

Interior Dialogue and Female Voice: A Feminist Dialogic Reading of Mohammed Abul Wali's "The Land, Salma"

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Abstract Despite the growing application of Bakhtinian dialogism in feminist literary criticism, scholarly attention remains concentrated on Western or female-authored texts, leaving a gap in applying this framework to Arabic literature authored by men. By exploring the dialogic structure of the female protagonist's interior monologue, which constitutes the primary narrative mode in Mohammed Abul Wali's short story "The Land, Salma," this study explores how dialogism can illuminate female interiority in male-authored, non-Western narratives where the interior discourse of a female character can enact ideological resistance and reveal complex negotiations of gendered identity. This narrative strategy allows Abul Wali to construct a nuanced, feminist portrayal of a woman negotiating her identity within a patriarchal context. The present paper, through qualitative close textual analysis, argues that Abul Wali uses interior monologue not merely as a psychological device but as a site of ideological confrontation, staging a complex dialogue between dominant cultural narratives and emergent subversive counter-narratives. Ultimately, the paper situates "The Land, Salma" within broader feminist debates in Arabic literature, particularly in relation to the dialogic representation of the "woman question," gendered voice, and ideological heteroglossia.

Keywords Dialogism; Arabic literature; women's agency; feminist literature; representation.

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Introduction

In response to the stark formalism of the Russian Formalists and the abstract objectivism of Saussurean Linguistics which tended to strip literature of its social roots, Bakhtin and his colleagues—known as the Bakhtin Circle—proposed a counter approach that emphasized the inseparability of language from its social context. Their pioneering ideas paved the way for the reintroduction of the social dimension into literary studies. Viewing language and discourse as inherently social phenomena, they challenged the prevailing structuralist models (Selden and Widdowson 38). Literature, as Salman Rushdie aptly puts it, is “the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way” (16). It is a space where multiple voices, perspectives, and discourses intersect.

Indeed, literature is a pluralistic space reflecting the complexities of society and human experience. Emphasizing this social nature of literature that goes beyond the level of abstract verbalism, Bakhtin (1984) writes in his analysis of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s fiction:

It could be said that Dostoevsky offers, in artistic form, something like a sociology of consciousness—to be sure, only on the level of coexistence. But even so, Dostoevsky as an artist does arrive at an objective mode for visualizing the life of consciousness and the forms of their living coexistence and thus offers material that is valuable for the sociologist as well. (32)

Bakhtin shows how Dostoevsky, through his artistic technique, captures the coexistence of diverse consciousnesses. He argues that Dostoevsky depicts consciousness as inherently relational and shaped by interaction, thereby presenting valuable insights into human consciousness as a social phenomenon.

Literature, in this view, appears as a means of visualizing and understanding the social dynamics of life. Literature can also function as a means of ideological critique. Drawing on Bakhtin’s perspective on language, some scholars argue that fiction by virtue of its formal and imaginative dimensions, can offer a

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distanced perspective that exposes ideological contradictions and enables critical consciousness (Abrams and Harpham 184). In Bakhtin's view (1981), language is not only verbal exchange between people; rather, it is the main factor of interrelations between self and other (294). Thus, for him, the whole life is dialogic and through its 'dialogicality,' the meaning is always in process of formation and creation because of the dialogic nature of language that is never born in isolation. Even when an utterance does not appear explicitly interactive, it still contains traces of dialogue, as "all utterances involve the, as it were, 'importing' and naturalization of the speech of others, all utterances include inner tensions, collaborations, negotiations which are comparable to the process of dialogue" (Hawthorn 46-47). According to Bakhtin, dialogic relations demand the presence of another person as, at least, a mere listener: "In fact, a fully self-sufficient and isolated consciousness cannot possibly exist: the very process of acquiring self-consciousness from birth to maturity is, in Bakhtin's eyes, utterly dependent upon discursive interaction with another 'I'" (Gardiner 28). This presence of multiple voices is what Bakhtin refers to as 'dialogism' which stresses the dynamic interaction and exchange of ideas between these voices.

A key distinction in Bakhtin's theory of dialogism lies between "authoritative discourse" which demands submission and resists critique, and "internally persuasive discourse" which engages in dialogue with the self and may be integrated into one's personal worldview (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 342-348). According to Bauer and McKinstry (1991), Bakhtin challenges traditional narrative forms through his insights of the authoritative and internally persuasive discourses. Bauer and McKinstry further maintain that a feminist dialogic reading brings these two discourses together in dialogue (2). Thus, Bakhtin's "dialogism" becomes a valuable lens for analysing how literary texts not only reflect but also question and resist dominant ideologies. This feminist reading facilitates nuanced interpretations of female characters' internal speech, revealing how narrative fiction dramatizes the ideological processes through which these characters internalize, reject, or negotiate dominant social norms.

