

## The Pursuit of Existential Meaning and Social Justice in Naguib Mahfouz's Three Short Stories: "Zaabalawi", "A Day for Saying Goodbye", and "The Answer is No"

**Dian Natalia Sutanto, Melania Prisca Mendrofa, Teti Apriyanti**

Sanata Dharma University

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### ABSTRACT

Mahfouz's literary fame is mainly based on his novels which become the main source for the critics to understand his whole literary visions. Mahfouz's short stories, on the other hand, are considered secondarily valuable by the critics as the remainder of the ideas from his novels. This paper proposes that Mahfouz's short stories are as important as his novels in a sense that they highlight or magnify particular aspects of Mahfouz's visions. From the analysis of three Mahfouz's short stories entitled "Zaabalawi", "A Day for Saying Goodbye", and "The Answer is No", some of his essential themes and literary visions, which developed further in his novel, are identified. In *Zaabalawi*, the persistence in maintaining hope of finding meaningful life in spite of the persisting tragedy in human life is emphasized by Mahfouz. In *A Day for Saying Goodbye*, Mahfouz depicts the futility of modernity without adherence to religious values. In *The Answer is No*, by depicting the shift of gender relations and accommodating the marginalized women's resistance to patriarchy, Mahfouz encourages the reformation of unjust societal structure.

*Keywords: existential meaning, social justice, women's resistance*

### INTRODUCTION

Naguib Mahfouz, a prolific Egyptian author, is the first Arab writer to win the 1988 Nobel Prize in literature. During his lifetime, he has published thirty-five novels, and more than two hundred short stories and plays in fourteen collections of short stories and plays. Even though Mahfouz had started his literary career in 1939, his fame was growing slowly within his home country and among the Western audience. It was not until the publication of *The Cairo Trilogy* in 1956-1957 that his works gained fame outside Egypt as the masterpiece of Arabic fiction. Mahfouz's literary fame is primarily based on his novels and secondarily on his short stories and plays. Mahfouz's novels have always been the main source in the literary

criticism of Mahfouz's works, whereas the short stories commonly take second place in the study of the author's work. The short stories are often treated as the footnotes to the novels or the remainder of the ideas from Mahfouz's novels. Though the novels are the main source for the critics to understand the whole literary visions of the author, the short stories are valuable in highlighting or magnifying particular aspects of Mahfouz's vision. This paper discusses several Mahfouz' short stories entitled "Zaabalawi", "A Day for Saying Goodbye", and "The Answer is No" that highlight the best of Mahfouz's literary visions about society and social problems, futility of modernity without adherence to religious values, the meaning of human life, the instability of personal and cultural

identity, and the shift of gender relation in the modern world.

### **MAJOR THEMES AND LITERARY STYLE OF NAGUIB MAHFOUZ'S SHORT STORIES**

During Mahfouz's literary activity, which has extended over fifty years, Mahfouz's thematic visions and literary style have undergone considerable changes. The development of Mahfouz's thematic visions and literary style can be divided into three stages as follows:

#### **The period of late 1930s to 1940s**

Mahfouz began his literary career by writing historical romance novels set in Ancient Egypt. The notable novels in this genre are *Play of Fate* (1939), *Radopese* (1943) and *Theban Struggle* (1944). These novels were written by Mahfouz amidst the rising of nationalist movement and growing interest in the glorious past of Ancient Egypt and the Pharaohs.<sup>1</sup> In writing these novels Mahfouz was influenced by Sir Walter Scott's, Alexander Dumas', Tawfiq Al-Hakim's and Salama Moussa's works. Despite its ancient setting, the modern themes are apparent in the novels. Mahfouz depicts the contemporary Egypt current social and political movements in parallel with the Egypt ancient socio-political conditions. By portraying the alienation of the Pharaoh from his people, Mahfouz indeed refers to the sentiments of the Egyptian people in 1940s to their youthful king, Farouq I, who was only interested in his pleasure and thus was increasingly disappointed the people.<sup>2</sup>

