

Season of Migration to the North: Women Between Tradition and Liberation

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Received: February 19, 2026

Accepted: May 18, 2026

Online Published: October 5, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v16n6p609

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n6p609>

Abstract

This article addresses the current friction between the ideals of Western feminism and traditional values adopted by Indigenous/Eastern feminism by analyzing *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih. It criticizes both extreme doctrines: one for imposing individualistic secularism by Western feminism, and the other for the cultural stagnation of the Eastern patriarchy. The analysis demonstrates how both parties perpetuate women's oppression. The novel discloses that true women's empowerment is neither derived from absolute liberation, nor strict adherence to traditions. Instead, it is realized through implementing a mediated approach that synthesizes cultural values with gender equality principles. The article examines the capacity of Islamic feminism to represent this balanced alternative by reinterpreting religious texts. This approach seeks solutions for the manifestations of prejudice without compromising faith. Ultimately, this approach may bridge the gap between traditions and modernity. It grants women the rights and respects they deserve without compromising their cultural identity.

Keywords: radical feminism, Islamic feminism, cultural identity, gender equality, patriarchy

1. Introduction

The conflict between Western and Eastern feminism is a complex cultural and ideological conflict, Western feminism holds that equality, and human rights are achieved through universal standards. These standards necessitate women's liberation, as it is a precursor to building a democratic and modernist community (Rahman, 2024). Eastern feminism posits that these approaches are only a form of Western colonialism (Al-Ghalith et al., 2023). It seeks to erode the cultural identities and values of non-Western communities (Ahmad, 2015; Badran, 2014). This friction represents a radical dilemma that links feminism with colonialism and cultural identity (Ide, 2017). While Western feminism condemns the pervasive patriarchy in the East and leverages it as an excuse for their intellectual and political intrusion (Quinn, 2019), these perspectives frequently elide the particularity of indigenous cultural contexts and the Eastern feminism perspectives (Badran, 2005).

Considering this dichotomy, this study explores an alternative vision proposed by Tayeb Salih in *Season of Migration to the North*. The novel presents a dual critique of both Western and Eastern paradigms regarding women. It demonstrates how Islamic Eastern culture perpetuates women's oppression if applied rigidly. It also uncovers new forms of oppression suffered by women in the liberal Western context, even if the situation seems to be a form of liberation superficially. Tayeb Salih challenges both doctrines, advancing, in turn, a more balanced narrative that transcends the duality of hegemony and subjugation. He advocates women's liberation from extreme ideology regardless of its source.

In this study, I work primarily with the English translation of *Season of Migration to the North* by Denys Johnson-Davies, treating it as a literary text in its own right rather than merely as a secondary reflection of the Arabic original. For many readers outside the Arab world, Johnson-Davies' translation is the form in which Tayeb Salih's novel has been encountered, discussed, and taught. The English version, therefore, plays a central role in shaping the novel's reception within Anglophone literary and critical traditions. By focusing on the translated text as the basis of analysis, this article situates Salih's work within English-language postcolonial and feminist debates while remaining attentive to the ways meaning is articulated through the texture of the English prose itself.

2. Literature Review

Eastern and Western feminisms differ ideologically and culturally. The common factor between both is acknowledging that women suffer multifaceted oppression. This similarity led to centralizing the tension between Eastern and Western feminism on the best methods for liberating women and setting the standards of this liberation (Abrahams, 2023; Glapka, 2018).

2.1 The Western Feminism Perspective

Western feminism advocates for the establishment of universal moral and social standards grounded in the principles of equality, individual freedom, and human rights (Haq, 2022). Within this framework, gender equality is not perceived as a secondary social concern

but rather as a fundamental condition for the development of democratic and progressive societies. Western feminist theorists generally argue that women's liberation is inseparable from broader struggles for social justice, political participation, and human dignity. Consequently, societies that deny women equal rights are often viewed as structurally unjust and resistant to genuine modernization (Abrahams, 2023). From this perspective, the advancement of women is directly linked to the advancement of society itself, as restricting women's agency limits social, economic, and intellectual progress.