Through a feminist lens, the present study applies Bakhtinian dialogism to Abul Wali's "The Land, Salma." It attempts to show that dialogism provides a valuable framework for analysing how the female protagonist, Salma, articulates both inherited social values (such as domesticity, womanhood, and sexual restraint) and internally persuasive discourse that contest or reinterpret these values. Based on a textual stylistics analysis of Abul Wali's use of interior dialogic monologue, the present study shows that this narrative technique serves as a site of ideological

struggle, where Salma engages in an inner dialogue shaped by competing discourses of conformity, resistance and autonomy. The dialogic portrayal of female subjectivity underscores the value of Bakhtinian theory in analysing how ideological tensions are embodied and dramatized in “The Land, Salma.” Abdul Wali’s artistic depiction of Salma’s dialogic interiority highlights how her consciousness is shaped by a dialogical interplay between dominant cultural narratives and emergent subversive counter-narratives.

While the term *interior monologue* traditionally refers to a literary technique that renders a character’s unmediated, seemingly univocal inner speech, this study reinterprets it as an *interior dialogue* because the protagonist’s inner discourse is inherently polyphonic, ideologically plural, and dialogically structured. This is not a mere semantic shift but a theoretical reorientation. This reorientation, grounded in Bakhtin’s principle of the inherently social and polyphonic nature of consciousness, reframes Salma’s seeming solitude as a site of ideological struggle. Her thoughts are not a private stream but a contested space where multiple internalized voices—of duty, desire, tradition, and resentment—engage in a “double-voiced” dialogue (Gardiner 28-29). In this reading, the internal negotiation of patriarchal constraints becomes the very mechanism of her agency. Introducing this dialogic framework from the outset clarifies the methodological approach and the article’s intervention in feminist narratology.

Mohammed Abdul Wali (1940-1973) is, widely regarded as a pioneer of modern Yemeni fiction, known for breaking away from traditional literary forms rooted in religious and historical writing (Al-Maqalih 1999). His fiction introduces a realist portrayal of ordinary Yemenis, especially the marginalized, with a compassionate and often critical lens (Weir 1). As Abdul-Rahman Mohammad (2003) notes, two deeply intertwined subjects define Mohammed Abdul Wali’s literary work: immigration and women (226). Although several studies have addressed Abdul Wali’s literary works (e.g., Nasser et al. 2024; Rashed 2022; Obaid 2022; Albalawi 2015; Al-Maqalih 2003; Mohammed 2003; Şabrah 2002), most of these studies focus on different aspects related to the theme of immigration. The few that consider the issue of women do not provide in-depth analysis of female representation and tend to overlook Abdul Wali’s portrayal of women from a feminist perspective. Abdul-Rahman A. Mohammad (2003) presents a concise study, written in Arabic, on Abdul Wali’s treatment of women and sexuality. He emphasizes that in most by Abdul Wali’s stories, female characters are portrayed in a positive light despite the oppressive realities they face (226). Also, in her introduction to *They Die Strangers*, a novella and short stories from Yemen and

the first work by Abdul Wali to be translated into English, Shelagh Weir (2001) notes that Abdul Wali depicts Yemeni village women as “sad, repressed, abandoned victims” (9) to highlight the negative effect of male long-term immigration.

To contextualize this gap, it is necessary to situate the present study within broader feminist debates in Arab literary criticism. While feminist readings of Yemeni literature remain limited, this article aligns with wider Arab feminist discussions on women’s agency and representation. Foundational works by Miriam Cooke, Nadjé Al-Ali, and Elora Shehabuddin highlight the complex ways Arab women negotiate patriarchal, political, and communal expectations. The present study’s dialogic approach resonates with these perspectives by foregrounding the plurality of voices within Salma’s interior monologue and illustrating how competing social discourses shape her self-understanding. In contrast to frameworks such as postcolonial feminism or Islamic feminism—which focus primarily on material, historical, or religious structures—a Bakhtinian dialogical perspective emphasizes the dynamic interplay of internal and external voices that constitute Salma’s agency. This approach complements existing feminist methodologies and positions the analysis within contemporary Arab feminist literary discourse.

This analysis of agency in Abdul Wali’s text also engages directly with broader feminist debates on Arab women’s representation. It echoes Miriam Cooke’s concern with how literary form shapes feminist resistance—particularly in her analyses of war narratives and the postcolonial Arab novel (Cooke 1988, 1996)—and draws on Nadjé Al-Ali’s attention to the intersectional social and political pressures shaping women’s lives in the Arab world (Al-Ali 2000, 2007). It further resonates with Dalal Sarnou’s (2016) application of a Bakhtinian feminist lens to Arab women’s writing, demonstrating how dialogic strategies function to navigate patriarchal discourse. While these scholars often centre women’s own activism or writings, the present article extends such feminist inquiries to the analysis of a male-authored narrative, asking how the dialogic representation of female consciousness may perform similar critical work.

Within this broader context, however, a notable gap persists in applying dialogic feminist frameworks to male-authored Arabic literature, particularly in the Yemeni context. Although dialogism has gained traction in feminist criticism, its application has largely focused on female authors or Western texts, leaving the complex representation of female interiority in male-authored narratives from non-Western contexts relatively underexplored.

