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**“I CHOOSE LIFE”: NEGATION, AGENCY, AND UTOPIAN HOPE IN
TAYEB SALIH’S *SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH***

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Abstract: Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* dramatizes the violence of colonialism and patriarchy and their impact on the African psyche. This article shifts from the prevailing scholarship on Mustafa, the main protagonist, to locate hope in what one does, not merely as an abstract concept. The unnamed narrator exemplifies Salih’s vision of a postcolonial subject that recognizes the perils of binary thinking and aspires instead towards an ethic accepting of vulnerability and difference. Invoking Tia DeNora’s conception of hope as “an orientation to action” and “a space for possibility,” I show how the narrator’s embrace of hope is linked to and complicated by the effects of colonialism and patriarchy in his Sudanese village. Overall, the aim of this article is threefold: first, to examine Salih’s critique of female negation and male hegemony; second, to highlight Salih’s rejection of passivity and fatalism—how both undermine individual and collective agency and reinforce female negation in society; and, lastly, to consider Salih’s postcolonial utopianism and privileging of autonomy.

Keywords: Tayeb Salih, hope, gender, Africa, utopianism

Introduction: Beyond (African) Fiction

On May 10, 2018, a Sudanese court sentenced to death Noura Hussein, a 19-year-old woman, for killing her 35-year-old husband, who she claimed raped her in the presence of his relatives. Noura’s parents had forced her into marrying him at the age

of sixteen, but she eventually fled to her aunt's house. Three years later, they convinced her to return home and handed her back to her husband. The death sentence provoked outrage among human rights activists. Speaking to *BBC News*, Yasmeen Hassan of Equality Now criticized Sudan's patriarchal system, adding: "To Noura's credit, she is a feisty girl, she is a girl who wanted her education and wanted to do good in the world and she has been trapped in the situation and is now a victim of this system."

The system in question consolidates male power and gender inequality in society. As Mohammed Boabaid remarks, "Since patriarchy affords men greater social power, the articulation of gender norms reflects the male-biased interests of society" (161). Noura's killing of her husband undermines gender ideology that authorizes "the control of women by men" (Boabaid 161). Noura will now serve a five-year jail term, thanks to the concerted global petitions, protests, and appeals.

Hassan presented Noura as a girl with a strong sense of self-worth; she has a distinct vision and future—a vision of what her future would look like. If "Hope is future-oriented," as Tia DeNora explains, then Noura "possess[es] a utopian vision, an imagined vision (or 'dream') of a place, time or state in which things are, if not perfect, then certainly better" (1, 5). Noura thus hopes to get an education, not only to better herself but also the society she lives in—a practical orientation to the future. She is forward-thinking and future-oriented, willing to challenge Sudan's "legal guardianship of men over women" (*BBC*). However, Sudanese society denies her the space to *become* who she wants to be, a subject, not a sexual object (See Nfah-Abbenyi 79; Katrak 15, 202; Gunne et al. 6; Umezurike 298; Egya 88; Adeniyi 1311). By objectifying Noura, Sudanese society seems to have no place for any "feisty" girl with such aspirations. Similarly, by forcing her into marriage to an older man, the heteronormative culture ties her future to reproductive sexuality, useful only if channelled towards reproducing male hegemony.

Noura's case delineates the reality of marital rape in some parts of Africa and the degree of control men still wield over women's bodies. What is equally shocking in Noura's experience is that her husband's brother and cousins assisted him in raping her: "One held her chest and head, the others held her legs" (Mackinstosh and Elbagir). These men watched and vicariously participated in the vicious act, illustrating how rape is weaponized against women (Card 6; Najmabadi 212; Eze 169; Adeniyi 1310, 1312).