In many strands of Western feminist thought, particular attention has been directed toward the cultural and religious traditions of Eastern and Muslim societies. Numerous feminist scholars and activists have argued that certain traditional practices contribute to the marginalization and dehumanization of women by reinforcing patriarchal authority and limiting female autonomy. Practices such as veiling, gender segregation, polygamy, and the strict regulation of women's sexuality have frequently been interpreted as manifestations of systemic oppression (Moghissi, 1999). These practices are often portrayed as mechanisms through which patriarchal societies preserve male dominance while restricting women's freedom of movement, expression, and self-determination. As a result, many Western feminists advocate the deconstruction and transformation of such traditions, viewing cultural reform as essential for achieving women's liberation and equality.

This perspective was also reinforced historically through Orientalist discourse during the colonial period. Several European Orientalists depicted Eastern societies as inherently oppressive toward women, using the condition of women as evidence of the East's alleged cultural and civilizational backwardness. Figures such as Lord Cromer and Stanley Lane-Poole criticized practices like veiling and female seclusion, presenting them as symbols of moral and social decline within Muslim societies (Ahmed, 1992). However, critics later argued that these colonial narratives were not entirely humanitarian in motivation; rather, they frequently functioned as ideological tools that justified European intervention and cultural dominance in the East. Nevertheless, these Orientalist representations significantly influenced the development of Western feminist attitudes toward Muslim women and Eastern societies.

Within this intellectual climate, Qasim Amin emerged as one of the earliest Arab intellectuals to advocate reforms inspired by Western liberal values. Often regarded as a pioneer of Arab feminism, Amin argued that the progress of Eastern societies was impossible without improving the status of women. In his influential work *The Liberation of Women*, he called for the removal of the veil, which he considered a social barrier preventing women from participating fully in public life and national development (Amin, 2000). Amin believed that women's education represented a crucial step toward societal modernization and viewed mixed education as an effective means of empowering women intellectually and socially. His writings reflected a broader reformist belief that adopting certain Western social values could help transform Eastern societies into more progressive and civilized nations. Although his ideas generated significant controversy within conservative circles, they became foundational in later debates surrounding feminism, modernity, and cultural reform in the Arab world.

2.2 Eastern Feminist Criticism of the Western Framework

In contrast to Western feminist discourse, Eastern and Islamic feminist perspectives often argue that the Western model of women's liberation carries an implicit sense of cultural superiority. From this viewpoint, Western feminism is not always perceived as a neutral humanitarian movement advocating universal rights; rather, it is frequently interpreted as a discourse that seeks to impose Western secular and liberal values upon non-Western societies while diminishing indigenous cultural and religious identities (La Fornara, 2018). Eastern feminists contend that many Western approaches evaluate Muslim societies through standards rooted in European historical and philosophical experiences without adequately considering the distinct social, spiritual, and cultural foundations of Islamic communities. Consequently, Western feminist criticism is sometimes viewed as another extension of intellectual and cultural hegemony operating under the banner of liberation and modernization.

Within this framework, scholars such as Ziba Mir-Hosseini emphasize the importance of understanding practices like veiling, gender separation, and polygamy within their broader religious and cultural contexts rather than isolating them as inherently oppressive practices (Mir-Hosseini, 2019). From the perspective of many Muslim women, these practices may reflect personal faith, cultural belonging, ethical commitment, or spiritual identity rather than submission to patriarchal authority. Therefore, Eastern feminists argue that reducing such practices to simplistic symbols of oppression overlooks the complexity of women's lived experiences in Islamic societies. They maintain that liberation cannot be meaningfully achieved through imposing external definitions of freedom that disregard the values and beliefs shaping women's identities and choices.

Leila Ahmed (1992) develops this critique extensively in her influential discussions on the veil and colonial discourse. She argues that Western representations of the veil often fail to recognize its diverse meanings for Muslim women, many of whom associate veiling with modesty, religious devotion, dignity, cultural continuity, and personal autonomy rather than coercion. Ahmed further demonstrates that colonial powers historically manipulated the issue of women's liberation to justify intervention in Muslim societies. Colonial administrators frequently portrayed themselves as defenders of oppressed Muslim women while simultaneously denying women's rights within their own societies. As Ahmed reveals, figures such as Lord Cromer condemned veiling in Egypt while actively opposing women's suffrage in England, exposing the political and ideological contradictions underlying colonial feminist rhetoric.