#### **The period of mid 1940s to mid-1950s**

After the publication of *Theban Struggle*, Mahfouz ended his literary pursuit in

historical romance and pursued instead in the genre of social novels. He changed his literary style into social realism to give realistic and panoramic portrayal of Egypt socio-political conditions during national uprising against British rule in 1919 to the end of World War II. The novels written between 1945 and 1949, such as *The New Cairo* (1945), *Midaq Alley* (1947), and *The Beginning and The End* (1949) provide realistic portrayal of the contrast between lower and upper middle class in Cairo in the late 1930s. The powerful, wealthy and prestigious upper class is depicted as morally bankrupt, whereas the poor lower class is struggling to improve their life but could only succeed by compromising their principles.<sup>3</sup> During this period Mahfouz brought forth his trilogy which gained him fame among domestic and international readership. *The Cairo Trilogy* (*Palace Walk, Palace of Desire and Sugar Street*, 1956-1957) depicts the life of three generations of Cairene bourgeois family during the national uprising against British colonialism to the end of World War II. In this trilogy Mahfouz depicts the conflict between tradition and modernity, changes of custom and convention, and generation gap.

#### **The period of late 1950s onwards**

After finishing his trilogy, Mahfouz stopped writing for seven years from 1952 to 1959. This hiatus was related with Mahfouz's reaction to revolution which took place in 1952. As stated by Mahfouz himself, due to this revolution, the Egyptian world which he had been writing about for years had changed overnight and thus, he

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<sup>1</sup> el-Enany, Rasheed. *Naguib Mahfouz: the Pursuit of Meaning*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Moussa-Mahmoud, Fatma. *Depth of Vision: The Fiction of Naguib Mahfouz*. *Third World Quarterly*,

11.2 (Apr., 1989), p. 157. JSTOR. Web. 4 November. 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Moosa, Matti. *Naguib Mahfouz: Life in the Alley of Arab History*. *The Georgia Review*, 49. 1, (Spring 1995), p. 226. JSTOR. Web. 4 November. 2015.

no longer had any reason to write.<sup>4</sup> Mahfouz waited for seven years to see how the revolution would yield the social changes he had envisioned in his works. In 1959, he published his new work, *Children of the Gebelawi*, as his social critique to the revolution and Nasser's regime which he perceived had failed to bring forth the social changes he had envisioned. The publication of *Children of the Gebelawi* marked the turning point in Mahfouz's thematic visions and literary style. Being disappointed with the revolution, during this period Mahfouz's work introduced new themes, such as the tension between individual loneliness and alienation to traditions and religions, futility of modernity, metaphysical quest for God and the meaning of human existence. He started to focus on the psychological state of his characters by using the more modern and artistic literary techniques, such as stream of consciousness, dialogue and internal monologues.<sup>5</sup> During this period Mahfouz focused more on the internal world of the characters rather than external world as he had done in his previous works. Other remarkable innovations were the shift from omniscient narration to the more restricted viewpoint and the sprawling novel to the condensed plot.<sup>6</sup> Besides, he started to communicate concealed social and political criticism under the mask of allegory and symbolism. In contrast with his early works in which Mahfouz employed realism to provide detailed portrayal of Egypt social life, in this period he focused more on communicating his ideas which meant that the detailed depiction of characters, events

and background were discarded and merely become symbols to express the ideas. The shift from detailed portrayal of social reality into abstract ideas transcending particular details made Mahfouz's works become more allegorical. The use of allegory is important for Mahfouz as a mean to avoid state censorship or social pressures.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the use of allegory also allows Mahfouz to address serious questions without giving definite solution; allegory allows him to express his ambivalence on the human life in modern era.<sup>8</sup> The use of the absurd also characterizes Mahfouz's works in this post-realist period. The influence of Camus and Kafka were apparent in Mahfouz's works, especially in his plays. Mahfouz's deploys the concept of absurd to express his uncertainty on the ability of religion and science to end human suffering from social injustice and tyrannical state. His uncertainty reflects his view on inherent tragedy of human's existence. Yet, Mahfouz's philosophy of the absurd is not devoid of meaning. Rasheed El-Enany calls Mahfouz's brand of absurdity as meaningful absurdity.<sup>9</sup> Unlike European absurdity which is total and absolute, Mahfouz's absurdity is rationalized, explicable and subdued.<sup>10</sup> Life is not inherently devoid of meaning. Mahfouz believes that life is full of meaning. He believes that hope remains the legitimate affirmation of mankind.