Therefore, attempting to fill this gap in the literature, the present study provides a feminist dialogic reading of Mohammad Abdul Wali’s short story الأرض ياسلمى

[Al-Arḍ Yā Salmā], translated by Abu Baker Bagader and Deborah Akers into English under the title “The Land, Salma” in *They Die Strangers* (2001). It shows that dialogic structure can illuminate female interiority in male-authored, non-Western narratives where the dialogic discourse of a female character can enact ideological resistance and reveal complex negotiations of gendered identity. It shows that it is in dialogism, as Bakhtin tells us, identity develops; it is through the illumination of the conflicts between the multiple voices, as this paper will attempt to show, Salma’s identity develops. The reader can trace the struggle of the protagonist for agency and detect how despite her restricted freedom, she does not yield but she determines to bring a change in society that helps improve women’s conditions.

Mohammed Abdul Wali’s “The Land, Salma”: An Overview

Abul Wali’s short story “The Land, Salma” appears in his first short story collection which bears the same title as the story itself, issued by Dar Al-Adab in Beirut in the mid-1970s. As Abdul Aziz Al-Maqalih (2003) notes, “after the publication of this first collection of his short stories, Mohammed Abul Wali had become the pioneer writer of the modern short story in Yemen” (8). Al-Maqalih further emphasizes that Mohammad Abdul Wali is considered as “the pioneering figure of the Yemeni modern fiction without dispute” (8). Al-Jumly et al also state that Mohammad Abdul Wali “is one of the most masterful fiction writers not only of Yemen but of the Arab world” (41).

Abdul Wali’s “The Land, Salma” is set in the second half of the twentieth century, a critical period in Yemen’s history during the Imamate regime (1948-1962) marked by rigid social hierarchies and deep patriarchal values. The narrative opens with a brief third-person narrator introducing the protagonist, Salma, a Yemeni village woman, as she works the land preparing it for the anticipated rainfall. Upon returning home, the rain begins to fall, preventing her from the usual outdoor work, so she rests in her room. Meanwhile, the narrative shifts to Salma’s interior monologue, revealing her emotional isolation after her husband, Dirham, who immigrated five years ago, unaware she was pregnant. Salma grapples with conflicting thoughts: while one voice recalls her domestic duties and roles, another voice reveals her aspirations for personal freedom and her escapist fantasies. She worries that her husband might marry and never return, while also fantasizes about love with a young man named Hassan.

The inner dialogue continues to become more intense as we hear the voice that tempts her with ideas of divorce and emotional fulfilment swiftly conflict with

another that highlights the harsh realities of her gendered position: inaccessible divorce, unlikely remarriage, and limited freedom. Finally, her internal confrontation leads to a hard-won clarity: not to pursue fantasy but to root herself in something lasting. Salma realizes that like her husband and other men in the village, Hassan would also immigrate, leaving her to care for his parents and land. Meanwhile, Salma's inner voice fades, followed promptly by her son entering the room. She then firmly decided to teach him to love the land. She chooses the land, which she has toiled on, and which sustains her and her son. The story ends with Salma having a clear purposeful mission to tackle the roots of immigration by empowering the next generation to find value in staying in their land.

Dialogism, Interior Dialogue, and Feminist Ideology in Narrative Prose

The application of dialogism to literary analysis has significantly enriched critical approaches to the study of voice, ideology, and self-representation in narrative fiction. Originating in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, dialogism conceptualizes language not as a neutral or unified system but as a socially and ideologically saturated field in which multiple worldviews coexist and engage in dynamic tension (Smith 45). Central to this theory of dialogism is the concept of polyphony, or the "multiplicity of voices" in a text, which shows the coexistence of conflicting and unmergeable ideological positions within a single narrative (Morris 49).

Bakhtin (1984) situates literary language within a broader sociopolitical framework, affirming that every narrative voice embodies a "particular point of view on the world" (Bakhtin 47). According to Bakhtin, these voices generate "heteroglossia," a condition in which diverse and often conflicting socio-ideological perspectives are revealed through language (291). "Heteroglossia" thus signals not mere stylistic variation, but ideological contestation enacted through discourse.

A central aspect of Bakhtin's theory is the contrast between "authoritative discourse," which demands submission, and "internally persuasive discourse," which interacts with the self and may shape personal belief. Bakhtin (1981) explains: "Authoritative discourse [...] demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally" (343). He further stresses: "The struggle and dialogic interrelationship of these categories of ideological discourse are what fills the structure of the dialogue and in fact determine its entire stylistic profile" (342).

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism has been extended into psychological domains, most notably through Hubert J. M. Hermans' Dialogical Self Theory (DST). Drawing on Bakhtin, Hermans (1996) conceptualizes the self as a dynamic

multiplicity of “I-positions,” each representing a distinct internalized voice, whether from personal experience, social roles, or cultural authority. In this framework, intrapersonal communication mirrors interpersonal dialogism, as identity becomes an ongoing negotiation between these various internal positions (Hermans and Dimaggio 35). Inner dialogue, as theorized by DST, plays a crucial role in psychological functions such as self-reflection, conflict resolution, and identity construction. Further, studies have shown that self-talk encompasses both evaluative and emotional functions, including self-criticism, self-reinforcement, self-management, and social judgment (Brinthaupt et al. 90). The presence of what DST calls confrontational dialogues (conflicts between opposing internal voices) underscores the dialogic nature of the self as it navigates diverse and often conflicting social expectations. In literary texts, such inner dialogues often serve to dramatize internal ideological tensions, portraying characters who grapple with competing discourses and contradictory desires.