From this perspective, many Eastern feminists regard the persistent Western insistence on a singular model of liberation—typically grounded in secularism, individualism, and unrestricted personal autonomy—as another form of cultural imperialism (Mansour, Mansur, Banat, & Banat, 2024). Critics argue that such frameworks universalize Western experiences while marginalizing alternative feminist

visions rooted in religion, collective identity, and cultural particularity. As a result, Islamic feminist thinkers seek to formulate a different paradigm for women's empowerment, one that emerges from within Islamic intellectual and cultural traditions rather than from external ideological impositions.

Rather than rejecting feminism altogether, these scholars advocate reinterpreting Islamic religious texts and traditions in ways that support gender justice while preserving religious and cultural belonging (Ahmed, 1992; Mir-Hosseini, 2019). This approach seeks to distinguish between patriarchal cultural practices that developed historically and the ethical principles of justice, dignity, and equality embedded within Islamic teachings themselves. Accordingly, Islamic feminism attempts to create a balanced framework that resists both patriarchal oppression and cultural alienation. It aspires to empower women without forcing them to abandon their faith, traditions, or communal identities, thereby offering an alternative vision of liberation that reconciles modern gender consciousness with cultural and religious continuity.

2.3 A Call for Balanced Feminism Free of Subjugation

Several scholars argue that the Western discourse surrounding the "saving" or "liberating" Eastern women often reproduces a new form of patriarchal authority rather than genuinely empowering women. Although this discourse appears humanitarian on the surface, critics contend that it frequently portrays Eastern women as helpless and voiceless victims awaiting rescue from the enlightened West. Such representations diminish women's agency and overlook their active participation in challenging oppressive structures within their own societies (Moghissi, 1999). By framing liberation as something that must come from external intervention, this discourse implicitly assumes the superiority of Western cultural models while marginalizing indigenous feminist voices and reform movements that originate from within Eastern communities themselves.

In response to this tendency, Eastern feminism advocates forms of reform that emerge organically from the cultural, religious, and social realities of local societies. Rather than importing Western frameworks wholesale, many Eastern feminists argue that sustainable women's empowerment must be rooted in the values, traditions, and lived experiences of the communities concerned. From this perspective, meaningful social transformation cannot be achieved through cultural confrontation or by rejecting collective identity altogether. Instead, reform should arise gradually through internal dialogue, reinterpretation, and social evolution that preserve communal cohesion while addressing gender injustice.

At the same time, Eastern feminist thought is not entirely unified in its defense of traditional structures. While many scholars reject the imposition of Western secular paradigms, some also recognize that certain inherited social practices continue to restrict women's opportunities and autonomy. Consequently, there is an increasing call within Islamic and Eastern feminist scholarship to critically reevaluate traditions and distinguish between authentic religious principles and patriarchal customs that developed historically under specific social conditions (Mir-Hosseini, 2019). This distinction is crucial because many oppressive practices are often defended in the name of religion, even when they originate primarily from cultural interpretations rather than foundational religious teachings themselves. Therefore, Eastern feminists seek not only to resist cultural imperialism but also to challenge internal systems of inequality that hinder women's intellectual, social, and economic progress.

Within this intellectual landscape, Islamic feminism has increasingly emerged as a mediating framework that attempts to reconcile religious commitment with gender equality. Rather than positioning Islam and feminism as inherently contradictory, Islamic feminism argues that the core ethical teachings of Islam grant women dignity, justice, and fundamental human rights (Badran, 2013). According to this perspective, the problem lies not within religion itself but within patriarchal interpretations that historically monopolized religious authority and marginalized women's voices. As a result, Islamic feminists advocate reinterpreting religious texts through contemporary and gender-conscious readings that remain faithful to Islamic principles while responding to modern social realities.

This approach seeks to construct a balanced model of liberation that neither blindly imitates Western secular feminism nor uncritically preserves restrictive traditions. Instead, it promotes women's empowerment from within the cultural and religious framework of Islamic societies themselves. In doing so, Islamic feminism challenges the assumption that Western liberalism represents the sole pathway toward women's freedom. It proposes that liberation can coexist with faith, cultural belonging, and communal identity, allowing women to pursue equality without feeling compelled to abandon their religious or social heritage (Hirschmann, 2002; Rich, 2021). Such a perspective reflects the diverse aspirations of women across different societies and highlights the possibility of developing multiple feminist paradigms shaped by varying historical and cultural experiences.

