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Hosna as Bride of Desire and Revolutionary Par Excellence in Tayib Salih's *The Season of Migration to the North*

Abstract

Most readings of Tayib Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* have focused on Mustafa Saeed and the nameless narrator, both male characters, and they have largely avoided a politically radical reading of the novel. This article attempts to present the female character, Hosna, as the revolutionary par excellence, following Lacan and Slavoj Žižek's reading of Antigone. Through Žižek's distinction between the act and action, this article argues that Hosna's deed at the end of the novel, murder and suicide, is not just an action out of hopelessness but rather an act that aims to make a new social order possible. We will try to connect Žižek's distinction between act and action to Benjamin's distinction between divine violence and mythic violence and Lacan's idea of "Thing-directed desire" (Marc De Kesel 245). By doing so, this article aims to put the extreme violence of Hosna in a new light and argues against the readings that simply ignore her act as an extreme form of violence and fail to see it in a broader framework of philosophical and sociological understanding.

Keywords: Antigone, Hosna, Symbolic Order, drive, mythic and divine violence

Most readings of Tayib Salih's prominent postcolonial novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) have focused on Mustafa Saeed and the nameless narrator, both male characters, and they have largely avoided a politically radical reading of the novel. This article attempts to present the female character Hosna – the charming wife of Mustapha Saeed – as the revolutionary par excellence, following Slavoj Žižek's reading of Antigone. Through Žižek's distinction between the act and the action, this article tries to demonstrate why her violent deed is not just an action out of hopelessness but rather an act that aims to make a new social order possible. We will show that Hosna, as the embodiment of the ethics of desire, goes to the limit of the Symbolic Order and enters the realm of *Atë*. By insisting on her desire, she becomes the incarnation of the mechanical drive, and by being removed from the Symbolic, she truly acts – in Žižek's sense – and undermines the "servicing of goods, the reign of the pleasure-reality principle" (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real* 142). Walter Benjamin's ideas about the

relation between violence and law will also be used to further elucidate the political reading presented in this article. We will try to connect Žižek's distinction between the act and the action to Benjamin's distinction between divine violence and mythic violence and Lacan's idea about "Thing-directed desire." By doing so, this article aims to put the extreme violence of Hosna in a new light and argue against the readings that simply ignore her act as an extreme form of violence and fail to see it in a broader framework of philosophical and sociological understanding.

Hosna through Lacan's Antigone: "The thing she did wasn't the act of a human being—it was the act of a devil"

In his seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan analyzes the character of Antigone, referring to Hegel's reading of the play. Hegel examines *the singularity of Antigone's desire* for her brother and states that "The loss of the brother is therefore irreparable to the sister and her duty towards him is the highest" (275). To understand what is meant by "the singularity of desire" and the opposition of desire and drive (which is crucial to this article), it is necessary to clarify what is exactly meant by desire in the Lacanian sense. Lacan distinguishes between need, demand, and desire. Need is biological, but since "the human subject, being born in a state of helplessness, is unable to satisfy its own needs;" s/he "depends on the Other to help it satisfy them" (Evans 38). To do so, the child has to express these needs in language, which results in demand. Yet when the other is involved in the satisfaction of a need which has been articulated in language, a surplus is produced. This is because when the mother satisfies these needs, she "soon acquires an importance in itself, an importance that goes beyond the satisfaction of need, since this presence symbolizes the Other's love" (Evans 38). So in the process, the other may satisfy the needs, but the mother's full attention can never be gained, which produces the surplus, that is desire. The most important characteristic of this process is the ultimate impossibility to satisfy desire as "the object of desire is continually deferred" (39). Žižek refers to this as "the dialectic of desire" and distinguishes it from drive. He argues that a drive, in contrast, is "a demand that is not caught up in the dialectic of desire that resists dialecticization" (*Looking Awry* 21).

