

THE DYNAMICS OF MASCULINE VULNERABILITY, SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE AND FEMALE PASSIVITY: A TRANSITIVITY APPROACH TO MOHSIN HAMID'S *A BEHEADING*

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Abstract

This article applies Sara Mills's feminist stylistic framework to a transitivity analysis of Mohsin Hamid's short story A Beheading, revealing how grammatical choices both reinforce and complicate patriarchal representations of male vulnerability and female silencing. The findings reveal that male narrator is centrally positioned in the three selected excerpts. Although his emotional vulnerability is foregrounded through dominant mental and behavioral processes yet he retains narrative authority and control. While the male narrator is portrayed as introspective and emotionally burdened, he continues to occupy active grammatical roles, such as Actor, Sayer, Senser, whereas his wife is largely positioned as passive recipient, Phenomenon or Goal. The analysis unmask how patriarchal structures regulate both male and female identities: women are silenced, objectified and their agency curtailed, while men, even when vulnerable, remain central. The representation of male trauma, particularly in contexts of violence and humiliation, challenges dominant ideals of masculinity, aligning with intersectional feminist critiques that call for a more inclusive understanding of gendered emotional expression. Ultimately, this study highlights how transitivity patterns not only reflect but also reproduce systemic gender inequalities, while also offering space to interrogate and reframe normative gender roles.

Key Words: Feminist stylistics, transitivity analysis, agency, masculine vulnerability

1. Background of the Study

Language plays a crucial role in shaping and constructing gender, a concept emphasized by Sara Mills in her work *Feminist Stylistics*. Mills argues that linguistic choices, particularly those related to transitivity, offer a wide range of meanings depending on the context and environment, a key concern in feminist stylistics. She posits that these choices can reinforce gender biases and ideologies; shaping the way gender is represented in texts. By analyzing transitivity choices at the syntactic level, it is possible to explore how characters are depicted as either passive victims of circumstances or as active participants who make significant contributions, take bold actions and make decisions (Mills, 1995, p. 144).

The concept of transitivity analysis, introduced by Michael Halliday in the 1960s, sees language as a system of choices, where each choice reflects a particular context and environment. Transitivity analysis focuses on identifying the actor (the one who practices agency) and the goal (the one who is acted upon). This approach examines clauses that describe actions and participants, revealing the interconnections between language, ideology and gender (Mills, 1995, p. 144, p. 143).

By combining Mills' *Feminist Stylistics* with Halliday's transitivity analysis, the study aims to uncover how linguistic choices at the syntactic level shape the representation of gender in texts. Transitivity analysis of Hamid's short story *A Beheading* offers a tool for understanding how

agency and passivity are distributed between characters, revealing how gender ideologies are reinforced or subverted. When examining short story through Michael Halliday's lens, *Feminist Stylistics* becomes a powerful way to critique the subtle ways in which language constructs gender and power relationships, urging a more nuanced interpretation of how men and women are depicted in narrative forms.

2. Literature Review

Compared to Mohsin Hamid's widely analyzed novels such as *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *How to get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, *Exit West* and *The last Whiteman*, *A Beheading* has received relatively limited scholarly attention. Only three research articles on this story are available which have been briefly reviewed below.

Asad and Batool (2020) conducted a stylistic analysis emphasizing the lexical and morphological aspects of the story. They identified the use of literary devices such as imagery, personification, metaphors, similes and repetitive phrases, which contribute to the story's intense emotional atmosphere. Morphologically, the story exhibits diverse word formations and origins, reflecting the protagonist's fragmented mental state.

Anam, Bilal & Abbas (2023) have explored the transitivity structure of Mohsin Hamid's short story *A Beheading*. Using systemic functional linguistics, they analyze the distribution of processes, participants and circumstances within the text to reveal the dynamics of power, agency and victimization. The analysis focuses on how the protagonist's limited agency and the external forces governing his fate are reflected through transitivity choices, contributing to the story's emotional and thematic depth.

