coloniality within postcolonial social relations. Complicit masculinity refers to forms of masculine identity that do not overtly enact domination but sustain patriarchal power through passivity and alignment with dominant norms. In the novel, the narrator does not directly cause Hosna's forced marriage or death; however, his earlier inaction and subsequent reflections reveal an internalization of the very structures that enable such violence. Even after the tragedy, his response is marked by hesitation and abstraction rather than decisive ethical accountability, suggesting a distancing from responsibility.

D. The Tragedy through Islamic Perspective

From an Islamic ethical perspective, the events surrounding Hosna reveal a significant tension between normative religious principles and their social distortion through patriarchal practice. In Islam, marriage is fundamentally based on mutual consent, and coercion is explicitly condemned. A well-known prophetic tradition reported in Sahih al-Bukhari states that a previously married

woman (widow) has more right to her consent than her guardian, indicating that forced marriage is invalid. Hosna's explicit refusal should therefore carry ethical and legal weight within the Islamic framework. However, her voice is disregarded by the male authorities in the village, demonstrating not a failure of Islamic teaching, but a failure in its application.

Furthermore, the narrator's silence can be evaluated through the Islamic moral obligation to prevent harm and injustice. Islamic ethics emphasizes *amr bil ma'ruf wa nahi 'an al-munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding wrong), which places responsibility on individuals—especially those with knowledge and social standing—to intervene against *dholim* (injustice). The narrator, who is educated and aware of Hosna's resistance, fails to act at a critical moment. His earlier acknowledgment reflects resignation rather than moral engagement. From an Islamic perspective, this inaction constitutes an ethical failure, as silence in the face of injustice is itself a form of complicity.

Thus, Hosna's tragedy can be understood as the result of cultural patriarchy overriding ethical religion, where social norms are mistaken for religious obligation. This distinction is crucial: Islam, as a moral and legal framework, upholds justice, consent, and protection of individual dignity, particularly for vulnerable individuals such as widows. The narrator's complicity, therefore, is not only social and gendered but also ethical and moral within an Islamic framework. Integrating this perspective reinforces the argument that violence in the novel is not inevitable or culturally justified, but rather produced through the convergence of patriarchal power, coloniality, and moral failure.

CONCLUSION(S)

This study demonstrates that silence in *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih is not merely a narrative device, but a critical mechanism through which power operates across gendered and postcolonial contexts. Hosna's position as a subaltern subject reveals that her apparent "silence" is not the absence of voice, but the product of epistemic violence that renders her speech unheard and ineffective. This silencing is further reinforced by the persistence of coloniality, where hierarchical structures of power continue to shape gender relations and normalize coercive practices within the postcolonial setting. Within this framework, the narrator's inaction exemplifies the concept of complicit masculinity, demonstrating how patriarchal violence is sustained not only through direct domination but also through passive acceptance and ethical disengagement.

Importantly, the incorporation of an Islamic ethical perspective further underscores that Hosna's tragedy cannot be justified as either cultural or religious inevitability. Instead, it reflects a profound disjunction between normative ethical principles, such as consent, justice, and the obligation to prevent harm, and their distortion within patriarchal social practice. The narrator's silence, therefore, emerges as a site where coloniality, masculinity, and moral failure converge. By centering Hosna's silencing and reinterpreting the narrator's role as one of complicity, this study contributes to postcolonial literary criticism by shifting attention toward the intimate, gendered, and ethical dimensions of power. Ultimately, the novel exposes how the failure to hear, to act, and to resist allows structures of domination to persist, rendering silence itself a form of violence.

REFERENCES

- Ali, Translated Maulawi Sher. *The Holy Quran - Arabic Text and English Translation*. n.d.
- Ali, Kecia. *Sexual Ethics and Islam*. Oneworld Publications, 2006.
- Belsey, Catherine. *The Subject of Tragedy (Routledge Revivals): Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama*. Routledge Revivals. Taylor and Francis, 2014.
- Connell, Robert. *Maculinites*. Second. University of California Press, 2005.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. Longman Group, 1995.
- Kamali, Mohammad Hashim. *Shari'ah Law: An Introduction*. Reprinted. Oneworld Publ, 2010.
- Mignolo, Walter D. "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom." *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, nos. 7–8 (2009): 159–81.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275>.
- Morris, Rosalind C., ed. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Columbia Univ. Press, 2010.
- Quijano, Anibal. *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America*. n.d.
- Sahih al-Bukhari (Book of Marriage – consent of المرأة)
- Salih, T. (2009). *Season of Migration to the North* (D. Johnson-Davies, Trans.). New York Review Books. (Original work published 1969)
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.