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## **Analytical Study of Naguib Mahfouz Novel Al-Qahira Al-Jadida** **Md. Hussain Ahmed Bhuiya**

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### **Abstract**

*Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian novelist who in 1988 won the Nobel prize in literature, is a man of contradiction well-versed in western culture, the most famous modern Arab novelist on whom more has been written than any other Arab writer. He is the pioneer of the novel in the Arabic language and his career has spanned almost the entire range of novelistic development in the Arab world. Mahfouz developed his novel further through the application of new or more appropriate technique surely mastered which shows especially in his novel al-qahira al-jadida. This novel of Mahfouz is by turns, ironic, satirical, farcical and ultimately cynical as the author creates a morality tale which takes place in a country where life's most basic guiding principles are still uncertain. Al-qahira al-jadida, written in a clear easy flowing style, paints a vivid picture of social, political and religious issues and their impact on Egyptian society. The novel deals with the period during the second world war the period which is characterized by political and social upheavals in Egypt.*

**Key Words:** *Naguib Mahfouz, al-qahira al-jadida, Egyptian women as portrayed in al-qahira al-jadida.*

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**Introduction:** The first Arab writer to make a name for himself in the narrative genres alone, and so far the only one to be awarded in 1988, the Nobel Prize for literature, Naguib Mahfouz occupies an eminent place in the development of Arabic novel as Mahmud Taymur in the case of short story and Tawfiq al-Hakeem in drama. In the field of modern Arabic fiction, Naguib Mahfouz contribution is tremendous which made a new path to the development of Arabic novel. Like Mohammed Husain Haykal's, Mahfouz is widely regarded as the founding father of modern Arabic Novel. He was the 1<sup>st</sup> Arabic novelist to make an analytical study of Arabic novel. His influence based on the ideas of Haykal's which can be seen in his various books. He was greatly influenced by western writers and their books. From the western writers and their works Naguib Mahfouz discovered that the western world as a much more developed from. Mahfouz's novels deal with the various aspects of life as love, faith and death and above all the meaning of life. The struggle between man and woman also forms an important aspects of his novel. Politics is an important aspect of his Novels. He is preoccupied mainly with liberty and deals with the relationship of the citizen to the state of the child to the father and of the women to the man. Mahfouz writing style is panoramic and he uses very ambiguous and complex sentences. He is the pioneer of the Novel in the Arabic language and his career has spanned almost the entire range of novelistic development in the Arab World. Mahfouz developed his novel further through the application of new or more appropriate techniques surely mastered which shows especially in his novel al-qahira al-jadida. Through this novel Mahfouz addressed many social and political issues. In this brief article about al-qahira al-jadida efforts have been made to highlight the writing of Mahfouz about the Novel with lucid style. The major theme of Mahfouz novel al-qahira al-jadida is that of the impact of rapid change in the social values and the radical alteration of the perspective of reality on the common people. In al-qahira al-jadida Mahfouz paint a vigorous and scrupulous picture of the lower middle class in Cairo of the 1930s and the year of the Second World War. This novel constitutes major step forward to the development of the Arabic novel.

Analytical study on al-qahira al-jadida : Naguib Mahfouz early Novels are about Egypt's pharaonic past: Khufu (cheops), builder of the great pyramid; The Hyksos invaders. But in the

1940s Mahfouz began to confront what could only be called the country's crisis of modernity. From that period came *al-qahira al-jadida* (Cairo Modern), originally published in 1945. This novel takes place in the 1930s with Egypt at a crossroad. Its traditional mores are being increasingly undermined by European influences. It is a period when cloistered women still peer down from latticed balconies in to Cairo's alley ways, while other stroll the city's wide boulevards dressed in the latest Parisian couture. For the first time Egyptian Universities are open to women. The country is still under British influence and ruled by the corrupt and gluttonous king Farauk, along with a degenerate bureaucracy of Turks and Circassia while unemployment is rampant and students go hungry.

Mahfouz camera Pans from the dome of king Fuad University (now Cairo University) to students streaming out of the campus, focusing on four students in their twenties each representing a different trend in Egypt in the 1930s. Finally the camera comes to rest on Mahgub Abd al-Daim. Cairo of the 1930s is a place of vast social and economic inequities. It is also a time of change, when the Universities have just opened to women and heady new Philosophies imported from Europe are stirring up debates among the young. Mahgub is a fiercely proud student who is determined to keep both his poverty and his lack of principles secret from his idealistic friends when he finds that there are no jobs for those without connections, out of desperation he agrees to participate in an elaborate deception. But what begins as a mere strategy of survival soon becomes much more for both Mahgub and his partner in crime, an equally desperate young women named Ihsan. As they makes their way through Cairo's lavish high society their precarious charade begins to unravel and the terrible price of Mahgub's Faustian bargain become clear.

From the historical romance, Naguib Mahfouz gradually moved to what critics usually call the social novel or the realistic novel of contemporary life. Between 1945 and 1949 Mahfouz published five of his best-known works among them *al-qahira al-jadida* is most important because Mahfouz graduated from the Egyptian University in 1934, the same year Lashin's novel appeared. Mahfouz use this year as the time of his novel *al-qahira al-jadida* (New Cairo) published in 1945, in which he treated the rise of an Egyptian middle-class intelligentsia and their struggle of find a place in Egyptian society dominated by the upper class.