Rahim and Hussain (2024) expanded upon previous analyses by incorporating phonological and graphological perspectives. They noted the use of alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia, which create a rhythmic quality that blurs the line between prose and poetry. Graphologically, the deliberate use of capitalization and punctuation deviations underscores the protagonist's psychological turmoil.

There is a relative lack of research which underscores the need for a more robust critical exploration of *A Beheading*, particularly its potent commentary on masculine vulnerability, sexualized violence and absence of female agency which is quite evident in transitivity choices. The present research article aims to fulfill this research gap.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, predominantly qualitative, with the inclusion of quantitative data in the form of tables to substantiate the findings. The analysis integrates Sara Mills's *Feminist Stylistics* in conjunction with Michael Halliday's theory of transitivity to scrutinize selected excerpts from the short story. For the purpose of this investigation, three specific excerpts involving interactions between the male narrator/husband and the female character/wife were selected, as these segments most directly align with the aims of the research. The chosen excerpts were broken into clauses to facilitate the identification of transitivity processes. The results of this analysis are subsequently interpreted through the lens of Sara Mills's framework, aiming to reveal patterns of both toxic and vulnerable masculinity, sexualized violence and the absence of female agency. The identified transitivity processes not only reflect but also perpetuate entrenched gender inequalities, while concurrently providing a critical space to challenge and reframe conventional gender norms.

Statement of the Problem

Despite extensive research on patriarchal structures and gendered representations in literature, limited attention has been paid to how transitivity choices, through the lens of Sara Mills's feminist stylistic framework, construct male vulnerability and female silencing in contemporary South Asian short fiction like Mohsin Hamid's *A Beheading*

3.2 Research Question

The overarching questions of the present research are:

- ✓ To what extent can a feminist stylistic analysis of transitivity open new possibilities for rethinking normative gender roles in *A Beheading*?
- ✓ In what ways does the grammatical positioning of male and female characters reflect broader systemic structures of agency, voice and silencing?
- ✓ How does the representation of masculine vulnerability intersect with feminist critiques of masculinity and emotional expression?

3.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of the present research are following:

- ✓ To apply Sara Mills's feminist stylistic framework to analyze the transitivity patterns in Mohsin Hamid's short story *A Beheading*.
- ✓ To examine the narrative positioning of male and female characters through transitivity roles such as Actor, Sayer, Senser, Phenomenon and Goal.
- ✓ To explore how representations masculine vulnerability interact with dominant ideals of masculinity within patriarchal structures.

3.3 Delimitations of the Study

This research is intentionally limited in scope, focusing specifically on Mohsin Hamid's short story *A Beheading*, which consists of twelve paragraphs. The analysis is delimited to three key passages where the narrator's wife is mentioned, thereby aligning with the objective of the study, examining the text through a feminist stylistic lens. Notably, while Sara Mills's *Feminist Stylistics* encompasses a broad range of features, including naming, modifiers, focalization and transitivity choices, this study concentrates exclusively on the latter, specifically transitivity choices, to explore the implications of gender representation.

3.5 Significance of the Study

This study can be fruitful not only in gender studies but it also signifies the wider value of linguistics methodologies into feminist literary criticism. Because it offers a unique perspective in applying a combined theoretical framework of *Mills' Feminist Stylistics* and Halliday's *Systematic Functional Grammar* to analyze Hamid's short story *A Beheading*. The study challenges traditional ideals of masculinity by emphasizing male emotional expression and contributes to feminist critiques by offering a space to reconsider normative gender roles and the systemic inequalities reflected in language.

