

The Aesthetics of Surrender: A Theological Inquiry into the Concepts of *Tawakkul* and Divine Destiny in Tere Liye's Novel *The Falling Leaf Never Hates the Wind*

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Abstract

This paper examines the theological aesthetic representation of surrender, *tawakkul* (trust in God), and divine destiny (*qadar*) in Tere Liye's novel *The Falling Leaf Never Hates the Wind*. It stems from an academic concern regarding reductive, popular readings that often dismiss the suffering depicted in popular literature merely as romantic melodrama or helpless fatalism. Employing a theological literary criticism and comparative aesthetics approach, this study bridges the Western theological discourse on self-emptying (*kenosis*) with the Islamic concepts of *tawakkul*, *ridha* (contentment with divine will), and destiny acceptance. The findings demonstrate that the metaphor of the "falling leaf" does not denote despair or passive defeat in the face of fate; rather, it manifests as an active form of self-transcendence imbued with conscious moral agency and pure spiritual beauty. The inner surrender portrayed in the text reflects profound psychological resilience, wherein relinquishing the ego and embracing divine destiny serve as a pathway to liberation and spiritual maturation for the characters.

Keywords: Theological aesthetics, surrender, *tawakkul*, divine destiny, popular literature, *kenosis*.

Introduction

Reading romance narratives intertwined with psychological wounds often makes one wonder why tales of surrender feel remarkably captivating yet confounding at the same time. Examining contemporary religious discourse, Farley (2020) elaborates on how the intersection of faith and beauty essentially shapes the human perception of surrender, framing it not as cold obedience, but rather as an experience endowed with aesthetic taste and intrinsic elegance. This may explain why the concept has never truly ceased to be debated. Garrett (2012a) notes that within theological aesthetics, the relationship between humanity and the divine perpetually engages sensory perception and profound emotional sensibility. This suggests that the act of surrendering is not merely a matter of winning or losing. According to Bychkov and Fodor (2008), aesthetic explorations following the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar reveal how divine glory frequently manifests precisely when individuals empty themselves of ego.

Such intense spiritual experiences do not reside exclusively within the quiet halls of theological seminars. In the realm of Indonesian popular literature, Tere Liye has successfully brought similar resonance to the reading public through his phenomenal work, *The Falling Leaf Never Hates the Wind*. Personally, one might

initially have mistaken the book for an ordinary young adult romance upon first seeing its cover years ago in the corner of a bookstore. Yet, enduring reader enthusiasm resulting in numerous reprints demonstrates that something far deeper lies beneath the surface. The novel portrays the inner struggles between the characters Tania and Danar, offering a metaphor of surrender that resonates deeply within Indonesian society. Regrettably, its widespread popular reception has often oversimplified the nuanced layers of meaning embedded in the narrative.

Most general readers and popular reviews tend to pigeonhole this story into a cliché romantic melodrama. The narrative is frequently reduced to the sorrow of an unrequited, age-gap romance or the lamentation of a street child rescued by an established benefactor. More problematically, the aphorism that a falling leaf never hates the wind is often interpreted as a form of passive fatalism, as though humans are expected to surrender helplessly before a harsh fate. Such a reductionist perspective overlooks the internal dynamics of characters who actually strive vigorously to take charge of their lives. Freimann and Mayseless (2025) remind us that surrendering to a spiritual or moral authority figure is an active, conscious psychological process, rather than a forced, blind submission.

Herein lies the research gap that this study seeks to bridge. There has long been a considerable divide between academic theological inquiry and popular literary criticism. Park (2024) explains how the concept of *kenosis*, or self-emptying, can address modern existential emptiness through the beauty of inner surrender. This Western theological aesthetic, rich with Christological kenotic nuances, possesses a compelling convergence point when brought into dialogue with Islamic doctrines concerning *tawakkul* (trust in God) and *ridha* (contentment with divine destiny). Mihoc (2019) asserts that the aesthetic realm can serve as a fluid interfaith space between Christian and Islamic traditions. Unfortunately, to date, there has been no in-depth exploration situating popular literary works, such as Tere Liye's novel, within this cross-traditional theological aesthetic dialogue.