The image of these men pinning her down symbolizes a type of ritual, lending rape a sacrificial character in which Noura is offered for the consummation of male pleasure. Noura is one of the “fortunate” young women who managed to escape a forced marriage, even though she had to kill to reclaim her autonomy. Her action demonstrates that a raped woman in a forced marriage can assert her voice only by murdering her husband. Killing thus functions as the ultimate resort for any woman to achieve the self in a dehumanizing situation (see Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, and Nawal El Saadawi’s *God Dies by the Nile* and *Woman at Point Zero*). Noura’s experience mirrors the most tragic scene in Tayeb Salih’s novel, *Season of Migration to the North* (1997), where Hosna Bint Mahmoud kills Wad Rayyes and herself. As I will discuss shortly, her action stages her radical opposition to the structures of male hegemony and patriarchal formations. For Hosna, there appears not to be an option. Patriarchal society has already foreclosed female choice, confining women to “the constraints and coercions of its tradition” (Parry 76). In other words, the female life, in any male-dominated society, is already an “inescapable,” hopeless condition. Hosna must have realized the futility of attempting to extricate herself from the grip of male authority. Her deathly action implies that it matters little to nothing whether she escapes or chooses to live because there will likely be no justice for women impacted by sexual violence.

Fiction Mirroring the Present; Envisioning Africa’s Future

Though originally published in 1967 and translated into English in 1969, *Season of Migration to the North* (henceforth *Season*) addresses the consequences of forced marriage and marital rape and the price gender oppression exacts on women (and men). Salih’s *Season* is considered the most widely taught Arabic novel in North American universities (Hassan 311), especially as many critics read it as a clear response to the racist depictions of Africans in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. James Tar Tsaaier defines *Season* as “a counter-text against European hegemony and expansionism” (231). By locating its main protagonist, Mustafa Sa’eed, in England and chronicling how his life grows dissolute, Salih reverses the Conradian trope of African subjectivity to portray Europeans as no less dissolute and Europe as a place of darkness. R.S. Krishnan clarifies how “Salih’s work reclaims for itself both the fictive territory and the imagined topos of Conrad’s Africa, and substitutes a postcolonial retelling, a new mythos for Africa, for a colonizing tale” (7). *Season* explores other

themes such as exile, migration, debauchery, religious hypocrisy, political corruption, and disillusionment.

The aim of this article is threefold: first, to examine Salih's critique of female negation and male hegemony; second, to highlight Salih's rejection of passivity and fatalism—how both undermine individual and collective agency and reinforce female negation; and, lastly, to consider Salih's postcolonial utopianism and privileging of autonomy. Therefore, my analysis of *Season* deviates from the prevailing scholarship on the character of Mustafa (See Harlow 1985; Abbas 1985; Davidson 1989; Geesey 1997; Al-Halool 2008; Tsaaior 2009; Osei-Nywame 2009; Velez 2010; Rajiva 2016; Murad 2018; Adeaga 2021) to focus first on Hosna and then the unnamed narrator, a British-educated Sudanese and returnee like Mustafa. Critics have paid little attention to Hosna and the radical agency she evinces by taking her husband's life and hers. Evelyn Accad argues that Salih depicts a Sudanese society that “is markedly less tolerant of cultural heterogeneity” (62). Conversely, Frank Birbalsingh notes “that traditional Sudanese society is capable of absorbing modern European innovations and still retain [sic] its Sudanese character” (70). Saree S. Makdisi summarizes Hosna's radical feminism, underlining how her “actions change the world, or, rather, change the villagers' awareness of their world” (819). Additionally, Theresah Patrine Ennin contends that “the actions of the female characters should not be read as random acts of nonconformity but rather be seen as intentional acts of protest against abusive behaviour” (27).

In *Season*, Salih contextualizes this abusive behavior, or more precisely, sexual violence against women as part of the patriarchal structures, though he stresses the relationship between action and change, underscoring how individual actions can trigger ruptures in society. Hosna's “fatal resistance,” as Benita Parry terms it (81), instantiates this connection between agency and social transformation. As I argue, Salih employs Hosna to critique the present gender structure, showing how, if unaddressed, it will undermine the pursuits of any utopian project in Africa. Hosna personifies a figure of female self-assertion; but even more importantly, she accentuates the necessity for society to take women seriously, as a matter of life and death. This foregrounds Salih's postcolonial utopianism and critique of “the androcentrism of the nation” (Boehmer 31).