The struggle between men and women also forms an important aspect of Mahfouz Novel. He is preoccupied mainly with liberty and deals with the relationship of the citizen. The Novel *al-qahira al-jadida* deals with the various aspects of lie as love, faith and death to the state, of the child to the father and women to the men. It is a novel of existentialist satire. In this Nove, Mahfouz attempts to depict the life and customs of a group of University students in Cairo.

*Al-qahira al-jadida* (New Cairo) presents a sketch of Egyptian life in the thirties with an emphasis on its poverty and corruption. It is the Cairo of the middle classes which grew up in the shadow of British corruption and reflects the contradictions in the social and economic order of the city and more so within the individual characters.<sup>1</sup>

The story opens on an optimistic note Mahjub the son of a poor village employee is able to enter the University for further studies students with different backgrounds like Mahmud Radwan of the Brotherhood and Ali Taha of the socialist party can discuss their political and social ideas openly indicating a spirit of tolerance.

Just four months before Mahjub's final examination his father falls critically ill. Mahjub ponders over the implications. His well-to-do fellow students in Cairo, in anticipation of their inheritance, would only be too happy to see their fathers die. But for him his father's death spells disaster. "Four months between me and the fruit of fifteen years hard work" he laments. His father's muscular paralysis signals the beginning of a financial crisis in the family. Mahjub despairs, "O canals of the countryside, distribute your favours among your children with justices."<sup>2</sup>

The overriding question, with his parents also having to be fed now, is how to ward off hunger. On graduation, Mahjub's friend's all get settled or go abroad for higher studies. Only he remains unemployed. A friend tells him frankly:

“Forget your qualifications. Do you have a recommendation? Are you related to someone in power? Can you marry the daughter of a government official?”<sup>3</sup>

In a show for the blind, Mahjub meets Ikshidi, an old friend who has settled down to a life of ease after deserting the “cause” of his student days. He sees him with the upper crust, who are shown speaking French and thinks that this glamour and glitter make life worth living and that money is the key to everything. He sees his rich cousin Tahiyya and is spurred by a mad desire to overpower as they make a date at the pyramids but Mahjub files to seduce her “Forty centuries regarding tragedy from the top of the pyramids” he concludes sadly as if he is speaking for the whole of Egypt.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile the quest for a job continues. Ikshidi shows Mahjub the way to wealth by dubious means. He can get him a sixth class position if he marries the mistress of his boss to be. On the way to the wedding, Mahjub philosophizes. Marriage is merely a social habit. In some places the custom is to have many wives. In others many husbands there is no absolute law for marriages and honour is a chain that shackles the necks of the poor only.

The bride turns out to be none other than Ihsan, the girl Ali Taha, Mahjub’s friend used to love and who mysteriously had later disappeared from his life. She too had loved him deeply. Her misfortune was brought about by her father, a drunkard, who had gambled her honours away.

The story reaches a dramatic end when the boss wife at the instance of al-Ikshidi, who is jealous of Mahjub’s quick promotions enters Mahjub’s flat to find her husband with his mistress. Simultaneously Mahjub’s parents arrive on the scene and the scandal becomes public. The government servant resigns and Mahjub is taken away to the country side far from the entanglements of “New Cairo”.

Naguib Mahfouz delineates his characters skillfully especially Mahjub whose changing life style is drawn in detail from his college days and life at the student hotenement he takes up when he is out of funds he counts every qirsh at apartment where he lives after his marriage.<sup>5</sup>

### **Egyptian women as portrayed in al-qahira al-jadida:**

One of the most interesting aspects of the required reform is the change in the position of women in the society. The role played by female characters in many Arabic Novels at the time reflects the prevalent attitude towards women. Naguib Mahfouz presents dynamic female character in the role of mothers, wives, prostitutes, daughter, sisters, servants and so on but it is the role of the sweet heart, love or sex- objects that is the most dominant. They are obedient, subservient, powerful, strong, independent and religious

Mahfouz’s female characters are unique to his understanding of the feminine and the internal and external contradictions within Egyptian culture. However, women’s roles in Mahfouz’s writing are described as powerful, not necessarily through an exteriority of power in the field of politics or society, but in the deeper community that reflects values, morality and Islam. The roles that the female characters play in Mahfouz’s novels define not only patriarchy, but also provide another way to view exteriority interiority during the twentieth century.

In the Novel al-qahira al-jadida, Mahfouz depicts women in various situations and on different social levels. Apparently, the ultimate aim is to explode the fallacy that women is and should be subservient to man. “In al-qahira al-jadida, specifically at the beginning of the Novel, there is a discussion between two friends about the role of females and their place in the University.”<sup>6</sup> In the following analysis of Mahfouz’s portrayal of women in his Novel al-qahira al-jadida an attempt will be made to race and examine female characters as presented in his literary masterpiece, al-qahira al-jadida, in order to understand the underlying view or rather the vision, of the author vis a-vis the position of women in society.