The tension between human agency and predestination is undoubtedly far from simple. Martin (2023) demonstrates how the composition of divine glory and order is intricately woven through artistic expressions that demand total surrender from the practitioner. Through Tania's narrative as she attempts to navigate her feelings toward Danar, readers are presented with a tug-of-war between personal desires, social norms, and inescapable realities. Holley (2007) discusses the paradoxical nature of surrender, wherein an individual attains genuine freedom and inner mastery precisely by relinquishing the urge to dominate circumstances. It is this paradox that renders the novel intensely emotional as well as philosophical.

A fundamental question that must be raised is how the concept of surrender is aesthetically and theologically articulated through the narrative entanglement of Tania and Danar. Naturally, one cannot view this in black-and-white terms. Fear, vulnerability, and emotional attachment continually churn beneath the calm exterior they project. Martínez (2025) highlights that spiritual obedience and surrender are invariably rooted in profound trust and love, rather than mere mechanical adherence to formal rules. Through this lens, the relationship between Tania, Danar, and the destiny encompassing them can be re-examined from a fresh perspective.

This study aims to dissect how the novel's text reconstructs the relationship between active surrender, human agency, and divine destiny. Does becoming like a falling leaf entail negating all human striving, or does it represent the highest state of awareness stemming from exertion? McCrae (2024) argues that aesthetic experience possesses a potent volitional dimension, wherein internal engagement requires relinquishing personal agendas to unite with a broader beauty. Through close reading, this paper seeks to unravel the layers of theological aesthetics concealed behind the simplicity of Tere Liye's prose, elevating the discourse on popular literature into a meaningful realm of spiritual contemplation.

Theoretical Framework

Theological Aesthetics of Surrender & Kenosis

Discussing the aesthetics of surrender often brings us into an intellectual terrain that is by no means black and white. On one hand, the notion of surrendering is widely misconstrued as humiliating helplessness; on the other hand, within a theological space, the act of relinquishing is envisioned as the very pinnacle of interior beauty. Freimann and Mayseless (2025) assert that voluntary surrender to a higher authority or spiritual mentor constitutes an active, transformative psychological development, fundamentally distinct from coercive submission or passive compliance within secular power dynamics. This perspective aligns with Lloyd (2025), who notes that Augustinian theology frames obedience as an active response of faith that safeguards human integrity, rather than an oppressive form of domination that degrades human dignity.

The active nature of this surrender also rests on existential courage. Holley (2007) articulates the fundamental paradox of surrender, observing that when individuals willingly release egoic control and confront their fears, they attain a far more integrated sense of inner freedom and spiritual restoration. This concept finds its theological resonance in the notion of *kenosis*, or self-emptying. Park (2024) examines how Hans Urs von Balthasar positions self-emptying and faithful surrender as an answer to modern nihilistic void, wherein individuals humble their ego to welcome a divine glory that transforms their existence. Through this lens, surrender ceases to be mere mechanical resignation and becomes a dynamic, liberating aesthetic movement.

The path toward surrender is rarely free from sorrow. Hart (2015) reminds us that theological aesthetics must not overlook the paradoxical beauty born of the suffering of the cross, a realm where anguish is transfigured into the purest expression of divine love. Suffering within this framework serves as a vehicle for inner purification. Branscomb (1993) characterizes this process as sacred wounding, in which psychological vulnerability and wounding become the gateway to a mythic journey of surrender and profound soul healing. Pain is not denied; rather, it is consciously inhabited as an integral part of spiritual formation.

This emotional dimension calls for an authentic acceptance of life's realities. Atlas (2022) highlights how mourning and embracing emotional truths represent a spiritual achievement that enables individuals to undergo transformation beyond past grief. When egoic control dissolves, human perception of the surrounding world

undergoes a meaningful shift. According to de Villiers (2016), mystical enchantment with divine beauty possesses the power to re-enchant a fractured soul, offering a renewed sense of wonder in viewing the unfolding events and ordinances of human life.