The narrator offers some relevant context to appreciate Salih's critique of what I describe as “passive agency,” particularly towards Hosna. Mona Takieddine-Amyuni

writes that “Salih’s hero in the book is not Mustapha Sa’eed, who is representative of the middle stage of the struggle with the Colonialist. The hero is the Narrator, who reenacts symbolically the three dialectical stages” (3). Takieddine-Amyuni lists the stages as the “dialectical interaction between East and West, Black and White, Muslim and Christians” (2). While I agree with Takieddine-Amyuni that the narrator personifies “aspects of the new Sudan” and Salih uses him to affirm “the dynamism of the world and the need to move forward” (16, 17), I hesitate to acknowledge the narrator wholly as a hero since his passivity partly implicates him in Hosna’s death. Nevertheless, the narrator undergoes a subtle but significant change at the novel’s ending. The change happens at the personal level (individual agency). For Salih, every person has the capacity to make things better for their fellow citizens.

My reading of *Season’s* utopianism draws upon feminist and materialist frameworks to illuminate female negation in society. Such a reading echoes Davina Cooper’s concept of the “everyday utopias,” which Julia Anne Cook, in *Hope, Utopia, and Everyday Life*, describes as “the mundane realities of everyday life” (382). *Season* locates hope in what one does, the action of a subject, especially if the action is oriented towards changes in the subject’s world. In this sense, hope is life-affirming, not merely an abstract concept. Invoking Tia DeNora’s conception of hope as “an orientation to action” and “a space for possibility,” I analyze how the narrator’s embrace of hope is complicated by the matrix of colonialism, nationalism, and patriarchy in Sudan. Salih recognizes the violence colonialism inflicted upon the African psyche, as well as the violence replicated in the name of tradition and religion by the neo-colonial state. His portrayal of Sudan reveals his awareness of the lures and limits of nativism (See Mbembe 11; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 63-4; Lee 13, 21; Eze 88). If utopianism is to actualize its goal of creating alternative futures, it must account for the voice and agency of women.

African (Male) Writers, Women, and Utopianism

In *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures*, Bill Ashcroft discusses how literature can create a different future and how postcolonial utopianism can contribute to political action and social transformation. In a chapter titled, “Remembering the Future: Time and Utopia in African Literature,” Ashcroft examines the novels by Ayi Kwai Armah and Ben Okri to map how they draw on Africa’s past to recast colonial narratives of history and forge a vision of hope for Africans. According to Ashcroft, Armah and Okri

are “interested in *engaging* the discourse of Western history” (85). Implied here is that they are writing back to the empire and so re-enacting the dialectical relationship between the center and the margin—a Manichean struggle over meaning. Central to Armah’s and Okri’s visions are African futurity, although one might contend that Ashcroft privileges a masculine perspective in his study of their novels. By emphasizing Armah’s and Okri’s preoccupation with Eurocentric concepts of modernity, Ashcroft misses an opportunity to explore questions relating to gender. His focus on history, myth, and memory is pertinent, although he overlooks the relevance of gender in narratives of postcolonial utopianism. His discussion of utopianism hardly attends to the reality of female oppression in Africa and how writers imagine gender relations in Africa’s anticipated future.

Salih recognizes the tendency among Africans to essentialize their traditions and customs (whether it be through myths, memory, fatalism, or religion); he relates how, for women, time constitutes an abstraction that refracts attention from their material experiences. Throughout his novel, he shows that time is static and ossified for women and that the past remains the same; if anything, women are mired in the past. Accordingly, time is not progressive but regressive, and myth is mobilized to petrify female autonomy. This point is salient because notions of memory, myth, time, and history are conventionally associated with persons identified as male; indeed, they are primarily masculine conceptions that reinforce a phallogentric vision of the world that excludes women as gendered subjects. Anne McClintock counters national discourses of time and space, pointing out their gendered significations that categorize women as “inert, backward, and natural,” and men as “forward-thrusting, potent and historic” (359). Traditionalism freezes women in time and space, outside history and modernity, whereas men recognize themselves as active agents of progress and modernity.

Ashcroft theorizes these concepts in universalist terms that elide the specificity and centrality of gender in discourses on African relationality, considering that African women as a social group still struggle against male hegemony. A feminist reading deprivileges abstractions such as tradition, time, and myth in favor of attending to concrete human experiences and unearthing ways women redefine understandings of postcolonial African utopianism. In *Ethics and Human Rights in Anglophone Literatures*, Chielozona Eze cautions against the dangers of valorizing “abstractions such as heritage, culture, tradition, and religion” because they are used to “disable

women's bodies" (2, 6). The disabling of women's bodies occupies Salih's vision of gender transformation. This article emphasizes the quotidian experiences of women and men in Africa in order to contribute to a critical interrogation of postcolonial studies and utopianism. If postcolonial utopian thinking, as Ashcroft proposes, is about "reconceiving the present, specifically the place *of* the present and place *in* the present" (10), then its scope must contemplate how men, normatively construed as socio-political agents, participate in the silencing of women who oppose phallic authority. Put differently, postcolonial utopianism in Africa must incorporate means to expunge the abjection that patriarchal society ascribes to female subjectivity.