Thus, Antigone exemplifies "the singularity of desire" because her desire is fixed upon one object, her brother, and she has just one aim: to bury her dead brother. Through this insistence on one single demand, she escapes the "dialecticization of desire." The same "mechanical insistence" can be identified in Hosna: "After Mustafa Saeed,' she answered immediately with a decisiveness that astonished me, 'I shall go to no man'" (96). Her insistence that after Mustafa Saeed she will never accept any other man is a "mechanical" insistence that cannot be caught up in dialectical deception "I demand something and I persist in it to the end" (*Looking Awry* 21). Therefore in her desire, "We have a trope of *absolute singularity* that opposes the universality of the law" (Rabate 78; emphasis added). Her desire avoids dialecticization and becomes drive proper.

Analogously to Antigone, Hosna's "singularity of desire" is subversive. This mechanical insistence is subversive since it avoids exchanging objects of desire. That is why

it disrupts the normal flow of things – or, as Lacan would put it, the normal service of the goods – according to which everything should be exchangeable. In both cases, women's insistence poses a threat to masculine authority. In Sophocles' tragedy, Creon, claiming that "no woman while I live shall govern me," suggests that if the transgressor of the law were not a woman, he would not insist on the punishment so sternly (182). The significance of gender factor is even more obvious in *The Season of Migration to the North* since patriarchy prevails in the village. When Hosna insists that she will not go to another man, male characters are annoyed, even those who believe that Wad Rayyes – a lifelong womanizer who is determined to marry Hosna though he has several wives – is going to the extremes. As Mahjoub, an influential figure in village politics, explains, "You know how life is run here [...]. Women belong to men, and a man's a man even if he's decrepit" (99). Men in the village take it for granted that a woman should be obedient towards them. Hosna's attitude thus subverts their assumption that "women belong to men," which challenges their masculine authority.

Another significant parallel between Antigone and Hosna is that they both desire something that is lost. What Creon says about Antigone can also be applied to Hosna: "There let her pray to the one god she worships: Death" (qtd. in De Kesel 206). Their desire aims at a dead object, and hence it is as if they desired death itself. Antigone knows that if she denies that she has tried to bury her brother or ask for mercy, she may be forgiven; but she recklessly insists that she has transgressed the law mandated by Creon. This fearless insistence on what she knows will take her to the grave makes everyone feel that she desires death itself. Analogously, Hosna also keeps saying that she will succumb to no other man. What the society wants is the exchangeability of objects of desire, but Hosna's desire is directed at one and only one object: her dead husband, which sutures her desire to death. As Lacan states regarding Antigone, "she pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such. She incarnates that desire" (282).¹

Antigone lives in ancient Greece where, according to Hegel, there is an immediate relation between individuals and the society with its symbolic laws. This immediate identification of the individual with the society is exactly what leads to tragedy in *Antigone*. When one person denies the obedience and identification with the law of the State represented by Creon, the law cannot tolerate it. When Antigone decides to bury her dead brother, she creates a hole inside the great edifice of the law, and it necessarily leads to a tragic end. This shows in yet another way how her insistence is related to death. Hosna, however, lives in a Muslim society, which is being gradually modernized. The law is patriarchal which is visible for example when the narrator's

1 There is only one point when Hosna hesitates. She asks the narrator to marry her formally, as she wants to circumvent the rules by being formally wed to another man, so that other men are not be tempted to approach her. This is her last attempt to stay in the symbolic, and as we will demonstrate later, the last attempt not to enter what Lacan calls *Ate*, the domain between two deaths. After the narrator rejects her offer, it seems as if a compulsive power is pushing her towards the tragic end. She must either accept the man imposed on her and give up on her desire or insist on her desire and face the deadly consequences.

family is mocked by the people after he refuses to have more than one wife. In this context, Hosna refuses to accept this law which is by men and for men, a law which legalizes the domination of men over women's desire. By persistence, she moves towards the limits of the Symbolic order. Like Antigone, she has to either retreat back to the Symbolic order and accept being the object of the perverse desire of Wad Rayyes or to keep insisting and be removed from the Symbolic. In fact, Hosna's and Antigone's acts both change the borders of the Symbolic order by radically shaking the coordinates of the accepted framework of their societies. Although no one can exactly predict what will happen to the village after Hosna's act, the villagers in the novel eventually realize that after Hosna's act nothing will be the same any more.