Notable novels that bear Mahfouz's remarkable accomplishment of his new literary experiments are *Autumn Quail* (1962), *Miramar* (1967), *Mirrors* (1972),

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<sup>4</sup> el-Enany Rasheed. *The Novelist as Political Eye-Witness: A View of Najib Mahfuz's Evaluation of the Nasser and Sadat Eras*. *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 21.1 (Mar., 1990): p. 74. JSTOR. Web. 4 November. 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Elad, Ami. *Mahfuz's "Zabalawi": Six Stations of a Quest*. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 26.4 (Nov., 1994): p. 632. JSTOR. Web. 4 November. 2015.

<sup>6</sup> el-Enany. *Naguib Mahfouz: the Pursuit of Meaning*, p. 197.

<sup>7</sup> Milson, Menahem. *An Allegory on the Social and Cultural Crisis in Egypt: 'Walid al-'Ana' by Najib Mahfuz*. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 3.3 (Jul., 1972): p. 325. JSTOR. Web. 4 November. 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Milson, p. 325.

<sup>9</sup> el-Enany. *Naguib Mahfouz: the Pursuit of Meaning*, p. 204.

<sup>10</sup> el-Enany. *Naguib Mahfouz: the Pursuit of Meaning*, p. 20.

and *A Thousand and One Nights* (1982). The change of Mahfouz's thematic visions and literary style had prompted Mahfouz's return to short story. It was during this period that Mahfouz was highly productive in writing short stories. Mahfouz's accomplishment on new thematic visions and literary style can be found in his collections of short story "The Thief and The Dogs" (1961) and "God's World" (1963).

The distinct characteristic of Mahfouz's works is not only in its political content, critique to the authority, and his doubt on the ability of the society to maintain justice indefinitely, but also his universal allegory of human existence. Even though Mahfouz's works deal with Egyptian society and his usage of symbolic or surrealistic stories are distinctly Egyptian in their settings, conflicts and characters, his works still have universal significance because the works address universal themes, such as the meaning of human life, death, personal and cultural identity, as well as religion. It is evident that the distinct characteristic of Mahfouz's works is that at one level Mahfouz's works can be perceived as social critique to Egyptian society, but at another level they can be perceived as symbolic parables on the human existence and condition.

"Zaabalawi" ("God's World", 1963), one of the most well-known Mahfouz's short stories, can be perceived in these two levels: as the social reflection to the oscillations of science/modernity between religion/traditions in Egyptian society and the symbolic parable on the sick humanity and human's persistent search for meaning of life in the modern era. "Zaabalawi" has been one of the most well-known Mahfouz's short stories. This short story even has been regarded as a part of world literature through its incorporation into *Norton Anthology of World Literature* (Martin Puchner *et al*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed, 2012). The

popularity of this short story as world literature is related not only to its depiction of Egyptian social condition, but also its universal significance for global audience in addressing universal themes.

"Zaabalawi" recounts the narrator's quest for Zaabalawi, a saintly person from whom the narrator will ask for help to cure his incurable illness. The search turns out to be very difficult because Zaabalawi does not have a permanent address. The narrator experiences strange adventure in the course of his search. In the end, the narrator fails to find Zaabalawi, but he becomes convinced that Zaabalawi exists. He maintains his hope and continues his search.

This story at one level is the metaphor for sick humanity's persistent search for spiritual meaning of life in the midst of change. The sickness of the narrator is the metaphor for the human's identity crisis in the modern life. Mahfouz uses stream of consciousness, dialogue and interior monologue to explore the inner-world of the protagonist and his identity crisis. The search of Zaabalawi shows that the narrator attempts to find the cure outside himself. This search becomes at once a pain and a hope for the narrator. Having failed to find Zaabalawi, the narrator learns that life does not provide immediate solution. The narrator eventually learns how to keep his patience and hope despite the persistence of his pathological condition. Mahfouz's emphasis on the quest of the meaning of life and the importance of maintaining hope has been a recurring theme in Mahfouz's works. For Mahfouz, the quest is not only the means or process to come up with the solution, but it is important within itself to deal with existential questions. This story also reflects Mahfouz's view that despite persistent tragedy in human's existence, people should not despair and throw away their beliefs and hopes, but rather struggle against the abuses of the modern age.