Although in his literary analysis, Bakhtin himself neither addressed feminist concerns or gender topics directly, nor he referenced female authors, prominent literary feminist theorists, including J. Kristeva (1966), S. Lanser (1992) and D. Bauer (1988), have drawn on his ideas to explore how narrative fiction gives voice to marginalized and gendered subjectivities. Significantly, the first English rendition of some of Bakhtin’s thoughts appeared in Julia Kristeva’s seminal essay “Word, Dialogue and Novel” in 1966 (Gasparyan 126). Hence, the initial introduction of Bakhtin’s ideas to Western literary analysis is closely associated with Julia Kristeva. Kristeva’s work plays a key role in bringing Bakhtin’s thought to the attention of Western scholars and stimulating academic interest in his theories (Gasparyan 126). In this text, Kristeva integrates Bakhtin’s notions of “dialogism” and “carnival” with semiotic theory, laying the groundwork for the foundational concept of “intertextuality.” Likewise, Lanser (1992) in *Fictions of Authority*, provides a crucial bridge between feminist narratology and Bakhtinian dialogism by theorizing narrative voice as a locus of both power and ideological positioning. She argues that female-authored texts often subvert dominant narrative conventions through what she calls “communal voice” and strategic disruptions of narrative authority, anticipating the kind of multiplicity that Bakhtin describes. Vice (1997) further clarifies the theoretical foundation of this tradition by outlining how Bakhtin’s core concepts—such as heteroglossia, polyphony, and internally persuasive discourse—illuminate the ideological tensions and dialogic multiplicity inherent in narrative voice. Together, these works meet in viewing the self not as a stable or unified subject, but as a site of ongoing ideological negotiation, echoing Bakhtinian

conceptions of discourse and identity.

More recent scholarship extends these insights into broader geographic and cultural contexts. Bakar, Yusof, and Vengadasamy (2016) apply a feminist dialogic lens to Southeast Asian drama, highlighting how female characters use dialogic strategies to contest authority and assert autonomy within the Southeast Asian socio-political context in Malaysian drama. Moving to Arabic context, Sarnou (2016) examines how Anglophone Arab women writers employ dialogic and polyphonic strategies to construct ideologically complex and politically significant narrative voices. Her work clarifies how combining feminist concerns with narratological approaches informed by both Bakhtin and Lanser enables women writers to navigate and challenge patriarchal discourse. Moreover, Diana Gasparyan (2023) traces the feminist appropriation of Bakhtinian ideas, pointing out: “Their initial introduction was deeply intertwined with the evolution of feminist theory, feminist criticism, and discussions surrounding gender identity” (125). Gasparyan argues that Bakhtin’s theory provides a fertile ground for feminist interpretive strategies, demonstrating its relevance to discussions of power relations, cultural marginalization, and political resistance (126-127). While she acknowledges the adaptation of Bakhtin’s ideas to foreground female subjectivity and articulate gendered voices, she stresses that “to truly harness their potential, there is an imperative to engage with them holistically” (138). Therefore, applying Bakhtin’s dialogic theory to a male-authored, non-Western text within feminist analysis requires methodological caution. As many feminist theorists have noted, Bakhtin’s work does not explicitly account for gendered power relations, raising questions about how female interiority is mediated within such narratives. This necessitates a critical reflection on the application of Bakhtinian dialogism, as Salma’s voice is inevitably mediated by Abdul Wali. We must therefore navigate the tension between interpreting her resistance and acknowledging the authorial framework that contains it. The feminist potential of the text thus lies not in claiming an unmediated female consciousness, but in analysing how the dialogic space *within* the narrative opens a possibility for subverting the very patriarchal logic that the author himself may have consciously or unconsciously documented. It is in this constructed, contested dialogue that Salma’s agency—and its structural implications—becomes most powerfully legible.

In short, these feminist studies demonstrate that dialogism serves as a powerful tool for feminist literary criticism by disrupting the notion of a singular, authoritative narrative voice and highlighting the presence of multiplicity, ideological conflict, and discursive resistance. Within this framework, female characters are depicted not as fixed identities but as dynamic, contested spaces where inherited norms and

subversive counter-narratives co-exist and interact. Within this feminist analysis, Bakhtin's theory of dialogism offers valuable insights into how, in the text under study, the female protagonist's subjectivity is dialogically constructed through competing internal voices, each shaped by a specific worldview.

