

# **Oppression of Women in Mahfouz's Early Novels**

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## **Abstract**

Violence against women has always been an important theme in modern literature. The main objective of the study is to deal with the theme of oppression of women in selected novels that Mahfouz wrote in the 1940s and early 1950s. The study tries to show how Mahfouz's realistic novels are contemporary and relevant because they deal with issues that are contemporary and relevant. The paper uses Sociological Criticism through examining the theme of violence against women in the cultural, economic and political context, exploring the relationships between the social and economic conditions and women's status in society. Several female characters from *New Cairo(1945)*, *Beginning and End(1949)*, *Middaq Alley(1947)*, and *the Cairo Trilogy(1956-1957)* are selected as examples of the submissive wife, the self-sacrificing woman, the ambitious woman, and the new woman. Through the stories of these women, the study arrives at several recommendations that will help, if implemented, in reducing the level of violence in Middle Eastern Societies. It is through these findings that the study links the past with the present.

## **Oppression of Women in Mahfouz's Early Novels**

Women's status in the Arab world has been a critical issue in many recent debates in the West especially after Arab Spring. Women's oppression in the Arab world has been depicted and interpreted through the lens of Western feminists and social activists. Most of the time, this theme has been read out of its social, cultural, religious, and historical context. Consequently, many mistaken perceptions and assumptions about how women in the Arab world live and how they are treated by society, state, and family, have appeared. Literature is the true history of any nation and for this it is important to examine how the theme of violence against women is depicted in Arabic literature, especially in the works of the first Arab Laureate, Naguib Mahfouz.

In his Nobel Lecture (1988), Mahfouz says, "In this decisive moment in the history of civilization it is inconceivable and unacceptable that the moans of mankind should die out in the void". Throughout his long literary career, Mahfouz was trying to make the moans of his fellow human beings heard. He saw his role as a social critic whose duty was to confront the evil phenomena in his society. He found the Egyptian society infested with social ills, perversions, oppression, cruelty and sexism. He set to paint an authentic and historically true picture of the suffering and the struggle of the

Egyptian people in the last century. He always articulated his sympathy for the oppressed and exploited in a nation that knew no real democracy. Political oppression and violence are major themes in his novels and so is violence against women. Part of his duty as a spokesperson for change in women's lives is to shed light on oppression on women, its causes, its effects, and how it can be challenged.

### **Study questions:–**

The study tries to answer the following main questions

- 1– How does Mahfouz view the theme of violence against women?
- 2– What are the reasons for this social phenomenon from the author's point of view?
- 3– What are the ways in which this social problem can be tackled?

### **Significance of the study:–**

The study is an attempt to analyse the status of women in Egyptian society through the works of one of the most important writers in modern Arabic literature. It helps to clarify many misconceptions about women and how they are treated in a male dominated society. The study does not only study Mahfouz's novels as realistic portrayal of the times in which they were written but also attempts to show how Mahfouz offers solutions to contemporary issues. Part of Mahfouz's aim in dealing with many females

stereotypes is to contribute to consciousness raising that helps women to overcome the sense of helplessness and passivity, which he sees as the main reason for their oppression. The recommendations reached by the study can help in understanding the nature of oppression of women in our society and the multi-faceted nature of this social problem.

### **Methodology:-**

Social criticism concerns itself with the social function of texts and recognizing literature as a reflection of environment. It can illuminate social and economic dimensions of literature that other approaches overlook. The theme of violence against women is a social theme so it is appropriate to use social criticism approach to examine this theme within the social, political, and economic context of 20th century Egypt. Several female characters from *New Cairo* (1945), *Beginning and End* (1949), *Middaq Alley*(1947), and *The Cairo Trilogy*(1956–1957) are selected as examples of the submissive wife, the self-sacrificing woman, the ambitious woman, and the new woman.

**Background: –**

Domestic violence and exploitation are the fate of innumerable and unfortunate women in Egypt and the Arab world. Things have improved since Mahfouz wrote his early novels, but many of the problems dealt with in his novels are still part of the daily life of women in this part of the world even today. In his social realistic novels of the 1940s, Mahfouz presents the conditions of women in a patriarchy that tends to treat them as second class citizens. Since the focus in these novels is on life in Cairo at the time, what we see is the reality of urban women. Generally speaking Cairo Society is less masculine than the rest of the Egyptian Society and other Middle East Societies. Still the nature of Cairo Society is gendered and this creates many spaces for men to exploit women with impunity.