In many of Mahfouz Novels, he often delineates characters with opposite views on some difficult issues, such as religions faith versus science, revolution versus acquiescence and the position of man’ versus the position of women in society. Duality of outlook on women and her role in society can best be illustrated by the following examples: In al-qahira al-jadida one of the male character’s

Ahmed Budair asks some University student colleagues of his about their opinion of women. Ma'Mun Radwan one of the Muslim Brethren answers: "I say what my God says. But if you want to hear it in my own words, I tell you that women is the security of this world and a lower path to the security of the hereafter."<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Ali Taha, a progressive socialist, says: "women is man's life partner as they say. But in my opinion it is a partnership which should be based on absolute equality in rights and duties."<sup>8</sup>

Ihsan Shihata of al-qahira al-jadida was a student at the higher institute for physical education in the Egyptian capital. Mahfouz portraits of Ihsan especially compassionate and complex Ihsan is Egypt new women, a lover of Goethe and Italian painting who planned to go to the University and have a career. But the threat of hunger is there for her too, and it will destroyed her youthful radiance. She together with her parents and seven brothers and sisters, lived in poverty and abject misery. She was also beautiful but constantly conscious of her family's poverty. Her parents were corrupt and unethical in their dealings. The father for instance was a drug addicted and a gambler. Ihsan has entered in to this arrangement through the connivance of her greedy father, who has lost his money on drugs and gambling and wants to marry a rich man for his own gain. He owned a small cigarette shop and his income was not sufficient to support a big family ten members. In these circumstances Ihsan was forced to become the mistress of a Cabinet Minister. Now Ihsan will be Mahgub's wife but she will also allow her husband's employer, Qasim to visit her on certain nights while Mahgub makes himself conveniently scarce, wandering the bars and Cafes of the city after few days married his secretary a pander, who was also a victim of the then prevalent political, social and economic corruption. The Cabinet Minister represented on the one hand the corruption of the political system and on the other the unjust in the distribution of wealth in the country at the time.

Tahiyya Hamdis is introduced to the reader as a young girl, primarily a daughter of a rich family, highly educated and haughty. Once Tahiya agreed to go on a trip to the pyramids with Mahgub Abd al-Da'im a University student of humble origin. They could walk and talk together. They could discuss public matters. But she could exchange only views with him, no emotions when he tried to kiss her she pushed him away and dismissed his emotional drift towards her as sheer madness. Tahiyya then terminated the trip, stepped into her car and ordered the driver to drive away, leaving Mahgub behind:

His eyes followed her until she receded from sight and disappeared leaving him alone at the foot of the pyramid.....He pensively gazed at the pyramid and sarcastically mumbled: "Forty His centuries have witnessed my tragedy from the top of this pyramid."<sup>9</sup>

Apparently the author has placed Mahgub at the foot of the pyramid" underlining his humble origin and contrasting him with the rich and aristocrats. Tahiyya who belongs to the upper class and by extension occupies the top of the social ladder.

Throughout the Novel this sketchy portrayed of aristocratic females is to be repeated over and over again revealing Mahfouz's disdain towards aristocrats through direct or indirect comments on their behaviour:

"What is to regretted is that each of these women, beautiful and many as they are, has one or more men hanging about her. Most of them (women) speak French fluently and they are partial Muslims."<sup>10</sup> Mahfouz's aristocratic female characters in al-qahira al-jadida is in fact not characters but "tools" or "symbols" apparently introduced to expose and criticize aristocracy as such. It is here where the author is at his weakest. His characterization is flat and his portrayal of aristocracy and aristocrats leaves much to be desired.

**Conclusion:** From the above brief article it is clearly said that Naguib Mahfouz is skillful artist picturing the real picture of the Egyptian society through his Novel al-qaira al- jadida. In this Novel Mahfouz has represented the rich Egyptian identity in an unprecedented way. As a progressive writer

Naguib Mahfouz paved the way for development of modern Egyptian Novels to introducing new values and ideas in his writing. Arabic novel reached to its zenith by the effort of Naguib Mahfouz. This Novel constitutes a major steps forward in the development of the Arabic Novel and reflects with the lives of contemporary Egyptian life based on a serious and social problems. Thus the novel *al-Qahira al-Jadidah* presents the life of Egyptian society in 1930's with stress on poverty and bribery and portrays middle class in Cairo with its social and economic denials in the shadow of British occupation.

### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Ghali Shukkri, *al-Muntami, Dirasa fi Adab Najib Mahfouz*, p. 95.
- <sup>2</sup> As quoted by Ghali Shukkri, p.99.
- <sup>3</sup> Naguib Mahfouz, *al-qahira al-jadida*, p.6
- <sup>4</sup> Ghali Shukkri, *al-Muntami, Dirasa fi Adab Najib Mahfouz*, p.103
- <sup>5</sup> Fatma Moussa, *fi'l Riwaya al-Arabiyya al-Mu'asira*, pp.49-50.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid* . p.2.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid* . pp .7-8 .
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid* . pp.7-8 .
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid* . pp.78-79.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid* . pp.92-93.

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