It is worth noting here that while the term "interior monologue" conventionally refers to a character's unmediated inner speech or a discourse with one voice, interior monologues reveal intrinsic dialogism among different voices (Riccioni and Zuczkowski 268). The present study adopts the term "interior dialogue" to emphasize the inherently dialogic structure of the interior monologue in the text under study. Michael Gardiner distinguishes the *dialogic* word from the *monologic* one in two respects:

Unlike the monologic word, which always 'gravitates towards itself and its referential object,' the dialogic word is locked into an intense relationship with the word of another. It is always addressed to someone - a witness, a judge or simply a listener - and it is accompanied by the keen anticipation of another's response. Nor is the dialogic word a passive vehicle of neutral description or information: because it is designed to provoke a response, to initiate dialogue, it is an 'arena of battle between two voices' and is charged with polemic, parody, evaluation and so on. This is what Bakhtin means when he refers to the dialogic utterance as being 'double-voiced', 'vari-directional', and 'multi-accented'. (Gardiner 28-29)

These two aspects are considered in this study exploring the quality of dialogism in Salma's interior monologue. As this study seeks to demonstrate, Salma's inner speech is not monologic; it is not a passive vehicle of neutral description or information. Rather, it is intended to incite a response and to open dialogue; it is a site of struggle between two voices. Hence, drawing on Bakhtin's notion of "internal dialogization" (or "microdialogue," a contemporary term inspired by Bakhtin's notion of internal dialogization in Dialogical Self Theory), the analysis treats Salma's inner discourse as a site where multiple I-positions and competing voices coexist and interact. Even in the absence of external conversation, her inner speech becomes polyphonic, a complex interplay of centripetal and centrifugal ideological forces. Hence, the shift from *monologue* to *dialogue* is not merely terminological but conceptual, reframing the protagonist's consciousness (conflicting thoughts, un-reconciled strivings, competing discourses regarding her roles in a patriarchal society, her desires, her reflections on the judgements of others, and so on) as a

space of ideological tension and feminist resistance.

Entering the Dialogue: Inner Speech and Polyphonic Consciousness

The story opens in a rural Yemeni village, where the protagonist, Salma, is labouring in the fields, preparing the land for the anticipated rain. As she returns home, the rain begins to fall, interrupting her work and forcing her indoors. This enforced pause in her physical activity becomes a rare and significant moment of stillness that allows her to chill alone and connect with herself; “Everyone in the house was asleep, and Salma found herself alone in her room” (95). This moment of stillness becomes a fertile ground for inner dialogue. This quiet space, when the external world is muted, is the narrative’s entry point into her inner speech. Salma’s shift from outer work to inward dialogue is critical: it signals the spatial and psychological transition that facilitates her dialogic consciousness. It is an “interior chronotope,” where the linearity of action pauses and a space opens for self-dialogue. In such moments, time is charged with significance. It is here that the ideological becoming of Salma’s being is established. We see Salma’s “imagination leads her away” (59), indicating the first break from social routine.

Salma listens to a whispering inner voice: “Salma, finally, you’re facing yourself, you must admit the truth; don’t run away from yourself, for that won’t help you” (95). This voice initiates the internal dialogue that frames the rest of the narrative. This voice is not merely a thought, but a dialogic utterance, a second self-speaking to the first. It addresses Salma directly, using the second person “you,” as if standing apart from her, casting judgment and posing questions. This juncture is the pivotal dialogic moment, where external time slows, allowing interior voices to emerge and Salma’s ideological transformation to begin. This reminds us of Bakhtin’s words, “in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is— and, we repeat, not only for others but for himself as well” (252). This voice starts to confront and interrogate Salma:

Admit it, you’ve been waiting for him a long time and can’t bear it any longer. Try to remember how long your husband Dirham has been away. Five years, exactly. Oh, Salma, five years and you are starting the sixth year of waiting. How old are you? Count, you don’t need to rush. You’re twenty-six years old. Yes, you’ve started to feel that you’re getting old—quickly, without noticing and without enjoying life. (95)

The dialogue here appears between different parts of Salma. In other words,

Salma seems to be other or two-faced, within herself. This evokes what Mikhail Bakhtin terms ‘polyphony,’ where the self is not singular but composed of multiple, interacting consciousnesses. Through this voice Salma’s subliminal fears and desires are revealed; we are allowed to know what is unsaid or suppressed. It is a rebellious feminist voice through which Salma confronts herself as being trapped by her marriage to Dirham who has immigrated behind the sea abandoning her for five years. As years pass, she worries about aging and desires to enjoy life.

Interestingly, this voice is not a unified monologue; it exemplifies what Bakhtin calls an “internally persuasive discourse”. This voice confronts and interrogates Salma, echoing what Bakhtin (1984) calls the “multi-voicedness of consciousness” (35). It presents her with facts she knows but avoids admitting, pulling her into a deeper awareness of her lived contradictions. It openly challenges her suppressed feelings, telling her: “Admit it, you’ve been waiting for him a long time and you can’t bear it any longer.” The voice then continues its interrogation: “How old are you?” The answer follows: “You’re twenty-six years old.” Here, Salma is both speaker and respondent, the subject and object of her own inquiry.

Through this “internally persuasive discourse”—which conflicts with the “authoritative discourse” that suppresses her desires and fears—Salma’s consciousness begins to be reshaped. Reflecting on her emotional unfulfillment and loss, this inner voice confirms: “Yes, you’ve started to feel that you’re getting old—quickly, without noticing and without enjoying life.” In this moment, we trace a critical point of personal growth, as Salma’s consciousness starts to grapple authentically with the full weight of her situation.