Islamic Conceptualisation of Tawakkul, Qadar, and Ridha

The theoretical framework of the aesthetics of surrender intersects harmoniously with core concepts in Islamic spiritual tradition, particularly regarding *tawakkul* (trust in God), *qadar* (divine destiny), and *ridha* (contentment). In Islamic doctrine, *tawakkul* is never an excuse for idle complacency or fatalistic inertia. The concept demands exhaustive human effort (*ikhtiar*), after which all outcomes and decrees are entrusted entirely to the divine will. Such surrender is rooted in sincere love (*mahabbah*), wherein submission is undertaken not out of coercion, but through total conviction in the perfect wisdom behind every divine decree.

When an individual attains the state of inner contentment or *ridha*, the acceptance of reality turns into an act of voluntary relinquishment. Humanity ceases imposing its ego to govern cosmic outcomes, aligning personal volition with the Creator's will. The convergence between kenotic submission in Western theology and trust-based submission in Islamic tradition offers a rich conceptual meeting ground. Mihoc (2019) observes that aesthetics functions as a fluid interfaith space that enriches dialogue between Christian and Islamic theologies, particularly in observing how spiritual beauty is realized through the human experience of surrender.

To unpack these complex layers of meaning within literary texts, this study employs a hermeneutic-philosophical literary criticism combined with a phenomenological reading. This approach allows the researcher not merely to read the narrative on the surface of its plot, but to delve into the latent structures of meaning beneath the author's motifs, actions, and metaphors. Konacheva (2018) illustrates how a phenomenological inquiry into the experience of being can unveil subtle layers of divine presence within human existential thought. Through this lens, the internal turmoil and existential choices of literary characters can be understood as conscious phenomena pregnant with spiritual significance.

Openness in reading literary texts demands a critical sensibility attuned to internal human dynamics. Cipriani (2017) elaborates on Kurt H. Wolff's methodology of surrender and catch, in which a researcher willingly suspends preconceived assumptions to grasp authentic knowledge and reality concerning the subject under investigation. In this study, that method is applied to approach the novel's narrative universe holistically, allowing the text to articulate the characters' emotional and spiritual tensions without imposing rigid dogmatic preconceptions.

The primary textual corpus is drawn directly from textual units in Tere Liye's novel *The Falling Leaf Never Hates the Wind*, utilizing both the official English translation and the original Indonesian text. The collected textual data encompass Tania's interior monologues, dialogic exchanges, relational dynamics with Danar, and key visual metaphors such as the linden tree, falling leaves, and the symbolic secret pendants. These textual units are classified and qualitatively analyzed to uncover the

aesthetic articulation of surrender, the struggle of human agency before destiny, and the realization of *tawakkul* woven into the aesthetic structure of the narrative.

Method

Approaching a literary work imbued with emotional weight and spiritual contemplation inevitably demands a flexible and nuanced perspective. One cannot simply dissect sentences as though solving a deterministic mathematical formula. Cipriani (2017) elaborates on Kurt H. Wolff's methodology of surrender and catch, in which a researcher is encouraged to suspend preconceived assumptions and restrictive conceptual frameworks to apprehend the authentic reality and lived experience of the subject under inquiry. In examining the narrative of Tania and Danar, this approach proves deeply relevant because it requires an open interior sensibility to perceive the palpable pulse of suffering, longing, and surrender experienced by the characters in a genuine, deeply human manner.

Consequently, this study integrates hermeneutic-philosophical literary criticism with a phenomenological lens. Through a phenomenological reading, Konacheva (2018) demonstrates how an inquiry into the experience of human existence can unveil subtle layers of divine presence operating quietly behind mundane, everyday events. Hermeneutics allows for the excavation of latent meaning beneath textual expressions, whereas phenomenology aids in observing how the characters' consciousness evolves when confronted with suffering and inescapable life circumstances. The researcher seeks to enter the narrative world without hastily imposing narrow moralistic judgments, thereby allowing the text to articulate its own existential struggles.

