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Najib Mahfouz's *The Trilogy*: The Portrayal of Social Aspects

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Abstract

Najib Mahfouz is an outstanding figure in the realm of Arabic literature having many novels, short stories and literary essays in his credit. His works are often charged with deep social criticism combined with subtle humour and clear conscience. 'The Trilogy', often regarded as the masterpiece in novelistic form, is based on domestic and national transitions. In the novel, Mahfouz penetrates into the spheres of individual, family and the nation as a whole and exposes the hypocrisy of people, most of them are Muslims whose life styles are contrary to the faith they profess. He highlights people's engagement in corrupt practices to show the societal decadence and to create awareness against the same. The present paper is an attempt to highlight Mahfouz's portrayal of social aspects in the novel 'The Trilogy' so as to give an insight about the author's engagement with the society at large.

Key words: *Najib Mahfouz, The Trilogy, Social Theme, Political Theme, Religious Theme.*

Introduction: Najib Mahfouz (1911- 2006) was an outstanding figure in the realm of Arabic Literature. No other writer of the Arab world has attracted the attention of such a wide range of readers and critics as Najib Mahfouz. He was not only a creative novelist, well-judged literary critic and thinker but also a great humanist, courteous, and had a great sense of humour, mystical humility and clear conscience.

Najib Mahfouz began his literary career while he was reading in secondary school. He wrote an impressive number of novels, short stories, dramas and philosophical literary essays, which got huge acceptance across the world and translated in many languages. His imprint of genius and literary talents traces out in his novels. His novels may be divided into three categories.

In the first category Mahfouz contributed his historical novels which are- *Abath al- Aqdar* (1939), *Radubis* (1943) and *Kifah Tiba* (1944).

The second category comprises social novels which are – *al- Qahira al- Jadida* (New Cairo, 1945), *Khan al- Khalili*, 1946, *Zuqaq al- Midaq* (Midaq Alley, 1947),

Bidaya wa Nihaya (The Beginning and the End, 1949), *al- Thulathiyya* (The Trilogy, 1956- 57) etc.

The third category includes his post realistic novels which are- *Awladu Harratina* (Children of Gebelawi, 1951), *al- Liss wal- Kilab* (The Thief and the Dogs, 1961), *al- Suman al- Kharif* (Autumn Quail, 1962), *Miramar*, 1967 etc.

Among his popular novels *The Trilogy* is considered as masterpiece of Arabic Literature. It is divided into three volumes which are- *Bain al- Qasrain* (Palace Walk), *Qasr al- Shawq* (Palace of Desire) and *al- Sukariyya* (Sugar Street). Most of the interesting elements of *The Trilogy* are domestic and national transitions. According to Hamdi Sakkut it can be ranked as the most significant work in the history of the Arabic novel. Mahfouz through his masterpiece *The Trilogy* raised various general problems like- social, political and religious themes of the 20th century Egypt that enable him to enter the hearts and souls of the individuals.

The author carefully observes most of the people in his nation engage in corrupt practices, especially a large number of Muslims whose life styles are contrary to the faith they profess. He has taken an equal observation in the individual, family and the nation as a whole. His novel also depicts the hypocrisy, patriarchy, oppression, corruption, sexism, class – consciousness etc. Mahfouz is traumatized by this type of societal decadence, creates public awareness against the same. The critics are convinced because of its realism. And it is said that *The Trilogy* breaks all the records of Arabic literature and make the novel accessible to millions of people.

Social Theme: The first part of *The Trilogy*, *Palace Walk*, reflects the dominance of men in Cairene society and elsewhere in the Middle East. Mahfouz portrays in *Palace Walk* that man and woman have separate spheres, the women confined to the house, where they rear the children, the men spending their time either at their work or among friends, free to choose their pleasures. The husband or the father is a dictator in the family, and preservation of his power stands between him and spontaneous expression of his affection for his children.