As James Mellard states, "true ethical position is not that which abides by the desire of the law of one's culture" (qtd. in Tuhkanen 91). Accordingly, Hosna does not want to accept the "desire of the law." She knows that the patriarchal order has only one message for her: "rather than pursuing your desires, you should renounce them, accept the tragic impossibility that lies at their core, and join the path of the common good" (Zupancic 175). Hosna does not want to take this path, and thus her ethical position "accords with *jouissance*" (Zupancic 175). Here we should distinguish between pleasure and *jouissance*. *Jouissance* is what goes beyond the pleasure and reality principle supported by Law; that is why it is linked to death drive and disrupts the social order. As Braunstein states, "the satisfaction proper to *jouissance* is neither the satisfaction of a need nor the satisfaction of a demand. It is also not the satisfaction of any bodily drive but one linked to the death drive" (105). Hosna mechanically insists on defying Wad Rayyes through which she defies the patriarchal law and the structures that give men the authority to subjugate women. Hosna, like Antigone, acts beyond "the traditional ethics"; "she is beyond the Good and goods and she repudiates the usual definition of goodness" (Rabate 78). That is why the villagers call her act – the slaying of Wad Rayyes – "ghastly" and they refuse to talk about it: "She stabbed him more than ten times and — how ghastly!" (131). And Mahjoub emphasizes that what she did "shouldn't be spoken about" (131).

Both Hosna and Antigone seem to be inhuman. One might now pause to reflect on what inhuman means here exactly, what this "frightening strangeness, "inhumanity," "apathetic character," this "being-towards-death" (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 130–131) refers to. Julian Young, while explaining Lacan's position on Antigone, states:

What motivates Antigone is, in fact, no recognizable human value. She is beyond human conceptions of good and evil, beyond reasoning – she never negotiates with Creon – but also beyond reasons itself. As such she is a 'Thing,' that is, an object 'sublime' in its unintelligibility, a monumental hole or rupture in the intelligible surface of the world. (*Tragedy from Plato to Žižek* 255)

The society in its normal state is under the sway of the pleasure and reality principle. That is why when one like Antigone goes beyond the "human conceptions of good and evil," that is beyond reality and pleasure principle, she is called inhuman; in that her desire stops moving from one object to another and aims at death. That is no surprise that the villagers strictly avoid talking about what Hosna does, because she shakes the

foundations of their beliefs and their Symbolic world. Here the concept of the limit is very important. Hosna – like Antigone – by her act goes beyond the limit of the Symbolic. Or as Julian Young puts it, “Antigone desires to transcend the limit of human being. This is why the chorus describes her as ‘uncivilized’ and ‘inhuman’” (255). They have what Lacan calls an “exceptional harshness” (263). In Salih’s novel, Mahjoub says, “The thing she did wasn’t the act of a human being – it was the act of a devil” (266).

To understand how they go beyond the limit of the Symbolic, we should pay attention to the Lacanian theorem that “the supreme good we deal with on a daily basis are perpetually sliding signifiers that keep us away from the evil supreme good, the ultimate ‘thing’ our desire aims at” (qtd. in De Kesel 207). Here the supreme good is closely related to what Lacan calls “the service of goods,” “private goods, family goods, domestic goods, other goods that solicit us, the goods of our trade or our profession, the goods of the city, etc.” (303). Hosna has the chance to choose these goods, which distract us from the very act which can shake the coordinates of the symbolic world. By marrying Wad Rayyes, she can go back to these goods, provided that she gives up on her desire and accepts being a powerless female character in a male-centered society. She chooses the opposite direction.