The primary data corpus for this research is derived directly from textual units in Tere Liye's novel *The Falling Leaf Never Hates the Wind*, utilizing both the official English translation and the original Indonesian edition. The collected textual units encompass the narrator's interior monologues, dialogic exchanges among characters, and key visual metaphors such as the linden tree, falling heart-shaped leaves, and the secret pair of pendants that tether the storyline. These textual data were selected, categorized according to thematic dimensions of aesthetic surrender, and interpreted qualitatively to unravel the dialectic between human striving, moral agency, and the realization of divine destiny woven throughout the narrative.

Findings and Discussion

The Metaphor of the Linden Tree and the Falling Leaf: Nature as Aesthetic-Theological Revelation

Within the novel's narrative universe, the natural landscape is not merely a passive backdrop across which characters move, but manifests as a natural theophany radiating existential truth. The linden tree (*Tilia*) standing firmly on the riverbank beside the cardboard shack of Tania and Dede's childhood serves as a pivotal spatial and symbolic axis. Farley (2020) suggests that sensory apprehension of created beauty often functions as a primary doorway through which human beings taste divine mysteries that transcend verbal articulation. The linden tree, with its distinctive heart-

shaped leaves, visually encapsulates the novel's central themes of love, vulnerability, and sincere surrender. Tania's mother, in a nighttime conversation beneath a full moon, once whispered that the tree possesses the power to evoke the purest emotional honesty within the human soul.

The sight of yellowing linden leaves detaching and touching the ground presents a natural cycle laden with metaphysical reflection. When Danar comforts Tania and Dede beside their mother's fresh grave, he utters the phrase that becomes the existential motif for the entire narrative: that leaves that have fallen never hate the wind. This aphorism firmly rejects interpretations rooted in resentment or interior bitterness. As outlined by de Villiers (2016), aesthetic mysticism operates when individuals discern divine order and enchantment behind occurrences that appear bitter or heart-wrenching. The leaf that allows itself to be carried away from its stem engages in no futile resistance; instead, it entrusts the trajectory of its descent to the wind that guides it toward its final resting place upon the earth.

Through a more critical reading, the non-resentful acceptance embodied by the leaf is by no means a form of empty or passive resignation. Within Islamic theology, such an orientation mirrors the station of *ridha*, which denotes authentic contentment with God's decree, wherein a servant ceases harboring negative assumptions toward divine destiny. When Dede returns to his mother's grave eight years later, he profoundly realizes that their mother's departure did not signify the extinction of love, but was rather an invitation for their souls to learn how to receive, comprehend, and embrace reality in its entirety. Garrett (2012b) emphasizes that beauty in theological perspective is inextricably linked to transcendent goodness and truth, enabling one to perceive profound meaning behind temporal suffering.

The metaphor of the leaf and the wind consequently redefines the dynamic between human suffering and divine volition. The spiritual beauty radiating from this analogy arises not from an absence of pain, but from the courage to keep that pain uncorrupted by destructive wrath or malice. Nature models a harmonious rhythm of surrender, where letting go constitutes an indispensable prerequisite for renewed life and spiritual maturation.

From Street Agony to Intellectual Transcendence: The Journey of Kenosis and Ethical Mentorship

Tania's life trajectory, progressing from a barefoot street child to the top graduate at a leading university in Singapore, represents a narrative arc uniting human striving (*ikhtiar*) and self-emptying (*kenosis*). The ordeal of busking from bus to bus under the scorching sun amid the constant threat of street violence forged Tania's psychological resilience from an early age. As noted by Park (2024), profound realizations of faith frequently demand the relinquishment of illusory self-security in order to welcome a transformative existential openness. When Tania's foot is pierced by a rusted thumbtack on the bus floor and Danar steps forward to dress her wound with a pristine white handkerchief, that moment marks the initial encounter with grace that interrupts their cycle of destitution.