4. Data Analysis

A Transitivity Analysis through Feminist Stylistic Lens

In *A Beheading*, Mohsin Hamid explores the vulnerability inherent in masculinity through the lens of sexualized violence. This analysis uses transitivity theory to examine how the protagonist's experience of violence disrupts conventional masculine identity. The analysis aims to reveal through linguistic structures, how Hamid highlights the performative nature of masculinity,

revealing how power dynamics and societal expectations shape male vulnerability. The narrative also reflects how women, often portrayed as passive recipients of action, are deprived of agency through transitivity choices. The use of passive constructions and the absence of women as active agents emphasize their subjugation and objectification within the story. Through these linguistic choices, Hamid contrasts male fragility with female disempowerment, exposing the fragility of male identity while challenging traditional notions of masculinity.

Excerpt 1: I hear the window shatter.// There's no air conditioner on to muffle the sound.// I get out of bed.// I wish(I wasn't my age)//. I wish (I was as old as my parents)//. Or as young as my son.// I wish(it didn't have to be me) (telling my wife to stay) where she is, //saying everything will be fine in a voice// she doesn't believe// and I don't believe either. //We both hear the shouting downstairs. //‘Put on some clothes,/' I'm saying to her.// ‘It'll be better (if you're wearing clothes.)’

Clause	Transitivity: Process Type	Participant	Process	Participant	Circumstances
A	Mental perception	Senser: I	Hear	Phenomenon: the window shatters	
A(Embedded Clause)	Material	Actor: the window	Shatters		
B	Existential		There is	Existent: no air conditioner	Purpose: <i>On</i> to muffle the sound
B (secondary Clause)	Material (purpose)		Muffle	Goal: the sound	
C	Material	Actor: I	get out		Out of the bed
D	mental (desiderative/projecting)	Senser: I	Wish	Phenomenon: I wasn't my age	
D (Projected Clause: what is wished for)	Relational (intensive, attributive)	Carrier / Identified: I	wasn't	Attribute / Identifier: my age	
C	Mental	Senser: I	Wish	Phenomenon: I was I was as old as my parents	
C(next clause)	Relational attributive	Carrier: I	Was	Attribute: <i>as old as my parents</i> (describes the attribute being wished for)	

D	Mental	Senser: I	Wish	Phenomenon: I was not my age	
D (Embedded Clause)	Relational	Token: I	Was not	Value: my age	
E (elliptical continuation)	Relational (Attributive)	Carrier: I	Ellipsis (was)	Attribute: as young as my son	
F	Mental (desiderative)	Senser: I	Wish	Phenomenon: it didn't have to be me	
F(embedded clause)	Process (relational/identifying + modal):	Identifier/carrier : It	didn't have to be	Identified: me	
G	Verbal: telling	Sayer: (implicit) I	Verbiage / Projected Clause: to stay where she is	Receiver: my wife	
G: Projected Clause:	Material (directed motion + location)	Actor: she	to stay	Goal/Location: where she is	
H	verbal	Sayer: She (implied)	Saying	Verbiage: everything will be fine	
H (Embedded clause)	Relational	Carrier: Everything	Will be	Attribute: fine	
I	Mental	Senser: She	does not believe	Phenomenon: voice	
J	Mental:	Senser: I	do not believe	Phenomenon: either	
K	Mental	Senser: we both	Hear	Phenomenon: the shouting	Downstairs: location
L (Embedded Clause)	Material	Actor: wife (implied)	Put on	Goal: some clothes	

L	Verbal: am saying	Sayer: I (implied)	Verbiage: Put on some clothes.	Receiver: her	
M	Relational: Attributive	Carrier: It	Will be	Attribute: better	
N	Material	Actor: you (Wife)	are wearing	Goal: Clothes	If : condition

Quantitative Summary of Transitivity Analysis of Selected Clauses in

Excerpt 1

Process Type	Frequency	Percentage
Total	25	100%
Material	6	24%
Mental	8	32%
Relational	7	28%
Verbal	3	12%
Existential	1	4%