3. Methodology

This study uses the qualitative literary analytical method as a framework for assessing the forms of ideological and cultural frictions between Western and Eastern feminists regarding the concept of women's liberation. The study focuses on a rigorous analysis of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* as a substantive literary text that illustrates this cultural conflict.

The literary analysis is consolidated by a theoretical framework based on postcolonial feminism. This framework operates by leveraging the thoughts of prominent theorists such as Haideh Moghissi, Edward Said, and Leila Ahmed, with the aim of understanding the practices of women's oppression within the Eastern patriarchal contexts and for criticizing the imposed Western liberating paradigms.

Maha Haq (2022) highlights how Western feminist discourse often incites extreme reactions from Eastern societies. These reactions are manifested through strict adherence to religious and cultural values, which contributes to reproducing patterns of oppression in defense of

identity. Thus, the study seeks to identify methods for forming gender dynamics within the controversy of colonial influences and indigenous traditions. This will help elucidate the persistent oppression of Eastern women, not by considering it an exclusive product of the patriarchal structure, but as the result of a conflict with the external liberating discourse condemned with alienation and hegemony.

4. Women between the Hammer of the East and the Anvil of the West: Reading the Feminist Discourse of Tayeb Salih

Season of Migration to the North is an exceptional literary text that approaches women's dilemma within a complex intersection between the East and the West, traditions and openness, and patriarchal values and individualism (Sayl & Abbas, 2025). Tayeb Salih does not include only one perspective on women's liberation. Rather, he delves into three levels of critique. From one aspect, he condemns the traditional patriarchal practices in Sudanese society, including oppression and patriarchal hegemony. From an alternative perspective, he critically examines the Western conceptions of liberty, suggesting that the rhetoric of equality often conceals new manifestations of oppression. In this context the novel through the narrator explicitly indicates that:

I would imagine the faces over there as being brown or black so that they would look like the faces of people I knew. Over there is like here, neither better nor worse. But I am from here, just as the date palm standing in the courtyard of our house has grown in our house and not in anyone else's. The fact that they came to our land, I know not why does that mean that we should poison our present and our future? (Salih, 2009, p. 39).

In this way, the novel transcends its narrative function into a multilayered cultural critique tool (Oudija, 2024). It not only exposes gender oppression in a certain indigenous or Western context. Instead, it seeks to deconstruct the symbolic and cognitive structures that permit this oppression in both paradigms. Through rich symbolism, internal narration, and cultural discourse, the novel represents a resistant, interpretive role. It re-interrogates the mainstream perception of women, freedom, and identity. Furthermore, it uncovers the mechanism of social and cultural forms to reproduce different forms of hegemony.

Working with Denys Johnson-Davies' English translation also enables attention to how linguistic form sharpens the novel's gender critique at the level of syntax and register. In several pivotal moments, Johnson-Davies preserves stark, paratactic structures that mimic the rigidity of patriarchal logic. The clause "Women belong to men" (Salih, 2009, p. 70) is grammatically simple, yet ideologically brutal: the unqualified verb "belong" is a lexical choice of possession rather than relation, affection, or duty, and the sentence's declarative finality permits no negotiation, apology, or contextual softening. The surrounding formulation "a man's a man even if he's decrepit" (Salih, 2009, p. 70) likewise relies on tautological repetition and proverbial cadence, reproducing the village's "common-sense" patriarchy as a linguistic reflex. In this way, the English diction and syntax enact the social structure they represent patriarchy appears not only as a theme but as an unthinking grammar of certainty.