This story at another level can be perceived as the portrayal of Egyptian social condition in the midst of change. The narrator represents the alienated people who live in the interstice of traditional and

modern life. The characters appear in the course of the narrator's quest symbolize either traditional or modern worlds. As has been identified by Ami Elad (1994), there have been six stations in the quest:<sup>11</sup>

| Station (Cairo)                  | Character                     | Occupation               | Symbol           |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| 1 Maydan al-Azhar                | Sheikh Qamar                  | Lawyer                   | New              |
| 1 Khan Ga'far                    | Bayya ful                     | Bean seller, middleman   | Old              |
| 2 Al-Birgawi residence           | Old bookseller<br>Shopkeepers | Shopkeeper               | Old<br>Old & New |
| 3 Narrator's quarter             | Local sheikh of the quarter   | Sheikh of the quarter    | Old & New        |
| 3 Narrator's quarter             | Local ironer                  | Presser, middleman       | Old              |
| 4 Umm al-Ghulam                  | Amm Hasanayn                  | Calligrapher             | Old              |
| 4 Umm al-Ghulam                  | Vendor                        | Lupine seller, middleman | Old              |
| 5 Tumbakshiyya                   | Sheikh Jadd                   | Musician                 | Old              |
| 6 Al-Najma Tavern in Alfi Street | Hajj Wanas                    | Landowner & merchant     | Old & new        |
| 6 Al-Najma Tavern in Alfi Street | Vendor                        | Prawnseller, middleman   | Old              |

As is evident from the table above, the quest takes place in the quarters, suburbs, streets, and alleys of Cairo. In the course of the narrator's quest, Mahfouz portrays Cairo as the city which is beautiful and ugly at the same time due to vast social change from traditional into modern world. The decaying of traditions is depicted as inevitable to modern quarter and lower-class population at the end of the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> However, the change does not happen at once, hence throughout his quest, the narrator encounters various characters that still hold on to old traditions or are trapped between the old and the modern worlds. Those who engage in arts and some of the lower middlemen belong to the modern world, whereas the Sheiks belong to the modern world. Mahfouz portrays the weakening of religious values in the Egyptian society which are replaced by

science (rationality) and materialism by depicting the changing lifestyle of the Sheiks who in the past were concerned with interpreting religious law and fostering traditional customs, but now engage in a cold and alienated commercial world. Moreover, Mahfouz also expresses his social critique to Nasser's regime in the 1960s by deploying Sheikh Jadd as the mouthpiece to criticize Nasser's tyrannical regime in persecuting those who become the symbol of the old world whose influence jeopardizes the regime's authority.<sup>13</sup> In the story, it is apparent that the oppressiveness of authority becomes one of the obstacles for the narrator to find Zaabalawi.

In the course of the narrator's quest, it is the characters that still adhere to the old world that provide a turning point in the narrator's quest. The old world's characters provide

<sup>11</sup> Elad, p. 641.

<sup>12</sup> Elad, p. 635.

<sup>13</sup> Elad, p. 638.

important information where the narrator can find Zaabalawi. This part shows Mahfouz's inclination toward traditions and religion. Mahfouz perceives that traditions and religious values are important in the search of meaningful life in the modern world.

In the end the narrator arrives at the last station in his search for Zaabalawi, that is, the bar where Hajj Wanas frequently drinks together with Zaabalawi. In this tavern, the narrator gets drunk. It is during his intoxication that Zaabalawi approaches him. Being unconscious of Zaabalawi's presence, the narrator falls asleep and dreams. In his dream, he finds peace of mind and is freed from his suffering self. The association of the quest in the last stations with music (Sheikh Jadd) and wine drinking (Hajj Wanas) actually reflects Mahfouz's moderate view that the search of meaning in life can also be done outside the conservative traditions and religions, such as through Sufi mysticism.<sup>14</sup> Music and wine intoxication have been commonly used by Sufis as the medium with which they can enter the oneness with the divine. By deploying the wine intoxication as the instrument in the search of Zaabalawi, it can be interpreted that Mahfouz has also been influenced by Sufi traditions.