"A British Cannon": Phallic Discourses and Female Negation

In this section, I use the term "female negation" to theorize the various ways men and women degrade, harm, and annul women's voices, bodies, and sexualities. Violence, be it symbolic, psychological, or material, inheres in female negation; in its extreme form, it can result in a woman's death. Female negation comprises sexism, misogyny, subjugation, objectification, and violence against women. It takes place primarily in homosocial spaces and operates as a means for men to reinstate power over the female body.

As such, normative masculinity reproduces female negation. In *Season*, Salih depicts how homosocial spaces reinforce structures of male hegemony (See Sedgwick 2-3, 66; Messner 253-254; Flood 342, 355; Hammarén and Johansson 2). For instance, the narrator's grandfather, Haji Ahmed, presents himself as a man of piety and tradition, a faithful Muslim, all the while exhibiting sexism towards women. His presentation is thus a façade, exemplifying Salih's critique of sham religiosity and how it can be used to degrade women. Haji Ahmed's sexism is pronounced whenever he is among his circle of friends, predominantly composed of elderly men, who likewise endorse toxic masculinity. Although this clique includes a woman, Bint Majzoub, it still represents homosociality in that she is part of what Sharon R. Bird would refer to as the "men's club" (121, 124) that perpetuates hypermasculinity. Bint Majzoub's participation in male bonding illustrates how women can internalize gender ideology and unwittingly continue the debasement of other women. This intimate group promotes female negation through stories they share among themselves and the ribaldry in which they revel.

The first time the narrator meets his grandfather's friends, comprising Haji Ahmed, Bint Majzoub, Wad Rayyes, and Bakri, is when he has returned home from his studies in England, and they ask him about Europe. The subject that piques Wad Rayyes' interest is sex (Salih 3). He is indifferent to the religious ramifications of sin, such as fornication, which he celebrates, but the freedom that accompanies unrestrained sexual access to any woman is not regulated by religion. He is fascinated by the fantasy of having sex with women, without commitments, whether they are "infidel" or "uncircumcised" (80). His lust for women is unbridled, which will cause his demise. In the scene where the narrator visits his grandfather, Wad Rayyes rhapsodizes about how he snatched a young slave girl from the wedding house and raped her (74). He recalls seeing his uncle standing covertly among the grass and watching him, a scenario reminiscent of how Noura's in-laws had watched her being raped. Throughout his recollections, no one among their group reproaches Wad Rayyes for sexual violence. Neither Haji Ahmed, who displays piety openly, nor Bint Majzoub, the only woman among the men, finds the act inexcusable and horrific; rather, they all laugh along with Wad Rayyes as he amplifies his hypersexuality.

Meanwhile, the narrator sits there listening to their racy conversations, neither expressing his displeasure nor calling them out. His passivity underscores his disinterest in challenging the status quo, one which favors him as a male and yet degrades females. The only time he speaks is when Wad Rayyes misinterprets the Qur'an's stance about women and children. As the novel shows, Wad Rayyes, who likens his penis to "a British cannon" (84), a piece of colonial artillery used to demolish the colonized, will go to great lengths to get any woman he desires and satisfy his sexual urges. Allegorically, he positions himself as a colonizer and destroyer of women.

When the conversation turns to Bint Majzoub's sexual prowess, she describes, with a theatrical flair, her favorite husband Wad Basheer's libidinal excesses, branding his penis "a wedge" (75). Her language is hyperbolic, dramatizing her utter satisfaction: "splayed open till the call to prayers at dawn" and her husband's *hyper*-virility (76). For Bint Majzoub, sexual satiety defines her relationships with men. When one of her daughters gets married to a wealthy man, Bint Majzoub demeans his ability to satisfy her daughter sexually (77). The foregoing establishes male virility—the size and strength of the penis—as the subject that constellates the group.