Equally important, Johnson-Davies' translation intensifies feminist meaning through metaphor and tonal compression in scenes of corporeal violation. The line "The red straw mat was swimming in blood" (Salih, 2009, p. 85) shifts the domestic object (a mat) into an animate surface through the verb "swimming," producing a grotesque inversion of ordinary domestic safety. The phrase is also tonally restrained—descriptive rather than exclamatory—so the horror is delivered in a cool register that resembles witnessing rather than melodrama, which paradoxically heightens shock. Similarly, Hosna's threat—"If they force me to marry, I'll kill him and kill myself" (Salih, 2009, p. 68)—depends on the blunt modal force of "force" and the parallel repetition "kill...kill," a syntactic mirroring that frames her final act as the only available grammatical "symmetry" against coercion. Even the narrator's terminal cry "Help, help!" (Salih, 2009, p. 108), stripped to a bare imperative, functions linguistically as a collapse of explanatory discourse into raw vocality: when social language fails women (and men) under oppressive systems, what remains is the minimal utterance of survival. These English formal choices—declarative certainty, proverb-like cadence, controlled register, and violent metaphor—therefore operate as part of the novel's postcolonial-feminist argument, shaping how oppression and resistance are experienced by the reader.

Apart from those two opposing paradigms, Salih proposes indirectly a third balanced paradigm that vindicates women without compromising their religious and cultural belonging. Therefore, this section will delve into this multi-layered vision. This intersection first highlights the points of agreement between Salih's critique and the Western feminist discourse. Then, it clarifies how the criticism extends to Western liberal anarchy before concluding by outlining the balanced feminist features that constitute the novel's implied vision.

4.1 Consensus between Tayeb Salih's Criticism and Western Feminist Discourse

In *Season of Migration to the North*, Tayeb Salih demonstrates a clear critical awareness of the oppressive patriarchal practices in Sudanese society. This is partially consistent with the Western feminist discourse, particularly focusing on issues such as female genital mutilation, polygamy, and forced marriage (Hassan, Najadat, Azmi, Abubakar, & Lawan, 2021). The novel explicitly conveys the suffering of Sudanese women and exposes the sexual double standards that grant men the authority to enforce control over women (Al-Shara, 2023).

The narrator offers a sustained critical perspective on the entrenched patriarchal structures of the village, focusing primarily on how they enforce and restrict gender roles. He denounces practices that reduce women to instruments intended to fulfill male desire, a mentality tied to the indigenous culture where manhood is often measured by the number of wives. Crucially, the destructive nature of this definition is revealed through the dark influence of Mustafa Sa'eed, who, in a moment of drunken cynicism, taunts the traditional men by declaring: "You're one-woman men. The only real man among you is Abdul Karim" (Salih, 2009, p. 59). Abd Alkareem is considered a real man because he has many wives. This means that societal traditions not only tolerated the oppression of women and their treatment as

commodities and tools for male pleasure but also promoted and encouraged this behavior (Alkilani, 2024). According to this culture, a man who marries only one woman is not considered a real man. This dialogue reveals a deeper understanding of this culture; it's not just about polygamy, but about reinforcing the image of men as the center of Sudanese society, while women are seen as marginal commodities with no value or voice. Therefore, the value of a disabled or elderly man in this society is greater than the value of the best woman in society: "You know how life is run here," he interrupted me. "Women belong to men, and a man's a man even if he's decrepit" (Salih, 2009, p. 70).

The major problem lies in the impact of this ideology on women. The danger is not only in devaluing women, but also in forcing them to relinquish their very identity in order to survive in such a society. In the novel, Hosna is forced into marriage despite her vehement refusal, with no regard for her wishes or her as a human being. Women are forced into marriage to preserve a patriarchal image that can only be challenged by the perceived threat to a woman's honor:

A week or ten days after you went away her father said he had given Wad Rayyes a promise — and they married her off to him. Her father swore at her and beat her; he told her she'd marry him whether she liked it or not. (Salih, 2009, p. 82)

The ultimate price of this societal oppression is realized in Hosna's tragic storyline. To uphold the superficial notion of "family honor," she is violently forced into an unethical marriage with the much older Wed Al-Rayes. Her subsequent, fierce rejection of this denial of self-determination leads her to kill her forced husband and herself. This catastrophic outcome powerfully embodies the rage and absolute rejection of the traditional practices that strip women of their autonomy (Ait Idir, 2019). Indeed, Hosna's outcome wasn't a spur-of-the-moment decision, but rather stemmed from a feminist ideology that rejected patriarchal oppression and the commodification of women. In a dialogue with the narrator, Hosna revealed her intention to kill her husband and herself if forced into marriage, as a rejection of oppression and a victory for self-respect: "I became aware of her voice in the darkness like the blade of a knife. 'If they force me to marry, I'll kill him and kill myself'" (Salih, 2009, p. 68).