The narrator's state of bliss does not maintain for so long. When the narrator wakes up, he finds out that Zaabalawi had been there with him, tried to wake him up and already left the bar not so very long ago. This event does not lead the narrator to the completion of his quest, but he becomes convinced that Zaabalawi exists and thus, boosts his hope to find him someday. To some extent, the narrator's failure to find Zaabalawi shares the imagery of absurdity. Yet, the absurdity in this story is not used as the total and absolute explanation of

human's meaningless life. In contrast, the absurdity is used to show the paradox of God rather than as a refutation to the existence of God.<sup>15</sup> This story reflects Mahfouz's view on Egyptian society and human condition in general that despite persistent tragedy in human's life, a human has to persist in searching for a better world. The persistence in maintaining hope or the belief of the possibilities –though remote of reaching the ultimate goal –is enough for its own sake as the reason for human existence. Being persistent in maintaining religious faith reflects Mahfouz's view that science, tradition and religion have to continue to coexist in the modern life.

The leitmotif of Mahfouz's works, such as searching for meaningful life and individual confusion amidst the vast change of social life is also addressed in "A Day for Saying Goodbye" ("The False Dawn", 1989). This short story brings some issues of life, such as the changing human relation and family's value in the modern life. It is about the contradiction between the ideal and the real. However, this story leaves some mystery because it is not clear enough whether there is a case of murder in the scene. Mahfouz creates such kind of riddle for the reader to guess and conclude the story on their own. Mustafa Ibrahim, the main character in this story, is depicted as a man who is trapped between hope and fact. The character is such a lonely person who seeks the meaning of his life. His idealism about life and love do not fit within the real life. The broken relationship between him and his wife then affects the family situation. The victims are their children, Samira and Gamal. It is also a reflection of Mahfouz's childhood memory in which he had experienced a dysfunctional childhood. Though the case is not the same, the imagination leads to the childhood moment

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<sup>14</sup> Elad, p. 641.

<sup>15</sup> Myers, Richard K. *The Problem of Authority: Franz Kafka and Nagib Mahfuz*. *Journal of Arabic*

*Literature*, 17, (1986): p. 94. JSTOR. Web. 4 November. 2015.

where the children go through difficult times during their young age.

On the whole, Mahfouz presents most of his story by giving the loneliness, social clumsiness with no sense of humour and in a frank manner.<sup>16</sup> In “A Day for Saying Goodbye”, the loneliness and social clumsiness are also depicted through the life of the main character. Mustafa questions how human relation can shift so easily. There is no pure relation and love in his belief. Human relation is imperfect for him. It becomes his first happiness while his wife says something good about him. In the end, that admiration changes into bad argument and fighting. It implies the stubbornness of human which leads to the fight.

The feeling of being chaotic with his life affects his way of coping with his personal and social life. Mustafa is being flustered by the fact that his struggle in love for the children and his wife has wasted away. The mystery whether he finally murders his wife or not is still ambiguous. Therefore, some scenes may imply that he murders his wife, for instance while Mustafa makes such kind of social clumsiness when he meets his neighbour. He is being suspicious for everyone and this may be not without reason. It can be concluded indeed that he murders his wife and wants to escape from his life. In fact, Mahfouz does not provide the escape as the anxiety of the character but more as the feeling of being free from the guilty. Mustafa does not want to completely run away from his guilt but instead to take some moment to realize what he has actually done in his life, to understand the ideal and the reality that do not fit his hope. Thus, this story still puts a puzzle in the reader's mind.

Similar to the other stories, Mahfouz portrays the decay of religious belief in which God is dead and buried, hence the humans only seek material achievement of a just social order.<sup>17</sup> It implies how human does not consider the punishment of God for their behaviour. The point is that humans lose focus on the spiritual life. It is reflected from Mustafa's character whose ego is stronger than his belief in God. The evil takes control of his behaviour; the anger is his passion. His bad temperament makes situation becoming worse.