A close reading of Mahfouz's realistic novels in the forties and early fifties shows Mahfouz as a socially committed writer who is concerned with the betterment of his society in all aspects. He does not only mirror social behaviours and attitudes and draws his readers' attention to the oppressive physical, economic, social and cultural methods of subjugating women but also creates in front of them the image of what one may call the ideal Egyptian woman or the modern Egyptian woman as he views her. According to Ibrahim Elshikh, while female characters are portrayed in their

age-old roles in many Arabic novels of the time, "Mahfouz depicts women in various situations and on different social levels. Apparently, the ultimate aim is to explode the fallacy that women are and should be subservient to men" (Elshikh 1991: 86). Miriam Cooke argues that Mahfouz, in his early career, was a feminist writer because he explored the shifting gender relations within Egyptian society during that period, and his sharp critique of masculinity within that shift, especially in the way he illuminates gender relations to be 'grounded in asymmetric power' (Cooke 1993: 107)

### **Discussion:–**

Though women do not tend to play the most important roles in Mahfouz's novels, many of them, as Hartman tells us, are among the most vital and original characters in his works. In his portrayal of women Mahfouz depicts their true state in society. Talking about images of women in the Modern Arabic Novel, Taha Wadi(1994) argues that in Mahfouz's novels that image is positive and his female characters are as much active as acted upon. Although they often appear powerless socially, economically and politically, they are not always without self-assertion. Mahfouz presents in his novels all types of women; the submissive wife, the dominating wife, the sex object, the ambitious woman, the self-sacrificing sister and daughter, and the liberated woman. His female characters belong to all

social classes but the majority of them belong to the middle class. This is why the study is divided into the following sections.

### **a- The Submissive Wife:-**

Mahfouz's masterpiece *The Cairo Trilogy* is an integrated human drama, panoramic in scope that offers a valuable reading of the socio-political development in Egypt during a transitional period. We can find different types of women in *The Cairo Trilogy*, in which Mahfouz depicts the suffering of women in a patriarchal society while recording the independence struggle and the conflict among the Egyptian political forces. He also shows us the types of relationship between husband and wife through the marital life of numerous couples throughout the novels. Most of them are not based on love and are just traditional relationships in which the husband is the master.

As El-sheikh observes, *The \_Trilogy,*" abounds with descriptions, analogies, dialogues, internal monologues, and even straightforward views directly or indirectly bearing on, among other things, the unfortunate lot of Egyptian women"( Elshikh 1991: 96 ). Through the story of al-Sayyid's family, Mahfouz explores the changing norms of Egyptian society and the emergence of a new modern morality. He also presents the different views of women that existed at the time. Women are viewed by Al-Sayyid and

his son Yaseen mainly as child bearers and a source of pleasure. Both believe they have the right to enjoy series of escapades every night and come at the end of the night to a calm house and a submissive wife who is not supposed to venture even polite objections to her husband's repeated nights out. Mahfouz tells us that Al-Sayyid's first wife, Yaseen's mother was beaten and then divorced because she objected to her husband's behaviour. He married his second wife Amina who has become a synonym of the submissive wife in the Arab world. Even those who have not read the novel have got the opportunity to watch her in the various movies, T.V. serials and followed her story in the radio serials. Likewise, Al-Sayyid has become a symbol of the traditional patriarch who for a quarter of a century confines his wife to the house, leaving her husband's house only in frequent occasions to visit her mother. He escorts her on each visit because he cannot suffer any one having a look at his wife. He feels that he has a moral and legal right over her and he can treat her as he wishes. Amina is a slave who performs all household chores. She is rebuked and not allowed to have an opinion of hers even in matters related to her family. Her duty is only to serve her master and please him regardless of her feelings or desires. When she ventures a polite objection

to his repeated night outs, his response is to seize her by the ears and tell her in a loud voice," I'm a man. I'm the one who commands and forbids. I will not accept any criticism of my behaviour. All I ask you is to obey me. Don't force me to discipline you"(Mahfouz 1956 *Palace Walk*: 4).