Voices in Tension: Salma’s Dialogic Struggle with Her Selves

The narrative moves back in time, continuing and intensifying the internal dialogue that dominates the story’s structure. Salma’s dynamic conversation between her conflicting inner voices manifests most clearly when one voice recalls past events while another simultaneously interrogates and critiques them, creating sustained dialogic tension. For instance, one voice nostalgically asserts: “You were happy to get married to Dirham” (96). Yet this is immediately challenged by a counter-voice: “But Salma, did you really love Dirham? No, I don’t think you did” (96). We clearly hear two selves: the young Salma, whose heart was full of joy at marriage, and the present Salma, interrogating the true foundation of that joy. The dialogic struggle continues: “Then what was the secret of that happiness of yours?” (96). This is not just narrating the past; it is rigorous self-questioning. The interrogative voice investigates her own motives, challenging her past assumptions.

The hidden reality behind her ‘joy’ is revealed by this deeper, questioning self, which rhetorically asks: “Was it because you were a young girl or that you thought you would be freed from your father’s house? From the hard work you did there? Did you think you would find peace and comfort at your husband’s house?!” (96). Notably, throughout this internal dialogue, no single voice dominates or offers a definitive conclusion. Instead, the narrative unfolds in a state of open-ended self-examination, exemplifying Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony, where multiple consciousnesses coexist and interact without final synthesis.

Salma’s internally persuasive voice persists, but its tone now shifts to one of discontent and weariness. This voice interrupts her submissive self, actively challenging the narrative of endurance. It catalogues in detail the nature of her life of toil, the suffering she has endured in her husband’s house for ten years:

You woke up every day before the dawn prayer, milked and fed the cow, then went to the well. After filling your water jar, you came home to fix your husband’s breakfast. At noon, you went to the fields to work with your-father-in-law, plowing, sowing and clearing, only to return home exhausted to fix lunch: you ground the grain, knead the dough, and baked the bread to feed your husband.

After lunch he left to chew qat. You rarely had lunch, which was usually your breakfast, too: bits of bread with bits of coffee beans or a pudding with milk.

Then it was after-the-lunch work: washing clothes, going to the mountain to collect firewood, going to the well again at sunset to get the evening water and then cutting grass for the cow. You fix dinner and offered it to your husband ... you lay down midnight dead tired and wake up at the dawn prayer call to work again- till you were exhausted. (96-97)

The internal voice here confronts Salma with the crushing strain of her labor, signaling that her patience is exhausted. This serves not only to reveal her burdens but to critique the traditional gender roles that cast women as domestic servants. Crucially, this voice also seeds defiance. It sparks a vision of autonomy and self-worth, enacting a form of resistance that challenges patriarchal oppression.

Salma’s perception of change—what may have once felt like progress—is reinterpreted by this inner voice as a shift in subjugation. It states bluntly, “This has been your life, every day”, and then, with palpable discontent, demands, “Has there been anything new in the last ten years?” (97). Salma grows aware that the supposed liberation of her marriage to Hassan was merely a replacement of one patriarch with

another. This realization is captured in her regretful reply: “It’s the same life you used to live at your father’s house. Nothing has changed except your boss—first your father, then your husband” (97). In the tension between past happiness and present exhaustion, between love and illusion, the writer dramatizes the polyphony of Salma’s selfhood. This internal dialogue establishes a direct chronological confrontation between her present awareness and her past submission.

Dialogism becomes sharply present as an agitating thought creeps into Salma’s mind: the suspicion of her husband’s infidelity. This causes her two inner voices to grow even more intense and alarming. A voice of doubt tells her:

You waited for his return to you and his child. A year passed. And another. And five years, but still he hasn’t appeared. He’s still alive overseas, over there. Across the big sea, the one they say has no end.
How do you know, Salma, whether he’s alone or not? (97)

Yet, a soothing voice tries to calm her and alleviate the burden of this dreadful doubt: “Don’t tremble and turn pale. It’s merely a thought, a guess” (97). The voice of doubt, however, is neither silenced nor placated. Instead, it grows more forceful, intensifying her fears:

He might be alone, and he might not. No one trusts men, especially when they are far away, unseen by the familiar eyes. Why should your husband be any different? You know the story of your uncle, Zaid, who deserted his wife for twenty years. He is alive and has a wife and children. They say one day he will return to his first wife, who still waits for him. (97)

These internal voices continue to operate in collision, with neither overcoming the other. While the first voice presses its rhetorical interrogation—“Why won’t your husband do the same. Yes, why wouldn’t he cheat on you?”—the second contradicts its premise by responding, “[t]he truth is unknown; it’s there overseas with your husband” (97). This dynamic embodies the true nature of dialogism: the two voices coexist in unresolved tension, where no single perspective has the final word. Each maintains its integrity, contributing to the polyphonic diversity that sustains the story’s ongoing internal dialogue.