Being apart from the theme of the story, translation also becomes the significant point in Mahfouz's works. Many of Mahfouz's works appear as the result of translation. In “A Day for Saying Goodbye”, there are many uses of adjective phrases to explain a condition. The choice of the vocabulary seems to be in the advance level. The way the translator chooses the advance vocabulary can be reflected as the way to make the story has the taste for foreign sensibility. Many of Mahfouz's works have been known all over the world and become World Literature. For this reason, the translation leads to the use of unusual sense of words' choice. As proposed by Schleiermacher, when a style of the original language displays the strength, the translation should pass the stage where the language appear as the usual and natural one.<sup>18</sup> It implies that the translator has to pour creativity toward the original language, so the translation will not stand as the standard one. The creativity on the original is needed to be visible in the translation.<sup>19</sup> For instance, the translator chooses the word *pallid* rather than *pale* to describe the face of Mustafa's sister while he visits her. Some of the other words also show the way the translator performs the

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<sup>16</sup> El-Enany, R. 'Religion in the Novels of Naguib Mahfouz'. Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies), Vol. 15, No. 1/2 (1988), pp. 21-27. JSTOR. Web 5 Nov. 2015, p. 22

<sup>17</sup> El-Enany, p. 27

<sup>18</sup> Maddah, Nora Talal. 'A Tentative Translation of Naguib Mahfouz' "Stories from our neighborhood" from Arabic into English'. *library.effatuniversity.edu.sa*. Web 5 Nov 2015, p. 9

<sup>19</sup> Maddah, p. 9

new style in translation text, such as *disparities* (rather than *difference*), *squander* (rather than *make* or *spend*), and so forth. Therefore, this translation of Mahfouz's works appears as the compatible one to give foreign sensibility to the readers. Though the diction may create difficulties to be understood by the common and intermediate level, yet the purpose is to make this story passes its' strength of the original.

Besides exploring the themes of individual alienation from tradition and religions in modern life and the search of meaning in life, Mahfouz also explores the issue of the shifting gender relations in Egyptian society. Mahfouz has been considered as a progressive writer because of his critique on patriarchy during the shift of gender relations in Egyptian society. This critique on patriarchy can be found in one of his short story, "The Answer is No" ("The False Dawn", 1989).

"The Answer is No" is a short story that Mahfouz wrote immediately after he was awarded the Nobel Prize. "The Answer is No" becomes an interesting work since it is outspokenly feminist, yet it is written by Mahfouz, a man from Egypt which is known for its strong patriarchal Arab culture. The short story foregrounds the conflict between genders.

The centre of the story is revolved around the protagonist character, a young female teacher who was sexually abused by Badran Badawi, a mathematics teacher who was giving her private lessons when she was fourteen years old. Before the incident, Badran Badawi was like a second father to her and she completely trusted him. In her innocence she could not see that he could have done such disgraceful behaviour. Even though he had promised to marry her when she reached appropriate age to marry, she decided to reject his proposal when the time came. She is now a grown up and

becomes a traumatized woman who avoids love and fears it. She convinces herself that happiness is not always confined to love and motherhood. Fortunately, her mother never insisted she get married; her mother leaves the decision to her. Years later, Badran Badawi becomes the headmaster of the school where she teaches. They meet again and have a conversation again about a marriage proposal. She remains determined to reject him for the second time.

The protagonist, the victimized young teacher, is not an average Egyptian woman. Since Egypt is known for its strong traditional and being an Islamic nation, Egyptian women are positioned as the subordinate of men and their roles are confined to domestic sphere, such as to get married, have children, and be in charge of the household duties. However, Mahfouz's protagonist is not a typical Egyptian woman; she is intelligent, well-educated, single, financially independent, and is supported by her liberal mother. Her mother frees her to make her own choice which is exceptionally rare in the Egyptian society during that period.

Despite the trauma she has experienced in the past, unlike many other women, she does not let herself become trapped in frustration. She successfully manages herself to move on with her life and pursues a career instead. She devotes her life to her career, chooses not to get married and appreciates her single life. In fact, the person the protagonist has become is the reaction to her childhood's assault by Badawi. Consequently, she has spent her life avoiding gender domination, and now fate has put her on a strange path. She learns that Badawi is appointed as the headmaster of the school where she teaches. This fact disturbs her and makes her down for a while. Yet, the protagonist is fortunate in one major aspect: she can move on, and

many women do not enjoy that kind of independence.