Mills argues that transitivity choices can reveal gender-specific ideologies. In Excerpt 1, the narrative is set in a private yet crisis-ridden space and is focalized through a male narrator. The transitivity patterns in the text are dominated by mental processes, which highlight the emotional burden and introspection of the narrator. Within these processes, the male character—both narrator and husband—emerges as the primary Senser, engaging in perception, desire, and reflection. The repeated use of "I wish" in relational clauses underscores his desire to escape and resist his socially constructed identity, echoing feminist critiques of fixed gender roles. This linguistic construction gestures toward a form of masculine emotional vulnerability—one that exists but is often repressed or narrowly expressed in patriarchal narratives. The relational clauses thus serve as a critique of rigid masculine ideals of competence and strength, portraying the male character as feeling confined within these roles. In Mills' framework, such markers of patriarchy function not only to constrain femininity but also to construct and limit masculinity. Interestingly, the only mental process attributed to the wife reflects her mental disbelief, further emphasizing the dominance of the male perspective. The male narrator also controls the verbal and material processes; he is consistently positioned as the speaker and actor, while the wife occupies the roles of receiver or passive participant, acting under his direction. Despite the domestic setting and the crisis context, the narrative continues to center the male figure, relegating the female character to the periphery. While the male narrator exhibits emotional vulnerability, he retains authority and control, managing the crisis and issuing directives to his wife. These directives—such as telling her to “put on clothes” and “stay”—reinforce conventional gender roles, with the man depicted as the active protector and the woman as passive and in need of protection. The seemingly pragmatic command “put on your clothes” carries deeper connotative meaning, potentially alluding to patriarchal control over the female body. Although both characters are affected by the crisis, the woman’s agency is minimized or silenced. This tension aligns with contemporary feminist critiques of masculinity, which reveal how even emotionally uncertain and vulnerable male characters are

often positioned in narratives as dominant, while female characters remain voiceless and regulated through linguistic choices that maintain a gendered imbalance.

Excerpt 2: “I feel feverish, a high, malarial fever(that makes me shiver and drift in and out of sleep).// I hope they didn’t kill my son and my wife and my parents.// I hope they didn’t rape my wife.// I hope (whatever they do to me they don’t use acid on me).// I don’t want to die /but I don’t mind dying.// I just don’t want (to be tortured).// I don’t want anyone (to crush my balls with a pair of pliers)// and put his cigarette out in my eye.// I don’t want this car ride ever to end.// I’m getting used to it now”.

Clause	Transitivity : Process Type	Participant	Process	Participant	Circumstances
A	Mental (Perception)	Senser: I	Feel	Phenomenon: feverish, a high malarial fever	
A (Embedded Clause)	Material (causative process that introduces two embedded process)	Actor: that (a high malarial fever)	Make (causative verb)	Goal: me	
A (Embedded Clause further extended)	Behavioral	Behaver: me	Shiver (involuntary body action)		
A (Embedded Clause further extended)	Behavioral	Behaver: me	Drift in and out of sleep (A bodily state, losing/regaining consciousness)		
B	Mental	Senser: I	hope	Phenomenon: they did not kill my son wife and parents	
B (Embedded Clause)	Material	Actor: they	did not kill	Goal: my son, wife and parents	
C	Mental	Senser: I	Hope	Phenomenon: they did not rape my wife	

C (Embedded Clause	Material	Actor: they	Rape	Goal: my wife	
D	Mental	Senser: I	Hope	Phenomenon: whatever they do to me they don't use acid on me (a projected idea)	
D (Embedded clause 1)	Material	Actor: they	do	Goal: me Range: whatever (specifies the scope or domain of the action)	
D (Embedded clause 2	Material	Actor: they(implied)	Use	Goal: acid(used instrumentally) Recipient: me	
E	Mental	Senser: I	don't want	Phenomenon: to die (material action embedded as phenomenon)	
F	Mental	Senser: I	don't mind	Dying: material process embedded as phenomenon)	
E	Mental	Senser: I	don't want	Phenomenon: to be tortured (embedded passive material process)	
E(Embedded clause)	Material	An elided Actor: implied external agent	To be tortured	Goal: I Passive subject (I as the affected one)	
F	Mental	Senser: I	don't want	Phenomenon: anyone to crush my balls	

				with a pair of pliers(an embedded clause)	
F(Embedded clause)	Material	Actor: anyone	Crush	Goal: my balls	With a pair of pliers (instrument)
G	Material	Actor: Anyone (elided)	Put	Goal: his cigarette	in my eye(location) out (manner)
H	Mental	Sayer: I	don't want	Phenomenon: this car ride(embedded material process)	Ever to an end (a clause that complements the mental process of wanting).
I	Mental	Senser: I	getting used to	Phenomenon: it	now(temporal)