In the following scene, Tayeb Salih presents one of the most disturbing images in the novel. Patriarchal oppression transforms the marital home, traditionally imagined as a place of safety and intimacy, into a scene of extreme violence: "The red straw mat was swimming in blood" (Salih, 2009, p. 85). Through this image, Salih warns that the consequences of patriarchal domination are not confined to individual relationships but are produced and sustained by society as a whole. This critique becomes especially evident in the description of Wad Rayyes's stab wounds "between his thighs," a detail that symbolically targets masculine authority and exposes the violent foundations upon which it rests:

I raised the lamp and saw that every inch of Bint Mahmoud's body was covered in bites and scratches — her stomach, thighs and neck. The nipple of one breast had been bitten through and blood poured down from her lower lip. There is no strength and no power save in God. Wad Rayyes had been stabbed more than ten times — in his stomach, chest, face, and between his thighs. (Salih, 2009, p. 85)

Rather than representing liberation in any celebratory sense, the scene reveals rebellion as a tragic and destructive response to an oppressive social order that leaves women no viable alternative.

The novel does not end with exposing masculine society. In a moment of a poignant internal admission, the narrator further articulates his desire to break the archetypal restraints of the educated man in a conservative environment:

Suddenly I experienced a violent desire for a cigarette. It wasn't merely a desire; it was a hunger, a thirst. And this was the instant of waking from the nightmare. The sky settled into place, as did the bank, and I heard the pattering of the pump and was aware of the coldness of the water on my body. (Salih, 2009, p. 108)

This quote not only reflects the personal agony of the narrator but also unfolds the psychological dimension. This indicates that oppression within patriarchal societies affects all individuals, not only women. However, women remain the most evident victims of this system, as it deprives them of their right to their bodies, choice, and expression. This personal moment in the novel reflects an inferred realization that authentic liberation is unattainable without self-accountability or reconfiguring the psychological and social restraints that confuse even the masculine consciousness.

The catastrophe intensifies toward the novel's conclusion when the narrator shouts, "Help, help!" (Salih, 2009, p. 108) in a symbolic scene. This can be interpreted as the scream of an imperiled person and a plea for liberation from the value system that restrains individuals—not only women—in societies that glorify appearances and demean humans.

4.2 Criticizing Undisciplined Western Liberty

In alignment with his thorough critique of the Eastern patriarchal authority, Tayeb Salih equally criticizes the so-called "brutal freedom" in the West. Mustafa Sa'eed's manipulation of European women illustrates how unrestrained sexual and emotional liberty can be perversely leveraged, leading to the destruction of women rather than their liberation. Sa'eed leverages his cultural mystique and sexual allure—playing into Orientalist fantasies—to seduce and subsequently abandon Western women, resulting in tragic consequences. The gravity of this exploitation is underscored by the woman who commits suicide, leaving behind a resentful final note: "It contained nothing but the words: 'Mr Sa'eed, may God damn you'" (Salih, 2009, p. 29). This narration reflects the failure of the Western paradigm to protect women as well. This suggests that when freedom is practiced recklessly, it can become a trap, exposing women to mental and emotional manipulation (Daraiseh & Booker, 2018). Consequently, the novel establishes that female suffering is not confined solely to the East but

is also evident in the West, though in different forms and for different reasons.

Salih's critique of Western openness is evident in Mustafa Said's description of his affairs in Europe. He states:

'It was as though his voice came to me from another world. The man continued skillfully to draw a terrible picture of a werewolf who had been the reason for two girls committing suicide, had wrecked the life of a married woman and killed his own wife — an egoist whose whole life had been directed to the quest of pleasure. (Salih, 2009, p. 30)

This quotation demonstrates the existential void accompanying Mustafa Said's indulgence in Western pleasures. It also shows how freedom shifts to vacuous and soulless consumption. Ideal slogans notwithstanding, the novel views practicing liberation as a state of alienation and purposelessness, particularly when enacted extrinsically to the moral and spiritual context that can regulate it.