Through his protagonist, Mahfouz addresses a message to Egyptian women in particular that they do not have to give up on their pursuit of rights which are severely limited by social rules. Being sexually tainted, the protagonist does not have to accept Badawi's proposal. In Egypt, and across the Arab world, social norms require a woman to marry before engaging in sexual behaviour, particularly for a woman and especially for the first time.<sup>20</sup> The prevailing moral standards in the Egyptian culture dictate that a woman should be pure or sexually untainted as she comes into marriage. Yet, as society makes an option for the protagonist that traditionally she should have accepted Badawi's proposal to marry her, she instead chooses to stay unmarried. As it is stated in the text:

The man had blocked her way outside and said, "How can you refuse? Don't you realize the outcome?" And she had relied with an asperity he had not expected, "For me any outcome is preferable to being married to you."<sup>21</sup>

Unlike many other Egyptian women, Mahfouz's protagonist character, the young victimized teacher, is financially independent. It is due to this advantage that she could refuse the marriage offer. This can be seen in the scene where the protagonist's mother lets the protagonist to make her own decision: "I know your attachment to your independence so I leave

the decision to you".<sup>22</sup> She has made her decision for staying unmarried and never has she regretted her firm decision.<sup>23</sup> The decision of staying unmarried and rejecting the role of wifehood and motherhood shows the protagonist's resistance toward social expectation and patriarchal domination.

In this piece of short story, Mahfouz shows the important relationship between woman's financial independence and freedom to determine one's own life. The importance of this particular independence is emphasized by Mahfouz in his article entitled "Woman and Public Office" as follows:

A young, working woman would gain complete independence to determine the course of her life. In this event, she would represent a source of income for the family, instead of being a burden on her father as before. Furthermore, a woman's ideas about marriage would change: marriage would no longer be her sole aim in life. From this it follows that she would refuse to marry just anyone who sought her hand in marriage – as though she were some cheap item to be sold off to the first buyer that comes along – rather, she would now have the option to choose the man she thinks suitable, the one who she deems worthy of her.<sup>24</sup>

Through his works, Mahfouz contributes in focalizing the minority voices, that is, the marginalized women's voice to resist

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<sup>20</sup> Johnson, Doris Osiimwe. *Victimized Against Her Will In Naguib Mahfouz's "The Answer Is No"*. Essay on

English Composition II: An Intro. to Literature.p.1 <https://www.middlesex.mass.edu/wac/downloads/osiimwe.pdf>. 4 November. 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Mahfouz, Naguib. "The Answer Is No." *The Time and the Place and Other Stories*. New York: Anchor, 1992, p.26

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.p.26

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.p.27

<sup>24</sup> Mahfouz, Naguib. *Woman and Public Office in On Literature and Philosophy: The Non-Fiction Writing of Naguib Mahfouz Volume I*. Edited and Translated by Aran Byrne. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 7.

patriarchal domination. Mahfouz, in fact, believed in the fact that "literature ... gives voice to whatever is without a voice" and "gives a name to what as yet has no name."<sup>25</sup> Literature has been an important medium for Mahfouz to speak for the marginalized voice in the society. Voicing the marginalized aspirations is important to invoke the social awareness of the unjust societal structure and initiates social change. Mahfouz's attempt to integrate his vision into his people's social practices making his writings unique not only for Egyptian people, but also for the global readers.<sup>26</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Naguib Mahfouz's keen awareness of social injustice and his realistic account of Egypt's social and political history have earned him international acclaim, as have his more experimental and fantastic works.<sup>27</sup> Even though Mahfouz's experimental short stories provide a less realistic account of Egypt's social condition than his realist novels, the short stories are rich with Mahfouz's keen awareness and sensibility to human's problem in modern life. The richness of Mahfouz's short stories as social critique to Egyptian society and symbolic parables of human life in general is the unique feature of Mahfouz's short stories that has gained Mahfouz international reputation. If Mahfouz had not written his realist novels, he still would be hailed as the master of fiction from Egypt for his magnificent short stories.

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