At the outset of the *Bain al-Qasrain* [*Palace Walk*], it is Amina who is confined to the house by her husband. She starts her duty after performing the dawn prayer and keeps herself busy until midnight. However, she catches only few hours of sleep and wakes at mid night to wait her husband's return from his evening entertainment and serves him until he goes to sleep. She is not even permitted to counsel her husband on any issue. Amina gets worried by this regular habit and one night she politely objects to her husband's coming home late. As a result of it he threatens her with a loud voice-

“Don't force me to discipline you.”¹

Amina is disappointed by the threat of her husband and becomes so conscious while speaking to her husband. She realizes that her only duty is to make him happy and comfortable and not investigate into his private life. It is worth noting that her duties make subservient to her husband. She helps him from dress to undress and fetches water and a basin when he bathes. Apart from respect, she neither sits beside him while relaxing on the sofa nor speaks to him unless asks. Amina accepted all these oppression silently and asks God to forgive him. Amina is so bothered by the activities of her husband which she cannot bear with. So, one day she discloses all the grief to her mother. Her mother could not dare to take any action instead console her in this way-

He married you after divorcing his first wife. He could have kept her too, if he wanted, or taken second, third and fourth wives. His father had many wives. Thank our Lord that you remain his only wife.²

After that Amina becomes very aware in the sense that she might be divorced in any moment by her husband.

Mentioned may be made here that Yasin, the first son of al- Jawad follow the footstep of his father like- drinking, womanizing, singing, dancing etc. He enjoys himself to the fullest as long as there is life. Ahmad Abd al- Jawad strictly ordered his son Yasin to get married when he came to know the scandal of Yasin with Umm Maryam (the homely maid servant) at the wedding ceremony of Aysha. He arranges marriage with one of his friends daughter namely Zaynab. Though he gets married but he could not give up bad habit like- womanizing and drinking etc. As a result of it his health is breaking down day after day. Zaynab becomes afraid due to his breaking health and complain against him not to go outside at night. But he refused and advised her to follow his mother. For example –

“Look at my father’s wife. Have you ever seen her object to his conduct?... In spite of that, they are a happy couple and a stable family. There will be no need to talk about this subject again.”³

After then Zaynab bearing her grief and sorrowful mind goes to her mother-in-law and tells everything but she says women must accept their husbands as they are.

Bribery and corruption is another example of Egyptian society which was prevalent at the writer’s time. In *Sugar Street*, these two elements are important in the running of offices. Through these the people influenced the government officers as well as the distinguished persons in making decision on several matters like- staff promotions and disciplinary actions. For example, during one promotion exercise in the Ministry of Education, Yasin Affandi becomes the management’s choice for promotion to the position of a sectional head. While the workers are speculating who is going to be promoted, Yasin, having been well connected to the decision makers and secretly received assurance, dismisses his colleagues’ view that “the selection should be based on merit, not influence.” He blurts out, “What strange ideas you have! Isn’t influence necessary to obtain any position in this world?”⁴ True to his series of vaunts, Yasin is promoted. Announcing the promotion, the director of their department tells Yasin, “You’ve been promoted to the sixth level,” but remarks “It’s only fair to tell you frankly that someone else deserves it more than you do. But strings were pulled on your behalf.”⁵

Similarly, Yasin has a case because of his fight in Massage Alley with a whore that attracts disciplinary action. As a result, a police report is filed, and a copy reaches the Ministry. Consequently a disciplinary panel decides to transfer him to Upper Egypt. After that, Yasin’s father without delay meets with acquaintances who are in parliament or distinguished in other ways and asks them to intercede to stop the transfer. Eventually he succeeds and the transfer is withdrawn.⁶

Political Theme: Najib Mahfouz through his *The Trilogy* describes the political unrest in Egypt and the outbreak of the nationalist revolution. In order to obtain independence and establish democracy the Egyptian people struggle against the autocratic rule of British. It is worth mentioning here that after the end of World War- I, British occupation over Egypt intensified. Intellectuals and revolutionaries yearned for Egyptian independence. The 1919 revolution led by Sa’d Zaghlul and others from politics, business and literati leaders of the 1919 revolution met at the Café to plan their strategies. Many people from different sectors took part in demonstration and the novelist Najib Mahfouz portrayed all the pictures in a

good and excellent manner. He also tries to show the strength of nationalism and the effect of the British occupation on the Egyptian people.

For example, in *Palace Walk*, the political unrest of Egypt had made a great impact on Kamal and his fellow students. One of the days Kamal found a few students attend in the class room due to participation of majority student in the demonstration. The teacher ordered them to review the previous lessons. Kamal opened a book and pretended to read but paid no attention to the book. He was very curious with the terms "Sa'd Zaghlul," "the English," "the students" "the martyrs," "handbills," and "demonstrations". He was perplexed bystander when it came to understanding what they stood for.