Mahfouz indirectly criticises the duplicity of Al-Sayyid who badly treats his wife and other members of his family. While outside his house he is a respectable and lovable person whose company is sought by people. He displays piety, dignity and gravity at home and unbridled sensuality among his friends and lovers. He is in El-Enany's words "a bundle of contradictions: a stern, authoritative, much feared patriarch at home, a cheerful, witty, much loved friend and businessman outside"(El-Enany 1993: 81). While the women in his household are imprisoned, he enjoys total freedom with numerous mistresses. When Amina hears her husband joking with his friends one night as they return from their night outs, Mahfouz tells us, "She and the children were accustomed to nothing but prudence, dignity, and gravity from him. How did he come by these joyful, jesting sounds, which flowed out so merrily and graciously?" (Mahfouz 1956 *Palace Walk* : 6).

Amina, as a traditional woman, feels it is her duty to obey her husband without reservation or condition. She is even convinced that

"true manliness, tyranny, and staying out till after midnight were common characteristics of a single entity" (Mahfouz 1956 *Palace\_Walk*: 4). She is a woman whose opinions are formed by her husband. Even when the matter concerns her daughter's future life, she can not express any opinion on the matter because that is meant to be her husband' prerogative even if he destroys the daughters' lives. She is a willing victim of stifling traditional practices who believes that women must not be assertive. As Mahfouz tells us, " No matter what happened, she remained a loving, obedient, and docile wife. She had no regrets at all about reconciling herself to a type of security based on surrender"( Mahfouz 1956 *Palace Walk*: 4). Al-Sayyid dictates to his two daughters whom to marry without taking into account that marriage is a matter of personal affection. Because of his belief that, "no woman has a fully developed mind", he will not allow them to counsel him in any issue. "My opinion", "says Amina to her husband", is the same as yours, sir. I have no opinion of mine". (Mahfouz 1956 *Palace Walk*: 156). Even when they are married and live in their husbands' houses, his daughters still fear their father

Mahfouz hints at the contradiction in the way society views male and female behaviour. Yaseen admires his father's promiscuity but can not forgive his mother for her extramarital relationships. She is discarded by

her own son who thinks that as a man he has social rights that allow him to have several relationships and escape what a woman like his mother cannot escape. To Yaseen, every woman is ' a filthy curse' and all women are just pets that are not allowed to intrude into our private lives." They (women) stay at home until we (men)'re free to play with them"( Mahfouz 1956 *Palace Walk*: 338). "Since antiquity", he tells his first wife, Zaynab, "houses have been for women and the outside world for men. Men are all like this." (Mahfouz 1956 *Palace Walk*: 44). Zaynab reluctantly resigned herself to the situation because she received no support in a household that views submission to men as a religion and a creed. But she could not continue to live with a husband who did not hesitate to sexually assault her own servants. She came to realize that life was impossible with a man who believed that, "what more does any woman want than a home of her own and sexual gratification? Nothing! Women are another kind of a domestic animal and must be treated as one" (Mahfouz 1956 *Palace Walk* :44).

What is remarkable about Mahfouz's interest in the theme of oppression against women is that he deals with it in the context of the political oppression in his country before and after independence. Almost all his realistic novels present a vivid description of women's exploitation and suffering in an attempt to expose the whole political system. He is

conscious of the deep-rooted exploitation of women which is accelerated and supported by colonialism and tradition. Women are oppressed by men who are in their turn oppressed by the British and the Monarchy in the pre-independence era and the ruling elite in the post independence era. He often uses women as symbols of Egypt and, through the oppression and exploitation mounted on them; he presents the oppression against the whole nation. In *The Trilogy* Mahfouz succeeded in creating a parallel between colonialism and patriarchy. Amina, who is totally ignorant of the outside world, is convinced by her sons and daughters to go out to visit Al-Husa'ayn Mosque while Al-Sayyid is out of town. Mahfouz calls this excursion a "revolution" against the patriarch similar to the revolution of 1919 against the British. Amina feels as if she has done something wrong. She is full of anxiety and sense of guilt. But she has an eager interest in exploring the outside world. "She (finds) an innocent pleasure in sharing the motion of freedom of other living creatures. It (is) the pleasure of someone who has spent a quarter of a century imprisoned by the walls of her house"( Mahfouz 1956 *Palace Walk*: 168). This tame revolution is thwarted when she has an accident and the truth is revealed to her husband. For this minor mistake she is ordered to leave the house, when she fully recovers, without being given a chance to explain as to why she left the house without his permission. By drawing a parallel between oppression of women