Within this relationship, Danar embodies spiritual and ethical mentorship that guides this marginalized family toward higher human dignity. Examining a similar

dynamic, Williamson and Hood (2015) emphasize that the presence of a mentor grounded in genuine love can catalyze spiritual transformation and existential recovery for broken individuals. Danar never positions himself as a domineering ruler; instead, he cultivates values of discipline, love of learning, and social concern through Sunday storytelling sessions at his rented home. The benevolence Danar displays acts like a widely resonating tuning fork, sparking an intense drive within Tania to study diligently in order to fulfill her mentor's hopes.

This asymmetrical bond is naturally not free from power tensions. Investigating spiritual care and accompaniment, Champagne (2014) highlights the necessity of balancing empowerment and surrender so that supportive relationships do not slide into stifling domination. Danar consistently urges Tania toward self-reliance, even directing her to secure overseas scholarships so that her growth transcends personal dependency on him. Tania's commitment to heed Danar's counsel represents a surrender founded upon ethical reverence, rather than the coerced compliance of a servant before a master.

Tania's intellectual transformation in Singapore ultimately demonstrates that surrender never negates hard work. With resolute determination, she masters demanding academic evaluations, establishes an independent bakery enterprise, and has her name inscribed upon the university's commemorative plaque. These accomplishments are the fruit of maximal human effort animated by a moral commitment to honor the benevolence she received.

The Dialectic of Love, Renunciation, and the Secret Pendants: Active Surrender vs. Emotional Suppression

Beneath her brilliant external achievements, Tania's interior life is haunted by the complex stirrings of love for Danar, her guardian angel who is fourteen years her senior. This tension reaches its symbolic climax through a pair of pendants bearing their respective initials. When the two pendants are joined, the engravings on their reverse sides unite to form a complete illustration of a blooming linden flower resting atop two heart-shaped leaves. This concealed symbol, alongside the unfinished manuscript titled *Love from a Linden Tree* on Danar's laptop, uncovers the reality that their feelings were entirely mutual, yet deliberately denied and suppressed by Danar for the sake of moral propriety and social convention.

In this struggle, one observes a sharp dialectic between human desire and the ethical imperative to renounce personal claims for the welfare of others. Exploring the ontology of the self in mystical verse, Mohr (2022) discusses how spiritual love often demands the dissolution of the ego and the sacrifice of personal appetite to preserve higher moral integrity. Danar recognizes that acknowledging romantic feelings toward a young girl he nurtured from childhood risks sully the purity of his altruistic mission; hence, he chooses to marry Ratna as an option deemed socially appropriate and rational. However, this rigid emotional suppression casts an unresolved shadow over the vitality of his own marriage.

Tania, on the other hand, finds herself ensnared in emotional suppression that torments her soul throughout her years abroad. She cuts her hair, acts coldly toward peers, and immerses herself in the relentless pace of financial brokerage as an escape

from inner void. Analyzing aesthetic experience, McCrae (2024) asserts that genuine volitional engagement necessitates an honest surrender of personal agendas rather than repressive maneuvers that generate psychological duplicity. Tania's pretense of having moved on from Danar proves fragile the moment she learns of the growing rift between Danar and Ratna.

Authentic surrender begins to take shape only when Tania confronts the reality of her feelings without illusions. Under the canopy of the linden tree, her open confrontation is not an attempt to reclaim Danar, but an act of inner purification to release what was never destined to unite in this life.

Redefining Tawakkul and Divine Destiny: Transcending Fatalism through Aesthetic Surrender

The narrative's ultimate resolution occurs during a quiet reconciliation beneath the linden tree on the plot of land where their former shack once stood. In that encounter, Tania informs Danar that Ratna is four months pregnant and awaiting his return to their family home in Menteng. Tania's deliberate step backward and her insistence that Danar restore his marriage demonstrate that theological surrender embodies conscious, free, and responsible moral agency, standing far removed from coercive submission that degrades human dignity. Examining resistance against oppressive religious control, Sharp (2014) illustrates that mature religious understanding and interpretive autonomy empower individuals to resist manipulation and enact ethical choices autonomously.