Quantitative Summary of Transitivity Analysis of Selected Clauses in Excerpt 2

Process Type	Frequency	Percentage
Total	20	100%
Material	8	40%
Mental	10	50%
Behavioral	2	10%

Using Sara Mills's framework, the transitivity analysis of Excerpt 2 highlights themes of masculine vulnerability and feminine passivity, revealing how patriarchal trauma and anxiety are internalized. The dominance of mental processes in this excerpt opens a window into the male narrator's inner world, marked by fear and anxiety, as he grapples with the emotional and physical toll of violence. These mental processes reflect his psychological struggle and vulnerability. The behavioral processes, such as "shivering" and "drifting," underscore his loss of control and bodily autonomy in moments of distress, further emphasizing his fragility. Mental actions also express his desperate desire to escape torture and death, indicating his fight for agency amid chaos. The transitivity choices position the narrator as the Senser and his wife as the Phenomenon, reinforcing gendered expectations within a patriarchal context. While the man's emotional responses suggest a form of psychic endurance, the gendered violence directed at his wife—particularly the threat of rape—renders her a passive and helpless victim. In the material processes, violent acts are carried out by unnamed but clearly powerful agents (e.g., kidnappers), with the *goals* being sexual assault and physical mutilation (e.g., rape and testicle crushing). These choices further underline how violence operates differently across gender lines, with men and women portrayed in contrasting roles of suffering and victimhood.

Excerpt: 3 "They tape my mouth shut// and pin me flat on my stomach.// One of them gets behind me// and pulls my head up by the hair//. It feels sexual (the way he does it). I wonder

(if my wife is still alive) and if she's going to sleep with another man after I'm gone.// How many men is she going to sleep with?// I hope she doesn't.// I hope (she's still alive).// I can see the long knife in his hand.// He's speaking into the camera.// I don't want to watch.// I shut my eyes./ I want to do something// to make my heart explode //so I can be gone now.// I don't want to stay".//

Clause	Transitivity : Process Type	Participant	Process	Participant	Circumstances
A	Material	Actor: they	Tape	Goal: my mouth	Shut: manner
B	Material	Actor: they (implied)	Pin	Goal: me	Flat on my stomach(location/manner)
C	Material	Actor: one of them	Gets behind		behind me: This is a Circumstance of Place (location)
D	Material	Actor: one of them (implied)	Pulls	Goal: my head	Up by the hair: manner
E	Mental	Senser: It	Feels	Phenomenon: sexual	the way he does it
E(Embedded clause)	Material	Actor: he	Does	Goal: it	
F	Mental	Senser: I	Wonder	Phenomenon: if my wife is still alive (embedded clause)	
F(Embedded Clause)	Material	Actor: she	is going to sleep	Goal: another man	after I am gone: Temporal
G	Material	Actor: she	Sleep with is a material process, even though it's metaphorical/colloquial. It denotes a physical action (doing), despite being used euphemistically	Goal: how many men (i.e., who she is sleeping with). In this case, it's a range-based interrogative where the quantity of the Goal is being questioned.	