and the British oppression of the Egyptian people, Mahfouz emphasizes that patriarchy and colonialism are two forms of aggression and exploitation. One reduces women's status; the other reduces the status of a whole nation.

Mahfouz presents a traditional society in which patriarchy operates through religious and cultural socialization to justify the male ill-treatment of women. He suggests, although not directly, that traditional and quite often religious practices at the time sanction the mistreatment of women. He shows that, due to some traditional views, some men feel that women are not equal with them in strength and intelligence. It is this exaggerated sense of superiority that makes men deny women the right to certain opportunities like education, work and choosing their partners in life. Some of them oppress the women of their household while they physically and emotionally exploit women outside their houses.

### **b- The Self-sacrificing Woman**

The term "self-sacrificing" is used here to stress the strong relationship between economic conditions and oppression of women. This fact is emphasised by great writers such as Dostoevsky, Dickens, and Victor Hugo in whose works we find examples of women who are oppressed and exploited for economic reasons. Sonya in *Crime and*

*Punishment*, Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, and Cosset and her mother in *The Miserable* are exploited because of their economic circumstances. Mahfouz, who has been influenced by these masters, has a remarkable interest in presenting the images of the prostitute as a clear example of male's exploitation of women. In the Trilogy there are many dancers and singers whose duty is to entertain the important men of society. These traditional dancers and singers are known in Egypt as "Awalem" (the plural of Alma). This phenomenon flourished in the patriarchal society portrayed by Mahfouz and was another way of flesh trade. The houses of these singers and dancers were just brothels where married and unmarried men could satisfy their sexual desires. Mahfouz also shows that women are guilty of oppressing their sisters. Galila the brothel owner exploits and forces needy women to trade their bodies. Although women exploit other women, only men are condemned of this social evil. Mahfouz wants to emphasize that oppression is oppression whether it is done by men or women. If prostitution defines women as objects of men's desires for dominance and exploitation, Mahfouz repeated presentation of the images of the prostitutes emphasizes his concern with this social problem. To him these women are not always fallen women who seek lust and gratification. Some of them are victims of unjust social system that leaves them with no other source of

income. Their lives and bodies are controlled by men because of their economic dependence on men.

Many of Mahfouz's memorable female characters in his realistic novels are prostitutes. Almost in every major novel of Mahfouz, one finds the prostitute, Zanuba, Galila, in *The Trilogy*, Nafissa in *Beginning and End*, Hamida in *Middaq Alley*, Ahsan in *New Cairo*. Through this long list of prostitutes Mahfouz demonstrates the condition of exploitation that women in Cairo experience. It is his way of exposing the corrupt social and political atmosphere in his country. These women are victims of the socio-political conditions from which the whole nation suffers. It occurs in all social classes but women belonging to lower middle class are more likely to experience violence. But women are double sufferers because they are the victims of the socio-economic conditions and men' dominance.

The stories of prostitutes listed above show that they are forced by their economic conditions to trade their bodies to survive. Nafissa in *Beginning and End*, and Ehssan in *New Cairo*, are forced to be prostitutes to support their families. Both are reduced to sex toys and objects, and the only difference between them is that the former sells herself without the knowledge of her parents. Nafissa is lured by sweet promises and sugary