According to Lacan, “human being as a real being is always already dead” (qtd. in De Kesel 214), or in Antigone’s sense “always buried alive”; human beings who are destined to bear signifiers live only “by the grace of the signifiers that represent them” (De Kesel 214). Like Antigone, Hosna is always the bearer of the desire of the Other (214) and therefore has no such autonomy. However, both Hosna and Antigone manage to act in their own way and autonomously. In the end, Hosna decides to die and not to accept being subjugated to Wad Rayyes; she chooses “paradoxical tragic freedom” (214). Mustafa Saeed is a signifier and therefore is beyond the “natural order of life and death” (214). Others want to push Mustafa Saeed back into the *ex nihilo* from which he comes. But for Hosna, Mustafa Saeed is a pure signifier, which is ineffaceable. They want to give Mustafa Saeed a “second death” and murder him as a signifier. However, for Hosna, Mustafa is a signifier that cannot be pushed back into the nothingness he comes from.

Lacan states that “Antigone’s position represents the radical limit that affirms the unique value of his being” (279). Like Antigone, Hosna goes to this radical limit, to the limit of the Symbolic and reveals the limits of the law to itself. This going to the limit of the Symbolic Order, which we discussed previously, is the most important thing which connects Hosna and Antigone together. According to the Lacanian conception of desire, “as subjects of the desire of the Other and hence as subjects of the law, we are at the same time an affirmation of the lack of the Other and its law” (De Kesel 221). By going to the radical limit of the Symbolic, by her radical act at the end of the story, Hosna reveals the lack of the Other. She proves that the Symbolic is itself a realm of lack and desire. By forcing the law to force her into getting married to a hankering old man, she shows that the Symbolic which is supposed to harness all desire is itself made up of desire.

One can say that in her insistence on accepting no man after Mustafa Saeed, “the metonymic displacement of signifiers strands itself on the one literal dead signifier”

(De Kesel 219), that is, on Mustafa Saeed. What she does is a piece of the Real which the villagers refuse to talk about. The narrator wants to understand what has happened but everyone refuses to tell anything: “For two whole days I went on asking people about it, but no one would tell me. They all avoided looking at me” (122). Mahjoub says that “Bint Mahmoud’s [Hosna’s] madness was of a kind never seen before” (109). Her mechanical aiming at the Thing is called madness by the villagers who are shocked by this sight which is beyond all bearing. They only curse Hosna for what she has done, like the grandfather who says, “God curse all women! Women are the sisters of the Devil” (123) thereby proving that Hegel was right in saying that woman is “the central irony of the community” (qtd. in Butler 4). They deny that anything has changed, but the narrator confesses that “the world has changed” (100).

By pushing the limits, Hosna experiences *Atë*, and she will have to choose to return to the Symbolic or die. After being forced to get married to Wad Rayyes, for some days, Hosna does not talk to the old man and does not let him get close to her: “For two weeks they remained together without exchanging a word” (122). In the end, she has to decide whether to sleep with him and go back to the Symbolic or to perform a radical act. She chooses the latter and slays him and herself.

Žižek and the Radical Politics of Act: Hosna through Žižek’s Antigone

We have already discussed Žižek’s ideas on Antigone and their relevance to our reading of Hosna’s ultimate act. But here we want to focus more deeply on his distinction between act and action and the political significance of this distinction. Žižek reads Antigone as a radical figure, a model of a political act. He makes a distinction between the act and the action. He defines the act as follows: “The act involves a kind of temporary eclipse, *aphanisis*, of the subject. Which is why every act worthy of this name is ‘mad’ in the sense of radical unaccountability; by means of it, I put at stake everything, including myself, my symbolic identity; the act is therefore always a ‘crime,’ a ‘transgression’” (*Enjoy Your Symptom* 44). “Mad” is the adjective Žižek attributes to a radical act. As it was mentioned earlier, what Hosna does is called “madness” in the novel. Žižek counters “act” with action, which means all the ordinary behaviors that do not subvert the system but even help to preserve the status quo. In this sense, Hosna truly acts and destroys her Symbolic identity and by the virtue of this act, she transgresses the law which wants to subjugate her to an old man whom she does not love. Žižek believes what defines a subject, his/her “elementary, founding, gesture is to subject itself” or what he calls “the act of freely assuming what is necessary anyway” (*Parallax View* 17). Hosna sees that a fate has been imposed on her: “Her father swore at her and beat her; he told her she’d marry him [Wad Rayyes] whether she liked it or not” (Salih 122); but she assumes what has been imposed on her and acts. No wonder Žižek refers to Nietzsche’s “amor fati” as the elementary act of a subject (17). By virtue of this act, Hosna enters *Atë*, a point at which she can either come back to the Symbolic or die. Hosna becomes inhuman and sees herself as an object and thus freely accepts what has been forced on her.