			for sexual activity		
H	Mental	Senser: I	Hope	Phenomenon: she does not (embedded material process)	
I	Material	Actor: She	does not	Goal: (implied sleep with other men)	
J	Mental	Senser: I	Hope	Phenomenon: she is still alive (Embedded clause)	
J (embedded clause)	Relational : attributive	Carrier: she	Is	Attribute: alive	Still: temporal
K	Mental	Senser: I	can see	Phenomenon: the knife	in his hand
L	Verbal	Sayer: he	Speaking		into the camera
M	Mental	Senser: I	don't want to watch		
N	Material	Actor: I	Shut	Goal: my eyes	
O	Mental	Senser: I	Want	Phenomenon: to do something (embedded clause)	
O (embedded clause)	Material	Actor: I (implied)	to do	Goal: something	
P	Material	Actor: I (implied)	to make	Goal: my heart Phenomenon: explode	
Q	Material	Actor: I	can be gone		now
R	Mental	Senser: I	don't want	Phenomenon: to stay	

Quantitative Summary of Transitivity Analysis of Selected Clauses in Excerpt 3

Process Type	Frequency	Percentage
Total	22	100%
Material	12	54.55%
Mental	8	36.36%
Relational	1	4.5%

Verbal	1	4.5%
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The transitivity analysis of these clauses critiques patriarchy by showing how it dehumanizes both women and, at times, men, reducing their bodies to instruments of control, ownership and loss. In processes A to D, the narrator is depicted as a passive, silenced object, subjected to forceful and coordinated physical control. The agents or actors behind the violence are likely male, establishing a dynamic of male-on-male violence that parallels the sexualized violence typically associated with female oppression in male-dominated societies. Clause E introduces a mental process that suggests a coercive sexual undertone, further emphasized by the narrator's physical positioning ("flat on my stomach") and the act of hair-pulling. This objectification of the male body through sexualized violence reflects a broader pattern of domination linked to toxic masculinity. It reveals how toxic masculinity uses sexuality as a tool for humiliation and control, regardless of the victim's gender. Mental process and material processes in clauses F, G, H reveal a patriarchal discourse in which male emotional experience and perspective dominate, while female agency particularly sexual agency is scrutinized, controlled, or morally framed through the male gaze. The male speaker/husband consistently occupies the role of *Senser*, placing the woman/wife as the object of thought or concern, thus reinforcing a dynamic where her value and actions are defined in relation to him. Even when the woman is an *Actor*, her sexual behavior is presented as transgressive or quantifiable, rather than autonomous, reflecting deeper ideological assumptions about male ownership and female fidelity. Ultimately, the clauses reproduce traditional gender norms where women's bodies and choices are sites of male anxiety, surveillance and regulation. The transitivity choices in Clauses I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R reframes masculinity by presenting a vulnerable and emotionally expressive narrator, challenging toxic masculine ideals and opening space to acknowledge male trauma, often overlooked in both patriarchal and traditional feminist discourse but acknowledged in intersectional feminism. It also highlights how men, like women, bear emotional labor and pain under patriarchy, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive understanding of emotional complexity and vulnerability across genders.

5. Conclusion

Through a transitivity analysis informed by Sara Mills's feminist stylistic framework, these excerpts reveal how linguistic choices subtly construct and reinforce gendered ideologies. The dominance of mental and relational processes focalized through the male narrator foregrounds masculine emotional vulnerability, while simultaneously preserving male authority and control. In contrast, the female character remains largely passive, often relegated to the roles of *Phenomenon* or *Goal*, her agency minimized through the narrator's linguistic positioning. Even as the male figure is portrayed as emotionally fragile or physically compromised, he continues to occupy the central narrative and grammatical positions of power. The analysis exposes how patriarchy constrains not only femininity but also masculinity, enforcing rigid roles that dehumanize both genders. Moreover, the texts illustrate how patriarchal violence manifests in gender-specific ways—silencing, regulating, or violating the female body, while disciplining and humiliating the male body through domination and suppression of vulnerability. Ultimately, the transitivity patterns critique the patriarchal discourse by unsettling conventional gender binaries, revealing the emotional toll patriarchy exerts on all individuals and underscoring the importance of intersectional approaches that recognize the complexity and plurality of gendered experience.

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