“If They Force Me to Marry:” Women’s Pain and Radical Female Agency

In what follows, I examine Hosna’s enactment of radical agency against masculine domination. I also explore the narrator’s “passive agency,” which I define as an awareness of one’s agency but a refusal to act, simply because one feels privileged not to act. If applied to the narrator, it represents a form of male privilege. Thus, passive agency emanates from privilege rather than fear or uncertainty; it reflects, for instance, a man’s awareness that neither harm nor disfavor may befall him, at least due to his manliness, or so he thinks. Broadly construed, passive agency for men confers such privileges that shield them from far-reaching consequences in the gender system. The passive agent is not a subject per se since they fail to *act*. The narrator, at first, figures as an exemplary passive agent in his community. Like his grandfather, the narrator also vicariously participates in female negation. His passivity extends to his late friend’s family.

Before dying, Mustafa appoints him as the guardian of his wife and two sons. When he finally dies, the narrator does little to prevent the old Wad Rayyes from exploiting Mustafa’s young widow. He even laughs when his grandfather reveals to him Wad Rayyes’s plan. It is telling that his grandfather reminds him: “You’re the bride’s guardian” and “the woman needs someone to protect her” (85, 86). It is also pertinent that the narrator keeps silent three times during the dialogue with his grandfather. Hardly assertive, he even evades his responsibility to Hosna, which “is dictated by duty” (99). Although he grows enraged later and takes his leave, he recognizes the need to respect her choice in the matter of remarriage: “free to do as she pleased” (86). Yet, at the same time, he fails to understand that Hosna has no freedom of choice in the matter: “Women belong to men, and a man’s a man even if he’s decrepit” (99). Whatever obligation the narrator has to the family, he eventually shifts to Hosna’s “father, her brothers” (86), showing that women have little choice in determining their happiness. The narrator’s stance demonstrates that male authority defines whom a woman could marry. The narrator’s father’s reaction and laughter when he tells him about Wad Rayyes’s desire for Hosna buttresses the above point: “Is that something to get angry about?” (87). Wad Rayyes further legitimizes this question when the narrator discourages him from marrying Hosna: “In this village the men are guardians of the women” (98).

Although the narrator is full of anger, he keeps silent, impotently labelling Wad Rayyes’s plan as “evil.” In his rage, he imagines Hosna “weeping under seventy-year-

old Wad Rayyes. Her weeping would be made the subject of one of Wad Rayyes's famous stories about his many women with which he regales men of the village" (87). This woeful image is powerful enough to incite him to act, but he remains indecisive, and only links the "evil" to sacrifice, with Hosna as "the offering Wad Rayyes wants to sacrifice at the edge of the grave" (89). Male pleasure is at stake here, not a woman's integrity or life. The woman is disposable, for she possesses an essence that must be sacrificed to consummate male pleasure, to reinvigorate an aged "stallion." Knowing all this, the narrator fails to stop this evil before it happens by "protecting" Hosna through marriage. Caught "in a state between action and restraint," he disregards her vows to cause tragedy: "If they force me to marry, I'll kill him and kill myself" (94). To be sure, Hosna does not kill herself after the marriage; she only kills herself when Wad Rayyes rapes her, leaving her "body covered in bites and scratches – her stomach, thighs and neck. The nipple of one breast had been bitten through" (127).

Hosna's action challenges patriarchal culture, typifying a radical feminist agency that spotlights attention on "bodies of women in pain" (Eze 2). Her action is consequential. First, it implies that the only way a woman can resist male power or reject a man forced on her is to kill him and herself. Second, it suggests that any woman in an oppressive situation can avoid death if she simply goes on suffering and silently accepts her fate, as Mabrouka, Wad Rayyes's eldest wife, illustrates. It is worth noting that not one person in Wad Hamid appears to side with Hosna against Wad Rayyes. The narrator's father refuses to intervene in the matter, even as Hosna pleads with him to get the narrator to marry her. Her own father even beats her, insisting that she belongs to Wad Rayyes.

Although Mahjoud tries to sway him, Hosna's father's concern lies with what the villagers will say, not with his daughter's dignity since her self-assertion threatens his authority (122). For him, Hosna's selfhood counts for nothing because it is his masculinity, which is being contested. In this context, then, a man's desire, however toxic, precedes any woman's happiness. By refusing to marry Wad Rayyes, Hosna defies her father and the hegemonic masculine order, demonstrating that her body is not "a social and sexual property" (Ball 80).