Religious Theme: Mahfouz observes most of the people in his nation engaged in corrupt practices, especially a large number of Muslims whose life styles are contrary to the faith they profess. He also notices that sensuality and materialism have subsumed their spirituality, leaving them as mere hearers and not doers of the word of Allah. Mahfouz is worried with the wrong interpretations given to some Qur'anic texts and some wrong notions about Allah. In *Palace Walk*, there are a number of occasions whereby people have interpreted some verses of the scripture out of context to excuse their indulgence. Yasin, for example, rationalizes his habit of marrying and divorcing women, one after the other, He claims: "Religion supports my view, as shown by its permission to marry four wives, not to mention the concubines with whom the palaces of the caliphs and wealthy men are packed. Religion acknowledges that even beauty itself, once familiarity and experience make it seem trite, can be boring, sickening, and deadly"⁷

Yasin feels neither shame nor disgrace in divorcing his wives. His unbalanced interpretation of Qur'an, together with his indifferent attitude towards marriage, is typical of many other men's position on the issues of marriage, and religion. Mahfouz condemns this anomaly and many other dignitaries have severely criticized it. Having had two broken marriages, Yasin misinterprets the scripture to justify his naughtiness. What he does not realize is that no portion of the Qur'an encourages any man to sack his wife. Rather, the scripture condemns it vividly.

Mahfouz also raises the issue of homosexuality in Muslim culture, tying it to the teachings of Islam. His magnificent *The Trilogy* present among other things, a picture of social ills, including licentiousness. Mahfouz's presenting of homosexuality is noteworthy because the topic is deeply objectionable to the Islamic tradition in which the novels [Trilogy] and their author are rooted.

Mahfouz is also concerned with the insincerity that moulds some people's prayers. They fear to establish any reverential awe in their relationship with God because they are unwilling to let sinfulness depart from their lives. For example, although Al-Sayyid Ahmad knows "beyond the shadow of a doubt that repentance is a necessity and that he cannot be pardoned without it," he does not ask for repentance; his fear is that if he repents of his sins, he will miss the pleasures of life he dearly loves and life will become meaningless⁸ In the mosque when the preacher's words reach his ears, he prays mechanically, limiting his request to pardon, forgiveness, and mercy. His thinking is that God is too merciful to cause a Muslim like himself to burn in hell for transitory lapses that harmed no one.⁹ The novel mentions that-

"The preacher himself is no better than Al-Sayyid Ahmad. In fact he is quite certainly more debauched... 'He believes in two things: God in heaven and adolescent boys on earth.'¹⁰

This statement indicates the preacher's interest or involvement in homosexuality. Mahfouz wonders how a man who has no faith in what he is doing can effectively teach others to keep the faith.

Conclusion: From this brief analysis of *The Trilogy* clearly reveals that he is a novelist par excellence, with an aim. He wants to mirror the society with its various colours. So far the richness of the story, characters and language are concerned, he is undoubtedly unequalled in the realm of Arabic novel. His truthful reflection on the history of modern Egypt and the portrayal of social, political and religious themes are worth noticeable.

Notes:

- ¹ Najib Mahfouz, *Bain al- Qasrain*, p- 8.
- ² Najib Mahfouz, *Palace Walk*, p- 9.
- ³ Najib Mahfouz, *Palace Walk*, 317.
- ⁴ Najib Mahfouz, *Sugar Street*, p- 150.
- ⁵ Ibid., p- 152.
- ⁶ Najib Mahfouz, *Palace of Desire*, p- 382.
- ⁷ Najib Mahfouz, *Palace Walk*, P- 337.
- ⁸ Ibid., 412.
- ⁹ Ibid., 413.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 414.

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4. _____. *Sugar Street*. trans. W. M. Hutchins & Angele Botros Samman. London: Black Swan, 1994.
5. _____. *Bain al-Qasrain*. Cairo. 1956.
6. _____. *Qasr al- Shawq*. Cairo. 1957.
7. _____. *Al- Sukkariyyah*. Cairo. 1957.