Here we should pause to reflect on what Hosna's choice and her act of turning fate into a choice exactly mean. Žižek, in his *Ticklish Subject*, talks about the revolutionary Terror and how it must necessarily usher the way towards a new rational modern state and then relates this to what he calls a "forced choice." Through this reflection, we can also see why her act is a revolutionary act. Ali Mirsepassi, in his book *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment*, focuses on how this novel shows the struggles of a premodern society to move towards a modern rational society. Mirsepassi tries to find similarities between Sudanese post-colonial approach to modernity and Iranian intellectuals' approach to modernity. He condemns Hosna's act as "an act of extreme violence that unfortunately leaves nothing left to be negotiated either one way or the other" (60). His reading is a representative reading regarding Hosna's violent act at the end of the novel. Here Žižek's discussion of revolutionary terror can help us to present an alternative reading of what Hosna does and its relation to the passage from a premodern society to a rational modern one. Žižek talks about a forced choice between "the organic Whole and the 'madness' of a unilateral feature which throws the Whole out of joint and into damaging imbalance" (*The Ticklish Subject* 94). Hosna has to either accept the Organic pre-modern Whole of her society and the function assigned to her by men or choose the path of what Žižek calls "madness." Mirsepassi condemns Hosna's madness since he insists on choosing the right and seemingly rational and non-violent way. But according to Žižek, "one *has* to begin by making the wrong choice," that "the only way to the rational totality of the modern state leads through the horror of revolutionary Terror" (93). Hosna makes the wrong choice and that is why she prefigures a change in the village – villagers after her murderous act keep saying that nothing will be the same anymore. Precisely by choosing what Žižek calls "madness," the "revolutionary Terror," "extreme violence," and "destructive fury," she implodes the pre-modern organic whole of the Islamic village. Mirsepassi does not see this point and chooses the narrator as the character prefiguring change in this premodern society. The narrator, unlike Hosna, chooses the right path, the non-violent path and that is why, in Žižek's paradigm, he cannot bring about a real change. This is Hosna who in her "outburst of radical negativity [...] undermine[s] the established order; clear[s] the slate, as it were, for the new rational order of the modern State" (*The Ticklish Subject* 94).

Hosna, Revolutionary Personified

Hosna's revolutionary character is even more conspicuous when juxtaposed with Wad Rayyes, Mustafa Saeed and the narrator, the male characters in the novel who function as her foils. Whereas Hosna is the incarnation of the drive and is "not caught up in the dialectic of desire and resists dialecticization" (*Looking Awry* 21), Wad Rayyes, the best example of workings of demand, a man who is enslaved by the dialectic of desire, who moves from one signifier to another, one woman to another. As Mahjoub says, "Wad Rayyes will certainly become obsessed with some other woman. Let's suppose, at the very worst, she marries him; I don't think he'll live more than a year" (Salih

103). He hankers after a woman and then gets tired and understands that she is not what he wanted, hence he perfectly illustrates the dialectic of demand. Wad Rayyes is an example of the Sadean torturer “who carries out his debaucheries in an empirical realm” (Dean 155). He worships women’s beauty and believes that “Women and children are the adornment of life on this earth” (Salih 84), though Islam says that wealth and children (not women) are such an adornment. He believes that “there’s no pleasure like that of fornication” (84) and says that “when I’m between a woman’s thighs I’m more energetic than even this grandson of yours [referring to the narrator]” (84). He recounts what he does to women to other men in a sadistic and narcissistic way, for example, “a young slave girl from down-river who’d just reached puberty, [...] her breasts, stuck out like pistols and your arms wouldn’t meet round her buttocks” (74), whom he tries to rape. Wad Rayyes like the Sadean rapist² uses the beautiful to keep the Thing away, “the beautiful is the barrier the sadist uses to protect himself from the deathly domain of the thing as presented in the victim’s real pain” (De Kesel 234).