Tania's choice to depart the city and return to Singapore represents the highest realization of *tawakkul* and *ridha*. Trust in God here does not mean defeat or despair; it represents a conscious choice to surrender the ultimate outcome of one's life to divine wisdom once truth and maximal effort have been fully expressed. As demonstrated by Shannonhouse et al. (2023), spiritual surrender operates as an emic religious coping strategy positively correlated with psychological well-being and interior peace, precisely because it unburdens the soul from exhausting ego control. Tania no longer battles the reality that her love does not culminate in marital union with her protector.

This existential resolve reflects what Šmejdo^á (2025) analyzes regarding the intimate link between freedom and obedience in answering the divine call as a vehicle for spiritual maturation. Authentic human freedom is not measured by the power to impose individual will upon the cosmos, but by the spiritual expansiveness required to embrace human limitation before the mystery of divine decree (*qadar*). By letting Danar go, Tania preserves the beauty of love from moral ruin, allowing it to remain pure and immortal as an experience that ennobles her life.

Through this aesthetics of surrender, Tere Liye's novel demonstrates that love does not always demand physical possession. Becoming like a falling leaf is ultimately a profound spiritual achievement: the willingness to glide along the winds of destiny without a single trace of hatred in one's heart, trusting that every falling leaf rests safely within the omniscient care of God.

Berikut adalah hasil terjemahan bagian kesimpulan dan implikasi (*Conclusion & Implications*) ke dalam bahasa Inggris akademik yang alami, terstruktur, dan bebas sitasi:

Conclusion

Traversing the pages of *The Falling Leaf Never Hates the Wind* leads to the realization that the boundary between popular fiction and spiritual contemplation is remarkably permeable. Tere Liye successfully democratizes complex theological concepts such as *tawakkul*, *ridha*, and surrender, weaving them into a grounded, accessible narrative that resonates deeply with a broad readership. Spiritual devotion is no longer confined to rigid dogmatic lectures or formal sanctuary rituals; rather, it is embodied through interpersonal dynamics, the suffering of street children, fraternal devotion, and the selfless release of unrequited romantic possession. Genuine obedience ultimately carries a dimension of inner redemption and sincere love, transcending mere mechanical adherence to external law.

The work persuasively deconstructs the common assumption that surrender equates to passive fatalism. Yielding like a falling leaf proves to be far from idle resignation to adversity; it represents an active posture that demands maximal human exertion before willingly embracing the ordained trajectory of life. Surrender to God serves as an active, constructive mode of religious coping that fosters psychological resilience amid severe existential crises. Tania's narrative trajectory illustrates that extraordinary academic achievement and self-reliance can coexist harmoniously with the spiritual generosity required to release Danar for the flourishing and integrity of his family.

Theoretically, this inquiry contributes to bridging Western theological aesthetics and Islamic spiritual traditions within literary studies. The concepts of self-emptying (*kenosis*) and divine beauty align seamlessly with the notions of *tawakkul* and interior submission found in Islam. Juxtaposing these two traditions demonstrates that Indonesian popular literature possesses a philosophical depth worthy of serious critical engagement, while affirming the capacity of narrative art to serve as a fluid, reflective space for interfaith dialogue. Contemporary religious expressions often discover vibrant, hospitable soil within fluid cultural artifacts, extending far beyond institutional boundaries.

Naturally, this reading does not exhaust the full spectrum of existential surrender within literature. Future research would benefit from comparative studies examining Tere Liye's novel alongside other literary works that explore similar themes of surrender, whether by Indonesian authors such as Ahmad Tohari and Ayu Utami, or world literary figures like Leo Tolstoy and Yasunari Kawabata. Broadening such intercultural comparisons will further enrich our understanding of how diverse human traditions navigate existential suffering and celebrate the transcendent beauty of yielding before the mystery of destiny.

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