Elsewhere, Mustafa Said expresses the fragmentation of the Western woman's depiction behind the curtain of liberation. He confesses:

I seduced her with gifts and honeyed words, and an unfaltering way of seeing things as they really are. It was my world, so novel to her, that attracted her. The smell of burning sandalwood and incense made her dizzy; she stood for a long time laughing at her image in the mirror as she fondled the ivory necklace I had placed like a noose round her beautiful neck. She entered my bedroom a chaste virgin and when she left it she was carrying the germs of self-destruction within her. (Salih, 2009, p. 31)

Through his protagonist's words, Tayeb Salih dismantles the trope of the Western woman who is under the impression that she is exercising her freedom. However, in reality, she is a captive of a reversed Orientalist imagination, viewing the Eastern man as a symbol of an enigmatic physical fantasy. Thus, the Western woman divests herself of her own humanity under the illusion of liberation to unconsciously become the prey of a cultural archetype that dominates her.

In this sense, the novel addresses themes related to emotionally unbalanced relationships and the utilitarian approach to freedom, rather than solely offering criticism. It offers a radical, cultural, and civilizational critique of the Western liberal value system when applied without considering the profound humanitarian and endogenous cultural foundations. Without self-awareness and a moral framework, this system may undermine its claims of liberation and equality, thus reducing human value and turning relationships into transactions driven by desire instead of respect. Thus, in this context, women become fragile beings exposed to exploitation even in societies advocating for their liberation. This is not for lacking freedom, but for lacking the defensive cultural structure of this freedom.

The novel stipulates that freedom becomes an additional burden on women when it becomes an end instead of a means to dignity and empowerment. It subjects women to forms of symbolic and spiritual violence that are equally perilous as traditional oppression. Thus, Tayeb Salih's critique is beyond the façade of the phenomena. It delves into the depth of the contradictions that invalidate the Western liberation discourse when negligent of the context and disregarding the protection of the value that safeguards the female humanity and their interpersonal and intrapersonal dignity.

4.3 Tayeb Salih Advocates for a Balanced Alternative

The novel reveals that women's suffering is not solely attributed to Eastern patriarchy or Western individualism, but to extremism in both spheres. This extremism includes oppressive traditions that rigidly control women's bodies and minds or anarchic liberation that renders them vulnerable and devoid of telos. Tayeb Salih advances a claim for an alternative vision that mediates between freedom and dignity. This vision, relevant for the post-colonial Sudanese context, affirms women's self-determination without forcing them to abandon their religious and cultural particularity.

The narrator offers a reflective critique of the traditional societal foundation inherited from his elders: He says:

By the standards of the European industrial world we are poor peasants, but when I embrace my grandfather I experience a sense of richness as though I am a note in the heartbeats of the very universe. He is no towering oak tree with luxuriant branches growing in a land on which Nature has bestowed water and fertility; rather is he like the sayal bushes in the deserts of the Sudan, thick of bark and sharp of thorn, defeating death because they ask so little of life. (Salih, 2009, p. 55)

This quote redefines the system as the cornerstone of the legitimacy of patriarchal authority, as a veneer of social tyranny. This intellectual re-evaluation expresses a profound transformation in the narrator's awareness. It simulates the need to dismantle the traditional structures that leverage stability, morals, or blessing to justify women's oppression. Thus, this friction is the evidence that the alternative paradigm the novel is urging to develop does not aim at nullifying values but, rather, interrogating them. The goal is to renew them to establish justice for women and maintain cultural identity cohesion simultaneously (Tahir et al., 2025).

4.4 Context of Western Feminism Critique, Leila Ahmed, and Moghissi as a Paradigm

Within the same context, Salih's discourse intersects with the proposals of prominent Arab feminists such as Leila Ahmed. She rejects the West's weaponization of women's liberation discourse to justify its colonial interventions. Through *Discourse on the Veil*, for example, Ahmed reveals that casting the Muslim woman as a victim of injustice is a moral guise that conceals subverting Islamic societies (Ahmed, 1992). She also underscores the stark contradiction in figures such as Cromer, who called for the unveiling in Egypt but was a leading member of the Men's League for Opposing Women's suffrage in England. Ahmed (1992) highlights this hypocrisy: "This champion of the Egyptian woman's unveiling was, in England, a founding member and, at one point, its president [of the anti-suffrage league]" (p. 153).