words into the hands of a deceitful man. Her meagre earnings from her work are swallowed up by the urgent needs of her family. Mahfouz tells us that, "she persuades herself that she accepts humiliation for the sake of money which her family badly needs. She finds pleasure, if we might call it that, in looking upon herself as a martyr and a victim of despondency and poverty" (Mahfouz 1944: 187). She works as a dress-maker to hide the true source of the money she provides her family with. Her financial support helps her younger brother, Hussein to become an army officer. Later when she is arrested in a brothel, her main concern is the bad reputation she will bring to her family especially her younger brother. She even requests him not to kill her himself because he will be prosecuted and may lose his job. She deliberately throws herself into the Nile to spare her family the scandal. The punishment is severe, but we must remember that Hussein responds in the same way an Egyptian male responds. A dishonourable girl must be killed by her male relatives if they want to continue to live in that society. Sadly it is always the female who is punished while her male partner goes unpunished. Although Mahfouz wrote about the tragedy of Nafissa over sixty years ago honour killing is still a much alive issue in most of the Middle-Eastern societies.

### **c- The Ambitious Woman**

Mahfouz is aware that not all prostitutes are victims. Some readers may feel less sympathetic with Hameeda, the heroine in *Middaq Alley*, than Nafissa because of the former's complex character. She is presented as an ambitious young woman who is conscious of her beauty. She appears to some readers less as a victim of her patriarchal society than the wilful agent of her misery. Hameeda is a stronger woman than both Ehssan and Nafissa, but her ambition to escape the dirty life in the alley leads her to fall victim to male exploitation at the hands of the very man whom she thought to be her saviour. Instead of finding the happy life she seeks, she ends up a prostitute in her exploiter's brothel selling her body to men especially British soldiers.

Taha Wadi rightly argues that social and political corruption is behind the tragedy of Hameeda. It appears that this corruption has affected every thing in the alley, including male-female relationship. "Most women in the same alley," Ibrahim Elsheikh tells us, "were oppressed by men. They were more or less inferior to men on almost all levels whether economic, social, or political. Their hearts were filled with grief, misery and hopelessness. Some of them were toiling hard to feed their hungry families while others were denied all chance of a decent life or even the slightest

glimpse of hope to improve their lot". ( Elsheikh 1991: 88). Even Mr.Redwan Al-Husseiny a devout and highly respected man, exerts his oppression on his helpless wife while preaching tolerance and kindness to the people of the alley. Mahfouz's success in *Middaq Alley* lies in the fact that his heroine's tragedy is interpreted in different ways by different people. To avoid a patriarchal reading of the novel one has to read the novel in the context of the socio-political conditions of the time. Only then one can agree with Elsheikh that Hameeda's character is, "a step forwards or rather a louder and more practical protest against the then prevalent economic conditions in particular"( Elsheikh, 1991, 89).

In the story of Zanuba in the Trilogy, we are given the struggle of an uneducated and poor woman and her gradual growth from sex object to a respectable wife. She is a representative of a traditional woman who becomes a victim of male exploitation because she was born in a poor family. She is never treated as Zanuba, but as Zanuba the prostitute although she does not choose prostitution as a profession. She finds a way to resist the exploitation of men and refusing to remain Al-Sayyid and Yaseen's sex object; she uses her feminine charm to become Yaseen's wife and force them to accept her as a member of their family. She becomes a faithful wife and a dutiful mother. Mahfouz, thus, suggests that some fallen women can become respectable members of society if

they are given the chance to live a respectable life. Zanuba is a good example of the prostitute who ultimately overcomes her male tormentors. She forces Al- Sayyid to accept her not as his plaything but as his son's wife, a respectable member of his distinguished family. Unlike Tayeb Saleh, Mahfouz does not present violence as a weapon in the hands of his women characters. Saleh in his best-known novel *Season of Migration to the North* allows his female protagonist Bint Mahmoud to resort to violence to set right the oppression inflicted upon her by her family and her husband. Forced to abandon her children and marry a wealthy and much older man, who has married several times and has many wives, the beautiful young widow decides to take the life of her husband in the wedding night before ending her own life.

#### **d-The New Woman**

In the last part of the Trilogy, Mahfouz shows the close relationship between educational attainment and its protective effects. Women's empowerment through education helps them to avoid violence. Education and equal opportunity of work is seen by the novelist as a strategy for achieving the level of economic independence that he sees as a prerequisite for the establishment of equality. He condemns those who, like Al-Sayyid, send their sons to schools and universities while they deprive

their daughters from the same opportunity. In Mahfouz's view education and equal opportunities of work lead to economic independence for women. He expresses his belief that the women more likely to experience violence are those who are less-educated. With the exception of Ehssan, almost all his characters, who are victims of male violence and mal-treatment, have little or no education at all. Their lack of education and economic dependence on men forces them to be controlled by people around them. Mahfouz wants his society to realize that the culture of inequality and violence against women is a major obstacle hindering progress in achieving development.

