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Critical study on The Trilogy of Najib Mahfouz

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Abstract

The Trilogy is the most mature work in the realistic vein of Nobel Laureate Najib Mahfouz (1911-2006) published in 1956-1957 in separate volumes taking their titles from street names in Old Cairo as Bain al Qasrain, Qasr al- Shawq and al- Sukkariyya. In this novel the novelist Najib Mahfouz depicts the 20th centuries burning social issues of Egyptian society like - hypocrisy, patriarchy, polygamy, adultery, drunkenness, poverty, disease, sufferings, hunger, tensions and pretensions, caste politics, inter-racial relations, tradition and modernity, and changing values of the modern civilization. Mahfouz's international fame rests mainly on his Cairo Trilogy. This novel is applauded for its realism, and as Edward Said put it for being "a dutiful sociological mirror of modern Egypt." According to Hamdi Sakkut, it can be ranked as the most significant work in the history of the Arabic novel. For this noble work he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988.

The Trilogy is the most mature work of Nobel Laureate Najib Mahfouz (1911-2006) published in 1956-1957. It describes the story of a Cairene Muslim family of the merchant class over three generations during Britain's occupation of Egypt between the two world wars. In fact, this very novel deal with the 20th centuries burning social issues of Egyptians' society like - hypocrisy, patriarchy, polygamy, adultery, drunkenness, poverty, disease, sufferings, hunger, tensions and pretensions, caste politics, inter-racial relations, tradition and modernity, and changing values of the modern civilization. Mahfouz's international fame was spread out because of his *The Trilogy*. This novel is applauded for its realism, and as Edward Said put it for being "a dutiful sociological mirror of modern Egypt." According to Hamdi Sakkut, it can be ranked as the most significant work in the history of the Arabic novel.

The Trilogy is divided into three books – Bain al- Qasrain (Palace walk), Qasr al- Shawq (Palace of Desire), and al- Sukkariyya (Sugar Street) - covers the period from 1917 to 1944. It is a three-part family saga centered around the patriarchal figure of al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad and his family - his wife Amina, his children (three sons - Yasin, Fahmy and Kamal - and two daughters, Khadija and Aisha), and eventually his grandchildren. Each character in the novel is perceived in a variety of roles and sets of relationships. Ahmad Abdul-Jawwad, for example, is presented through his roles of father, husband, friend, playboy, etc. Amina appears as mother, wife, mother-in-law, etc. Kamal plays the roles of youngest child, son to the father, son to the mother, a brother to male siblings, a brother to female siblings, a friend, an enamoured person, a member of a social class, a maternal uncle, a brother-in-law, a thinker and so forth.

The family's patriarch, Al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawwad is respected both by his family - that actually fears him - as well as by his friends. At home, he is very serious and sincere in his prayer who fulfills his religious duties to God like prayer, fasting, or alms giving. However, he frequently visits the shrine of al- Husayn on Friday with his sons believing that visiting the shrine of al-Husayn itself is a blessing and protects him and his family from evil. He also recites the short suras (chapters) of the Holy Quran. These qualities make him faith full Muslim to his friends and at the same time convince his children to think that he is not only gentle and graceful but an upstanding and exemplary man whose moral conduct is impeccable. But the reality is outside of the home he becomes another Ahmad Abd al-Jawwad who cherishes wine, women, and song, seeking sexual pleasure with Jalila and Zubayda, leaders of the folk ensembles. He enjoys his life to the fullest as long as there is life. His conscience is never weighed down by his guilty feelings or anxious scruples rather he congratulates himself for his finesse in managing his two faces. He is the shopkeeper known in Cairo's old neighborhoods for his generosity and honesty who spends most of his days in the shop, returning home only for lunch. Faithful to his routine, he would leave the house again in the afternoon to re-appear only at midnight when he finds Amina waiting for him on top of the stairs, holding a lamp in her hand to light her husband way to his room. Then, Amina would wash his feet in silence, talking only if she is asked to and mainly to share the happenings of the day, choosing the words prudently to avoid enraging her husband. Eventually, she would help him to undress and after folding his cloths on the chair, she would finally retire to her bedroom.

Undoubtedly, duties of Amina make subservient to her husband. She married at the age of 14 and since then she has been serving her husband dutifully. Adored by her children to whom she is a loving and indulgent mother, Amina spends

her days within the four walls of the three-story building, since al-Sayyid Ahmad never allows his wife and daughters to leave the premises. The women of Palace Walk see the world from the openings of the cage of latticework on the balcony, from where they look at the street vendors and admire the tops of the minarets. Occasionally, when Amina is permitted to visit her mother, al-Sayyid Ahmad would escort his wife travelling together in a carriage from where Amina would only catch glimpses of the outside world. The two daughters Khadija and Aisha show very different personalities, but each of them nurture respect and utter obedience to their father and give in to their status, which include no education beyond primary school and fulfillment of women's duties such as devotion to the family and marriage.

Both the husband and the wife remain the main characters throughout *The Trilogy*. It is worth noting that with the passage of time many changes took place in Egypt and it had a profound influence on the family of al- Jawwad. For example when al-Jawwad possessed old age and becomes a weak person then he allow Amina the freedom she never enjoyed before. Now she regularly visits the children and grandchildren who live in Palace of Desire and Sugar Street. She however, frequently used to go the shrine of al- Hussayn praying for her husband's health that she did not get a chance to see. Regarding the patriarch of al- Jawwad, one of the grandchildren namely Ahmad from the Sugar Street complains in this way- "I bet our family's four centuries behind the times." Though the children are disappointed by the father but they decide for themselves. Each one of them has a unique personality and as soon as they grow up the patriarch realizes that he is losing the grip over them and cannot but witness powerlessly to their evolution. Alienated by their choices, al-Sayyid Ahmad fails to understand and fully accept the profound changes that his family, Egypt and Islam are going through.

It is evident from the brief discussion that the children of al- Jawwad

are somehow influenced by the culture and lifestyle they have been brought up in and eventually remain on the threshold of the new era. Kamal, the youngest of al-Sayyid Ahmad's children, in a beautiful passage of the trilogy, says referring to Amina: "Ignorance is your crime, ignorance ... ignorance ... ignorance. My father's the manifestation of ignorant harshness and you of ignorant tenderness. As long as I live, I'll remain the victim of the two opposites." In fact, only al-Sayyid Ahmad's grandchildren will manage to step into the new era and surf the wave of changes to the apex.

Sugar Street marks the climactic end of the trilogy. Readers see through the eyes of the grandchildren who give shape to modern Egypt. Ahmad is a communist

activist, his brother Abd al-Muni'm is a Muslim fundamentalist, and their cousin Ridwan, the only inheritor of the charm and beauty of his father and grandfather, starts a distinguished political career helped by a homosexual affair with a prominent politician.

From the 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 poetic portrayal of hypocrisy and patriarchy is worth noticeable.

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