Salma’s internal dialogue deepens into another layer of multiplicity, marked by further conflicting voices. One voice yearns for autonomy and emotional fulfillment through a happy marital life with Hassan, the man she loves. In stark contrast,

another voice articulates the weight of internalized social codes, shame, and patriarchal control. Salma's fantasy of divorcing her absent husband and beginning a new life emerges through a voice that openly challenges her repressed desires:

“The truth, Salma, is that you're wearing make-up for him, for Hassan.”
 “No, no—don't let your heart flutter. Don't get embarrassed and blush—you'll reveal your secret.” (98)

This voice gives utterance to Salma's “unspeakable” thoughts, echoing what Bakhtin (1984) identifies as “extreme internal dialogisation” (237). However, it is immediately conflicted by another voice, one shaped by social surveillance and internalized as guilt and fear:

Haven't you noticed that for the past two days everyone has been following you with eyes full of doubt? Haven't you noticed? Why are they throwing those silent looks your way? You're smart, Salma. You know. You're wearing make-up. Yes, make-up. They haven't seen you wear make-up since your husband left five years ago. (97-98)

Though the internally persuasive voice offers quiet resistance, affirming, “There is nothing wrong with loving someone” (98), the authoritative patriarchal voice asserts its ideology: “But it is shameful to betray another. You betray your husband when you love someone else” (98). It further enforces a gendered double standard, forbidding her from reciprocating her husband's infidelity: “Don't think about acting like him, cheating on him” (98). Through this voice, the reader's attention is drawn to the hypocrisy of gender roles in Salma's world, where men may leave, cheat, and remarry, while women are bound by expectations of loyalty and silence.

This dialogic interplay reflects not only Salma's psychological fragmentation but also her internal struggle between personal desire and societal expectation. The tension, shaped by gendered double standards, is crystallized in the internalized voice of patriarchal morality confronting her: “A woman in your position here doesn't have the right to love whom she wants, nor to enjoy her youth” (98). This voice articulates the full weight of oppressive ideology, asserting that “a woman is merely a servant. The man marries her to serve his parents. He leaves her to go far away and not come back. She doesn't have the right to seek divorce. Divorce is disdained” (98).

Significantly, the very articulation of these beliefs within Salma's consciousness demonstrates her growing awareness of her oppression, while

simultaneously opening them to internal scrutiny and criticism. Here, the text reveals a nascent feminist perspective, implicitly questioning the injustice of these prescribed roles.

Thus, Salma's conflicting inner voices stage the central ideological conflict of the text: patriarchy versus self-determination. The patriarchal logic denies her the right to divorce an absent husband or pursue love and happiness. Yet a competing, internally persuasive voice insists, "Divorce is something you'd like since you would enjoy the life that your husband has stolen" (98). The presence of this counter-voice—expressing her repressed desires for autonomy and fulfilment—reveals a self that is dialogically fragmented, not unified. In sum, this layering of memory, social norms, judgment, and desire shows that Salma's subjectivity is constructed polyphonically, through a contested chorus of voices rather than a single, authoritative perspective.

Attainment of Dialogic Agency and Meaning-Making

This dialogic struggle culminates in Salma becoming fully aware of her aspirations, fantasies, and submissive subjectivity. By weighing her options, she demonstrates that she is not passively accepting her circumstances. She actively engages in critical thought about her situation, reflecting: "But, Salma, what can you do?" (98). This question initiates an active search for a way to change her life, highlighting her growing agency amid conflicting internal voices.

She then begins to consider the potential consequences. She recognizes that love with Hassan and divorce from her absent husband may not bring positive change: "You won't gain a thing by loving Hassan" (98). Furthermore, she weighs the negative consequences of divorce—namely, the potential loss of her son's future and her connection to the land: "Where will your child go? [...] How could you leave your land and for whom? [...] Nobody values the land like you do. [...] Isn't the land your life?" (98). This voice further frames Hassan as a duplicate of her husband—another man who will ultimately immigrate, leaving behind a woman to serve his family and work the land. It warns her that even if she divorces and remarries, "he [Hassan] won't live in the village forever. He will depart tomorrow, leaving behind a woman to serve his parents, to work the land" (99). The voice presses the point home, asking: "Even if you were that woman—what's the difference between your present life and life in his house?" (99) It then answers definitively: "There is no difference, Salma, no difference" (99). Thus, Salma realizes her situation would remain fundamentally unchanged. Through this internal debate, the reader recognizes that male emigration plays a key role in structuring the

challenges faced by Salma and other women in the village, locking them into cycles of servitude and abandonment regardless of their personal choices.

At this moment of awareness, the “dialogic self” fades, and the narrator returns, shifting the imagery to the rain and the land presented at the story’s opening. We see the rain fall softly, music-like, nurturing the land. The narrator observes, “the water streams on the terraces embraced the dry, yellow roots, giving them life” (99). This interplay between rain and land, recalling the opening scene’s ‘thirsty’ earth, emphasizes themes of growth and change, suggesting that even in difficult times, there is potential for a new beginning.