Mahfouz urges women to resist the attempt to destroy their identity. This is why his intention is to "write women as individuals, and autonomous characters who exist and act not only under the control and power of men."(Hartman 1997). Johnson states that" Taking responsibility for patriarchy means not only trying to be aware of what's going on and to understand it, but also daring to act from this understanding in ways that do more than make us comfortable with things as they are. To do this, we have to lay claim to patriarchy and own it as something we have an obligation to act upon."( 2005: P 208-209). Mahfouz believes that women's strength comes first from a realization of oppression, and from the will to act against it. This idea is similar to what contemporary social

activists say on how women can change their lot. Mahfouz urges women not to be passive and not to tolerate their male tormentors. He shows them how to realize their inner strength and stop bowing to circumstances. Even his prostitutes show signs of inner strength. Traditionally, they are fallen women but in his novels, as pointed out earlier, they are "modern women, who have been exposed to new options and values and who have rebelled against social expectations. They are forging a different future in a period of transition" (Cooke 1993: 123).

Mahfouz, thus, is trying to draw women out of the bounds of socially assigned passive roles, encouraging them to play more active roles in their society. Women in his fictional world play not only traditional roles such as singers, prostitutes, and submissive wives, but also play an active role in their nation's history. Sawsan Hamad who appears in *Sugar Street*, the last part of *The Cairo Trilogy*, is the symbol of the new Egyptian woman who refuses to resign to a male-dominated society. Through education and hard work, she even excels men. She steps out of her assigned feminine role and intrudes upon the male domain of work. She is the opposite of Amina and her relationship with her husband and co-worker Ahmed, is the ideal male-female relationship in the Trilogy from the point of view of the novelist. Positive relationships are only possible if women are no longer

oppressed. Sawsan and her husband join hands to achieve the common goal of liberating their country. Gender equality, Mahfouz suggests, is the cornerstone of any social development.

### **Conclusion:–**

Mahfouz is aware that the reality he deals with is complex, varied and multi-coloured and that violence against women and gender inequality in Egypt and the Arab world results from a complex array of interwoven political, social, economic and cultural factors. He knows that women's empowerment through education does not always help them to avoid violence. If social and economic conditions are bad, even educated women can be subjected to violence and exploitation. From the way Mahfouz deals with the theme of oppression of women in society, one can arrive at the following recommendations which are still relevant in today's Society:–

- 1– When the whole nation is oppressed, women become in a sense the marginals of the marginals.
- 2– Women should be given more education in improved economic and social conditions.

- 3- Middle-Eastern men should change their attitude towards women. They should view them not as "domestic animals" or sex objects but as equal partners. They must believe that women like men, have "fully developed minds" and can exist without the control and power of men. They must accept the fact that relationship between men and women is not a master- slave relationship, but a mutually dependent relationship in which each one has rights and duties. Violence, thus, can only be curtailed through process of educating not only women but also men.
  - 4- Women should realize their inner power and their ability to resist oppression and change their conditions.
  - 5- Oppression of women in society is not only done by men. Some women are guilty of exploiting other women. Therefore, oppression is not an exclusively male conduct.
  - 6- The culture of inequality and violence against women is a major obstacle hindering progress in achieving development. Thus, to achieve real development, gender inequality should be eradicated.
- Finally one can rightly state that Mahfouz's realistic novels are contemporary and relevant because they deal with issues that are contemporary and relevant. Taking into account the fact that Mahfouz wrote his realistic novels in the 1940s and early 1950s, one admires the courage and vision of this great writer who is far advanced of his age.

Through studies like the present study we can clear all the mistaken perceptions and assumptions about how women in the Arab world live and how they are treated by society, state, and family. Moreover, Mahfouz's views on other social issues such as political oppression, extremism, freedom, and other social relationships should be examined to look for solutions for contemporary social problems.

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