Hosna's death does not stop her denigration; instead, the village further demonizes her, identifying her actions with madness or something devilish. Makdisi writes that "The villagers, however, are not willing to view Hosna's action in terms of the tradition against which she rebels, but as a demented aberration that should never

have happened” (819). The narrator’s mother, for instance, attributes Hosna’s action to modernity: “That’s modern women for you!” (Salih 123). Implied here is that modern society, an outcome of European colonialism, has liberated women so that they now have the power to question and subvert traditional gender norms. The narrator’s mother ignores Hosna’s strength of character and fearlessness. As a child, Hosna fought with boys, climbed trees, and swam naked with boys (100)—as if no gender boundaries existed. When she became marriageable, eventually marrying Mustafa, she acquired a sexual identity. Later, when she is widowed, her sexuality returns to her father, brothers, and the village, which is what she tries to reclaim by refusing to be “conquered” by Wad Rayyes’s “Cannon.” The narrator’s grandfather blames the devil and Hosna’s tribe, unleashing his misogyny (124). In a previous scene, the father has nothing good to say about the tribe, demonstrating a xenophobic strain by castigating its members for mingling with non-locals or “strangers.”

Similarly, Mahjoub describes Hosna’s action as “the act of a devil” and indicative of her madness (132), erasing her agency. Everyone but Mabrouka absolves Wad Rayyes; no one is willing to admit that they might have directly or indirectly empowered his sexual conquest of women. Due to their patriarchal investments, none of the villagers view Hosna’s action as radical self-assertion, even as it causes self-annihilation. It is only Mabrouka who interprets the “great catastrophe” differently, contrasting her knowledge borne out of her lived experience to the villagers’ abstract fatalism. To the neighbors’ dismay, she commends Hosna’s courage, stressing that “Wad Rayyes dug his grave with his own hands” (Salih 128).

It is worth pondering: Would Hosna have staged something as radically terminal as death if she had been taken seriously? The villagers refuse to recognize her as self-sovereign, a subject, a *human* with a mind of her own. Instead, they negate her voice and present her with a hopeless future, closing off any possibility for her to imagine that things could get better for her and her children. Because she inhabits a hopeless condition, her action figures as those of a “hopeless” person. Because there can be “no justice or moderation in the world” (120), Hosna mobilizes a language of violence to *represent* herself and articulate her resistance to male violence. Hosna appropriates the knife (a phallic symbol, a masculine weapon) to confront the source of her problems: sexual violence. By stabbing Wad Rayyes several times “between his thighs,” (127), she redirects male violence onto its source: the penis. In other words, she attacks the ultimate— or originary—foundation of male power. In a condition of hopelessness,

violence functions as a mode of radical self-representation, even if it brings about mortal consequences.

As Mahjoub remarks to the narrator, “It was the woman herself who had the impudence to speak her mind” (132). Her impudence causes her to lose her life; however, Mahjoub mistakes her courage for impudence, associating courage with maleness. It follows that any woman who speaks her mind and refuses to be silenced by men is brave. This explains why he thinks that Hosna does not deserve to be buried properly: “we’d have thrown her into the river or left her body out for the hawks” (133). If one thought that Mahjoub all along was progressive and forward-thinking, this passage completely dispels any such notion. In his thinking, society should not recognize whatever is left of the worth of a woman, even in her death. It is such masculinist, atavistic thinking that negates female subjectivity, which Salih challenges. It is worth mentioning that there is another woman, from the tribes of El-Mirisab, who kills her husband (110).

One might speculate that Salih suggests that it takes a woman’s killing of herself (and her husband) to inspire gender transformation. But that contradicts his intention because he demonstrates that no woman should have to die for men to take her pain seriously. This crystallizes the basis for his critique of postcolonial Sudan. For Salih, the postcolonial nation has failed to take African women seriously and must make amends. A society on the path of transformation must listen to the voices of suffering women and undo cultural norms that inflict such suffering. It is pointless to dream of a new Africa if it fails to offer hope for the “hopeless women” or improve their social conditions. This is the thrust of Salih’s postcolonial utopianism.