The cry which women give, like the one heard by the narrator passing the house of Wad Rayyes, helps him keep lack and death away. People in the village know that he tortures women, and the narrator imagines what will happen to Hosna if she surrenders to Wad Rayyes: “I pictured Hosna Bint Mahmoud, Mustafa Saeed’s widow; a woman in her thirties, 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 the men of the village” (87). This weeping of the woman in pain helps Wad Rayyes project a fantasy of omnipotence, of being kept at a distance from lack and death, to keep the “abyss of the deadly Beyond” away (De Kesel 144). Hosna is the only woman in this chain who refuses to be an object of Sadean fantasy and by her act, she actually destroys and dispels all the imaginary images. By killing Wad Rayyes, she lets the Thing, the Beyond shine and makes the sadist Wad Rayyes face it himself.

Mustafa Saeed aims to fight the colonizer but his fight against the oppressive social order which is plagued by both the colonizer and patriarchal culture becomes a mock-heroic fantasy-oriented struggle. He tries “to liberate Africa with [his] penis” (Salih 120), that is, he turns his fight into an emotional and personal struggle, moving from one woman to another engaging in sexual odysseys in his room. It functions as a phantasmagoric space for both Mustafa Saeed and the European girls he seduces. The English girls and women ask him to “forget his intellect” (120) so that he embodies their colonial fantasy of Shakespearean Othello. Mustafa, on the other hand, fantasizes that the body of each woman is a city which he is conquering. He says that at that time he “would do everything possible to entice a woman to my bed. Then [he] would go after some new prey” (30). The whole logic of the relationship between these girls and Mustafa revolves around a fantastical relationship to reality and history. That is why his fight has no effect on the reality, whether in Sudan or in England. In court, he confesses to himself: “This Mustafa Saeed does not exist. He’s an illusion, a lie” (30). But after he marries Hosna, he brings about a great change in her character and

2 The Sadean rapist cares only about his personal pleasures and cares nothing about temporarily denying the same for his victim.

turns Hosna into a modern woman who would not accept tyranny. Hosna later tries to carry on what Mustafa Saeed had started. After his death, he is not given a proper funeral because his corpse has never been found. This “symbolic debt” which “persists beyond physical expiration” (*Looking Awry* 23) leads Mustafa to haunt Hosna and to thus make her carry on a process he had started earlier.

Interestingly, the scene in which Hosna kills Wad Rayyes seems to be a repetition of Mustafa Saeed’s murder of Jean Morris. Having killed him, Mustafa Saeed does not dare to kill himself and later in the court says: “My life achieved completion that night and there was no justification for staying on. But I hesitated and at the critical moment I was afraid. I was hoping that the court would grant me what I had been incapable of accomplishing” (68). In his fight, Mustafa Saeed engages in a fantastical fight and does not dare to end a project he has started and has to expect the court to give him what he has failed to do. Marx in *18th Brumaire*, quoting Hegel, says that history repeats itself but – he adds – the first time as a tragedy and the second time as a farce (1). This process seems to have been reversed in Hosna’s case. What Mustafa and Jean Morris do is just a farcical, mock-heroic crusade, which does not bring about any change, but what Hosna does at the end of the novel is a truly tragic event which blasts open the tedious continuum of the social order. What she does is an intervention into social reality that, as we have mentioned, fits Žižek’s definition of the revolutionary act.