Moghissi coined the term "colonial feminism." She exposed European males' exploitation of the feminist discourse to assert their cultural superiority (Moghissi, 1999). Certain Western practices promoting women's liberation led some Muslim men to take measures intended to

protect women from Western perspectives. This was not only to protect them but also a response to the triggered feelings of cultural inferiority and normative rejection.

4.5 Towards a Balanced and Non-Arrogant Feminism

The significance of *Season of Migration to the North* is evident in unveiling the moral and cognitive crisis stemming from imposing either of the paradigms upon women: the Eastern patriarchy paradigm or the Western liberal paradigm. Tayeb Salih illustrates both paradigms as incapable of granting women essential dignity and functional autonomy.

As delineated in the novel, Tayeb Salih advocates for an endogenous balanced feminism, which respects the cultural and religious particularity of women while simultaneously rejecting oppressive traditions and anarchic forms of liberty. It is an imperative for liberation that does not forsake identity, empowerment that does not compromise dignity, and an equilibrium that does not yield to external dictates.

5. Conclusion

The source of the friction between Western and indigenous feminism is the substantive disagreement on the concept of liberation, the source of its legitimacy, and its cultural boundaries (Al-Ghammaz et al., 2024). While Western feminism seeks to impose universal standards for freedom and equality, these calls are often inconsiderate of cultural sensitivity. Thus, they are perceived by Eastern societies as a new form of hegemony or colonial feminism that disregards the native contexts and replicates the Orientalist pattern using a liberationist veneer. Indigenous feminism operates on a critical awareness of the patriarchal structure's implications in their societies. However, they refuse extrinsic intrusion that may jeopardize the cultural and religious identity structure, resulting in some societies vindicating traditional practices, even if they are oppressive, to avoid the Westernization of feminist discourse.

Absolute repudiation of change solely due to its Western origin is not a viable strategy for women's liberation. Conversely, mandating the Western paradigm without considering the cultural particularity obscures and, at times, elides the reality of women in non-Western societies. Identity preservation must not jeopardize women's dignity and rights. Similarly, liberation efforts should not lead to cultural degeneration or abandoning heritage.

Within this context, *Season of Migration to the North* constructs a literary framework that articulates the complex dimensions of feminist debate. The novel transcends the mere exposition of patriarchal practices in the Sudanese society, such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and polygamy. It further critiques Western liberal illusions that conceal the impulse for emotional domination and exploitation within the freedom discourse. After assessing both paradigms, the novel implicitly advocates a third path, which reconciles women's self-determination with the preservation of their religious and cultural identity.

The novel asserts that genuine liberation cannot be achieved by adhering to Western paradigms or submitting to externally imposed values. This assertion is vividly illustrated by the tragic fates of key characters: the life of Mustafa Sa'eed functions as a stark warning, showing how his full adoption of the Western liberal paradigm—a freedom devoid of moral anchors—leads only to alienation, revenge, and violence, demonstrating that these external values are incommensurate with genuine fulfillment. Conversely, the catastrophic story of Hosna Bint Mahmoud demonstrates that submitting to oppressive traditions—like the forced marriage demanded by the Eastern patriarchal system—is equally lethal, driving her to a final, violent act of ultimate self-determination. Thus, true liberty is achieved through an internal reconfiguration, one that stems from critiquing traditions rather than completely abrogating them, and revisiting heritage rather than forsaking it. This optimal path to women's liberation is to adopt a socially grounded feminism capable of both interrogating oppressive practices and resisting the drift toward Western paradigms.

This study emphasizes that women's empowerment is not achieved by the absolute embracing of one of the paradigms but rather by developing an alternative hybrid and adaptable paradigm. This paradigm combines progressivism and upholding particularity with individual rights and communal accountability. It is a paradigm that equitably conceptualizes women as agents of full capacity. It grants them the entitlements of freedom, dignity, and belonging, without necessitating the choice between their identity and their rights. Consequently, women's liberation must not be an extrinsic imposition; instead, it must be a native construct created with a transnational dimension.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Author contributions

Dr. Ashraf Waleed Mansour, and Dr. Visam Mansur were responsible for the theoretical part of the study, and Dr. Ala Shdouh, were responsible for the discussion and editing the paper according to the Journal guidelines.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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