“It was Fated”: Fatalist Imaginary and Gender Ideology

In *Season*, Salih shows the pervasiveness of fatalism among the villagers and how it can work against women’s autonomy. He points out the perils of fatalism, narrating instances where the villagers believe that people cannot escape their destiny because God has already determined their lives. None of them have a choice in what might happen to them at any point in time. In short, no one can influence their fate; one simply needs to accept and yield to whatever fate brings their way. To believe that things or circumstances are predestined or fated is to admit that one has no agency at all in one’s personal or collective affairs. This type of fatalism, propelled by religious determinism, legitimizes female negation and male violence and undermines human

volition. For instance, Wad Rayyes exploits Hosna's vulnerability, claiming that he is entitled to her sexuality, according to God's laws (122).

In "Gender, Power and Social Change in Morocco," Don Conway-Long observes how some Muslims employ the Qur'an to endorse male dominance (156). Baobaid elucidates this point: "While the Qur'an unequivocally states that men and women are equal in respect to one another, other passages and sayings have been interpreted in ways that limit the rights of women and deny equality" (167). The narrator's grandfather and the other men in the village deploy religion to bolster gender ideology, lending it a divine force. This type of logic inspires them to believe that women belong to men. Salih critiques how religion can function as fatalism and be used to absolve sexually violent men from accountability. His vision of utopianism locates hope in individual actions, thereby challenging the fatalism of religion, which constrains personal and social agency. Like colonialism, traditionalism operates as modes of fatalism and sovereignty over people's lives. It primarily constitutes the capacity to define, control, regulate, and take people's lives. *Season*, therefore, ends with the narrator rejecting fatalism (in forms of tradition and colonial legacy) as the organizing principle of social life, a fatalism which incapacitated him from acting on behalf of Hosna. In the end, the narrator chooses to live, to hope, and to transcend binaries that function as predestination.

"I Choose Life:" Critical Awareness and Self-Transformation

Shaden Tageldin writes that "Hosna embodies an amalgam of agency and victimhood" (2). Nonetheless, it is her death, not her victimhood, that incites the narrator to act with urgency and become more critically aware. Like his friend Mustafa, the narrator has been living a lie, enjoying "a feeling of assurance" and "purpose," which makes him believe that "life is good and the world [is] unchanged as ever" (2). Though unlike Mustafa in relation to the deaths of his lovers, the narrator admits his complicity in Hosna's death, knowing that she would still be alive if he had reciprocated her love for him: "If only I had told her the truth perhaps she would not have acted as she did. I had lost the war because I did not know and did not choose" (134). Choice is the keyword in the passage. For most part of the novel, the narrator exhibits passivity. With Hosna's death, he realises that his "adversary is within" (134). As he comes to realize, he is his *own* enemy, having failed to recognize himself as an agent of change.

According to Daraiseh and Booker, Salih indicts both “the corrupt leaders” and individuals who choose “the more comfortable option of silence and inaction” for Africa’s misfortunes (55). The narrator’s inaction indexes the structural privileges conferred on him by tradition and modernity, both of which privilege men. His grandfather, embodying Islamic religion and heritage, reinforces his sense of rootedness and security (Salih 5), in much the same way that his privileged position as a civil servant does. Even though the narrator at first tries to blame Mahjoub for Hosna’s death, the latter easily queries him about his passivity: “Why didn’t *you* do something? Why didn’t you marry her? You’re only any good when it comes to talking” (131-32, original emphasis). The narrator *did* nothing. Marrying Hosna was the only way he could have acted to change her hopeless situation.

For Hosna, tradition and modernity have left her uprooted and groundless, denying her any “sense of stability” (5). Thus, until her death totally unsettles but jolts him into critical self-reflection, the narrator does not realise that these formations are tenuous and can be destabilized. As his grandfather laments, “it’s the first time anything like this has happened in the village since God created it” (124). Aware that he has become almost as groundless as Hosna and his condition is “hopeless” as hers, the narrator attempts to drown himself in the river. Clinging to life, for him, no longer matters since death appears more appealing. Instead of the river seeming a place of death, it strangely opens a way of *eternal* escape: to atone for Hosna’s death and his inaction. Therefore, drowning enables him to assert his own notion of radical agency. At the point of death, though, the narrator finds clarity and resolve, realizing that there is still hope for him, after all. His vow to stay alive, then, annuls his impulse to obliterate himself by drowning.