The narrator is the very opposite of Hosna. He is a man who only talks and never acts at the right time. As Mahjoub tells him, “You’re a man who talks rubbish” (84). He has a chance to save Hosna but refuses to do it, even when he realizes he is in love with her. He rejects his desire and stands on the side of the oppressive tradition.³ Mirsepassi reads the narrator as a figure who comes to affirm the importance of everyday life and unlike Hosna, leaves the possibility of negotiation open. He refers to the last scene of the novel, in which the narrator tries to drown himself but on the verge of drowning, he “makes what is perhaps the first real decision of his life when he decides that he wants to live” (65). Mirsepassi admires this so-called life-affirming moment. Yet, the last scene with the narrator’s abstract idea of choosing life over death – or in Mirsepassi’s jargon, the “acknowledgement of everyday world” (65) – is only an attempt on the side of the narrator to hide the significance of Hosna’s revolutionary act and the narrator’s and Mustafa Saeed’s inability to “act” when they have the chance to.

After the death of Hosna, he comes back to the village and tries to project his sense of guilt (due to his inability to save Hosna) on different people, such as Mahjoub and Mustafa Saeed. At the end of the novel, when he wants to drown himself, he refuses like Mustafa who has refused to complete what he has started. In the end, he again produces some abstract sentences acknowledging life over death. The narrator has faced what Žižek calls the “blind contingent automatism, the constitutive stupidity of the symbolic order” (*Looking Awry* 18); he has seen how the sexual hankering of

3 One may ask what about the narrator’s own wife or one may say that he could not marry Hosna to save her because in that case he would have to accept polygamy. But we should not forget Hosna had asked him for a formal marriage without any of the duties of a real emotional and sexual relationship. By just marrying her formally, he could have saved her, but he refuses to do so.

a decrepit old man has simply caused the death of a young woman; but at the moment of drowning, a sense of life overtakes him like what Žižek calls “the answer of the real” (*The Parallax View* 225). The moment he must affirm his impotence in saving Hosna and die as an ethical compensation for his omnipotence can be read as an example of what Žižek calls an “inversion of impotence into omnipotence” (*Looking Awry* 30). He turns his impotence into a life-affirming gesture. He chooses life, but this choice works only as a delusory cover-up for his real impotence: first in saving Hosna, second in his ethical compensation. The only ethical compensation he can offer to Hosna for having played such an impotent role in her life would be suicide, but over the border of the abyss, he refuses.

Conclusion: Walter Benjamin, Hosna, and Divine Violence

In his article “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin argues that “Law sees violence in the hands of individuals as a danger undermining the legal system” (280). He mentions that the law tries to control all violence, but its “foundation coincides with its transgression. Every rule springs out of its exception” (280). The law tries to have a monopoly on violence, and violence in the hands of the individuals is perceived as threatening by the mere fact of being outside it. Hosna’s violence is a violence which is outside the law and threatens to disrupt the whole social order. By her act, Hosna becomes the figure of “the ‘great’ criminal” (Benjamin 280), who “however repellent [her] ends may be, arouses secret admiration from the public” (280) because of having exposed the shortcomings and limits of power. That is why when the repressed wife of Wad Rayyes learns that he has been killed by Hosna, she feels happy and blesses Hosna: “Bint Mahmoud [Hosna], God’s blessings be upon her, paid him out in full” (128). Hosna as the “great” criminal “confronts the law with the threat of declaring a new law, an act which horrifies the public” (280). Everyone is so horrified that they refuse to even talk about what she has done. By violence, Hosna is forced to marry the old man, but by rejecting him and insisting on her own mechanical desire, she reveals the internal contradiction of the patriarchal law. Benjamin states that “violence crowned by fate is the origin of law” (280). When people of the village understand that Wad Rayyes is after Hosna, they all accept the belief that women are destined to be subjugated to men. But Hosna, through her violent act, shows the arbitrariness of the law and the violence which is bound with this patriarchal law. Benjamin counters mythic violence, that is legal violence, with the divine violence, “a pure immediate violence” (252), which knows no compromise and aims only to destroy the legal-mythic violence. Hosna’s act is an example of divine violence, which aims to put a stop to the legal violence which is repressing many men and women. “If mythical violence is law-making, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes” (297). Hosna’s radical act is law-destroying. It truly aims to destroy all the boundaries. Hosna’s violence is a model example of revolutionary violence which aims to open the possibility for a wholly different social

order. Hosna, in what Žižek calls “burst of radical negativity,” undermines the established order and clears the slate for a new order.

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