This natural metaphor parallels Salma’s emotional shift from passive endurance to growth and active decision-making. Holding her son, she decisively determines: “I will teach him. I will teach him to love the land” (99, italics in the original). Her decision to teach her son to love the land is the act that enables her to instigate change, signifying a new beginning. The dialogic struggle thus culminates in Salma locating herself within the discursive multiplicity and making a definitive choice. The agency reflected in this act is not a simple assertion of will but the active process of navigating a dynamic, multifaceted internal dialogue to arrive at a decisive resolution.

Indeed, this is the moment when Salma reclaims her agency. She neither yields to the authoritative social voice—surrendering to despair and submission—nor escapes into the romantic dream of marrying Hassan. Instead, she reclaims agency by choosing to invest in her son, in continuity, and in a legacy of rooted resistance.

Salma’s mission to teach her son to love the land is a form of agency that is feminine, maternal, moral, and strategic. It is not the agency of public rebellion but the agency of transformation from within—of planting new values in her society. In a society where men leave the land and women are left behind, raising children who value it is an act of resistance against structural forces: migration, patriarchy, and abandonment. She uses her maternal role to reshape the future, both for women and for society as a whole.

While Salma’s decision to root her son’s identity in the land signals an act of resistance, it also invites counter-readings. One could argue that her return to the land risks reinscribing traditional gender roles by locating her agency within the maternal sphere and confining her influence to domestic space. Yet, as scholars of agency within constraint have shown, such margins can themselves become powerful sites of critique. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s discussion of the margin as a space with its own political logic, Miriam Cooke (2015) observes that the social periphery often functions as a locus of resistance (107-108). Similarly, Saba

Mahmood (2005) demonstrates that agency can operate productively within socially prescribed roles. This perspective is powerfully affirmed by feminist theorists who frame motherhood itself as a site of empowerment. Bell hooks (1984) argues that motherhood can be a profound source of personal and political affirmation (87), while Patricia Hill Collins (2000) notes it fosters a culture of resistance within marginalized communities (178).

These conceptual frames help us see how Salma's maternal agency operates. Sara Ruddick's (1989) concept of "maternal practice" reframes mothering as intellectual and political labour aimed at preserving and nurturing future life. In this light, Salma's pedagogy constitutes a profound maternal practice that resists a destructive social cycle. Audre Lorde (1984) similarly identifies maternal love as a transformative source of empowerment against oppression. Furthermore, James C. Scott's (1985) notion of "everyday resistance" highlights how subtle, quotidian acts can subvert dominant power relations. Viewed through these lenses—Cooke's margin, Ruddick's practice, and Scott's resistance—Salma's teaching is not a passive gesture but a deliberate, strategic form of resistance. It imagines a different social order, one in which a man's connection to the land mitigates the patriarchal cycle of abandonment.

This is a structural feminist intervention. In Abdul Wali's fictional world—as in many Yemeni communities—the cycle of male out-migration is sustained by a gendered ideology that valorizes men's departure as economic duty while rendering women's suffering invisible. By cultivating in her son an attachment to the land, Salma symbolically interrupts this generational cycle: she plants the idea of rootedness as an alternative to the masculine ideal of departure. This act reframes the future not around the father's absence but around a mother's vision for stability, belonging, and communal continuity.

Ultimately, Salma's power lies in her dialogic self-awareness, in her refusal to be pacified by either submission or fantasy. She listens to her fears, desires, duties, and doubts and finally takes a decision. By doing so, she constructs a quiet but powerful act of resistance: to remain, to cultivate, and to teach. Consequently, Salma is neither a tragic heroine nor a submissive figure; she is a woman who thinks, doubts, endures, and resists. Her final decision, "I'll teach him to love the land," is not a surrender but a reclamation of agency—a decision forged in dialogue, in contradiction, and in the soil beneath her feet.

Conclusion

Though formally an interior monologue, the protagonist's inner discourse is deeply

dialogic, echoing Bakhtin's notion of internal dialogization. Salma's story is not told by one Salma, but by Salma's multiple selves, who debate, confront, and question each other. These multiple voices exemplify Bakhtinian dialogism in literary character construction. This narrative technique makes Abdul Wali's depiction of his female protagonist complex and obliterates the authorial voice throughout the entire story. Salma's self-consciousness, to quote Bakhtin (1984), is "represented and not merely expressed, that is, [...] does not become the mouthpiece for [the author's] voice" (51). "The Land, Salma" is not a reflection of Abdul Wali's views regarding his female protagonist, but both a critique of the oppressive patriarchal system and hegemonic discourses about women and a recognition of female agency and struggle.

Earlier in the story, Salma appears in a dilemma; she is emotionally fragmented, weighed down by loneliness, desire, social norms and expectations and shame. Her inner voice reflects doubt, aspirations, fantasies and internalized oppression. But by the end, she chooses a direction, and that choice gives her strength. Though she doesn't change the oppressive system, she makes meaning from within it: finding her own voice amidst conflicting forces. Interestingly, Salma's agency echoes Bakhtin's notion of agency as emerging through dialogue (rather than against it) and it also aligns with feminist dialogic theory as Salma asserts meaning in the very space where voices clash.

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