As such, he reclaims his agency and chooses “to remain with the limitations and possibilities of Sudan” (Parry 76). Salih’s intention is not to foreclose hope; rather, it is to outline a horizon of possibility in the present, however fraught. Likewise, individual agency, however marginal, is enough to make something happen: “Why didn’t *you* do something?” The “you” is a site of volition, potentiality, and possibility. Furthermore, the “you,” understood as the “self,” is crucial to the imaginings of an alternative relationality in any postcolonial utopia. It is here that Salih affirms the role any individual can play to transform not only their lives but their social world. The following passage reflects the confluence of critical awareness, human volition, and utopianism:

Then my mind cleared and my relationship to the river was determined. Though floating on the water, I was not part of it. I thought that if I died at that moment, I would have died as I was born—without any volition of mine. All my life I had not chosen, had not decided. Now I am making a decision. I choose life. I shall live because there are a few people I want to stay with for the longest possible time and because I have duties to discharge. It is not my concern whether or not life has meaning. (168-69)

This passage maps a moment of critical self-reflection (“my mind cleared”), of individual transformation (“Now I am making a decision”) that is integral to utopian hope (“I have duties to discharge”), and human resilience in the face of mortality (“I shall live”). What is striking is that Salih accentuates the singular “I,” the individual agency, as the preliminary grounds to initiate and pursue change. Individual agency must not be completely revolutionary but could take on incremental modes. The model of social change, Salih offers us, encompasses the radical and the incremental. This marks a turning point in Salih’s narratives of individual agency: not mainly because the narrator confronts his mortality and survives it but also because he now recognizes that it hardly matters “whether or not life has meaning,” since meaning is constituted through relationships with others (“there are a few people I want to stay with for the longest possible time”). As DeNora comments, “Hope recognizes that what is hoped for may not happen, yet it pursues signs of the possible alleviation or transcendence of the present (difficult) circumstances” (4). Hope demands the courage to move on against meaninglessness—or what Francesca Wild refers to as the “ruptures and cavities along the way” (qtd. in Zipes 71). To decide, to choose, to live, not only for oneself but for and with others constitute assertions of hope towards the future. This is Salih’s hope for postcolonial Africa.

Conclusion: “the Land of Poetry and the Possible”

Hope is a major theme in *Season*, and Salih portrays it through the narrator’s characterization. It is not accidental that the narrator names his daughter Hope (113), for Salih is intentional about his vision of utopianism for Africans. The narrator mentions his daughter’s name during a spectacular festival, where he is among “a vast concourse of people gathered” in the desert (114). In that passage, Salih refigures the desert, barren as it is popularly understood, to sketch a glimpse of “spaces of change

and possibility” (Ashcroft 207). The desert festival evokes the carnivalesque, where revelers “break the usual norms of social relations,” given that there is “the suspension of all hierarchic differences, of all ranks and status” (Bakhtin 201, 246).

Gender roles blur in this de-politicized space where “younger men entered and danced in the manner of girls” and “imitated the loud trilling cries women utter at festivities” (Salih 114). Likewise, hierarchies, traditions, and norms that organize social relationships are suspended, albeit for a short time: “Actual women entered the circle; had you seen them by day you would not have given them a second glance, but at that time and place they were beautiful” (Salih 114).

Furthermore, the aridity of the desert is saturated with conviviality: “We clapped, stamped on the ground, and hummed in unison, making a festival to nothingness in the heart of the desert” (Salih 114). Pam Morris elaborates on the carnival, underlining how it “is subject only to its own laws, that is, the laws of freedom” (198). Though the narrator labels the festival “nothingness,” Salih posits it as a moment of openness to the world, a utopian kinship, unconstrained by politics or religion. Perhaps there is something of the carnivalesque in African postcolonial utopianism.

In an interview titled “Poetry and Possibility,” Paul Ricoeur explains how creative or productive imagination can recreate the world (qtd. in Valdés 453). This, for Salih, is the reason why he declaims through his narrator’s voice in *God Dies*, “This is the land of poetry and the possible” (114). Literature can make *something* possible, that is, impress on readers a vision of the possible. That is the utopian consciousness underlying Salih’s narrative of hope for a better world for Africans.

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