

# Existential protagonist in Naguib Mahfouz's novel "The Beggar"

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**Abstract**— This study has the main objective that is, examining the concept of Existentialism in Naguib Mahfouz's novel "The Beggar". In it, Omer Al-Hamzawi, the protagonist of this novel, had chosen the death as an escape from the reality. Omer Al-Hamzawi was looking for the meaning of life and existence. This man who wants to evade his truth in search of new value renews the meaning he finds himself living a double he could not get rid of. This face of life did not die, but it is reflected in new images through the characters of the novel and confirms that the truth is ongoing and is pursued to the end. And Omar al-Hamzawi a goal sought to achieve. It is the "searching for the meaning of life." In order to achieve this lofty goal, the researcher has selected the topic that applies the existentialism to elucidate the burdens, hardships and the sense of being betrayed and disappointed with the values of the idealism, such betrayal and disappointment calls upon images and impressions of frustration and despair on the account of the Egyptians. Therefore, instances of the fictional works of Naguib Mahfouz would draw a fine and satisfactory picture of the plight of the modern man in an existential perspective that matches perfectly the theme of the study in content and medium of analysis. An analysis for this novel was conducted by the researcher who also reviewed relevant several books and journals and read the opinions and arguments of the critics in order to reveal how this Arab writer dealt with the death as a tool of escape.

This study aims at examining the plight of the modern man due to multiple reasons like the effects of the two world wars, and being embedded to the colonial powers and the occupations of the small countries. Such big events have left a big stack on the shoulders of the regular citizens of the colonized countries. Particularly those countries with different ethics and moral codes.

**Keyword**— modern man, existential, predicament.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The existentialism is a philosophical stream that transcends the value of man. It emphasizes on man's uniqueness that he is a thinker, freedom, will, choice and does not need to be directed. It is a philosophical movement suggests that man as an individual creates the essence and meaning of his life. The existentialism emerged as a literary and philosophical movement in the 20th century, despite the existence of those who wrote about it in the earlier eras. The existentialism shows that the absence of the direct influence of an external force (God) means that the individual is completely free. Man is the one who chooses and creates his beliefs and individual responsibilities than any other systems. This individual way of expressing existence is the only way to rise above a situation that lacks a convincing meaning (suffering, death, and the annihilation of the individual).

The existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes the importance and value of human existence. It's meaning and cultural movement that spread between the 1930s and 1940s. The concept of existentialism is confused by many of the people in the society and even by some intellectuals because the term is vague. It must be linked to literature because the origin of the term is the French philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre, one of the heroes of existentialism in our time. He was born in 1905 and he taught at the Haver, then at the French Institute in Berlin. Sartre was arrested in 1940 and spent a full year in prison. His philosophy in the writings of Husserl and Heidegger ... was communist at the beginning of his command, then changed it to the existentialism that he claimed, he became at odds with Communism. Therefore, both sides fought each other and attacked him the most, He believes in the future of socialism, because its conditions remain

Existentialism was established in the French resistance during the Nazi occupation in the Second World War, where there was a great deal of death, the individual was living alone and felt absurd, meaning that there was no meaning to life, so that the individual became a state called existential anxiety. A sense of despair had caused this anxiety in the Second World War, it caused the total annihilation that happened as a result of the war, which they call nothingness. There is an intellectual need to appeal to the human being to pay attention to highlighting the value of existence, its importance, its meaning and themes, and an existential view of existence and nothingness.

The understanding meaning of existence begins by entering into the inner existential experience and experiencing the reality rather than the mental. Human existence reveals the basic meanings of existentialism. It is nothingness, annihilation, death, sin, loneliness, despair, absurdity, existential anxiety and then the value of life or existence. and freedoms. Man can solve his problems with his will and freedom. Man is compelled to be free, and the existentialists ask the human being to commit himself in a manner that satisfies them. They emphasize the value of work.

The psychological illness of the existentialists is an emotional attitude towards existence and non-existence. It is not an independent disease, but an existential transformation as well as caring for time, i.e. forgetting the last individual and looking to the future as a solution to his problems.

Some of the Naguib Mahfouz's novel showed the idea of existentialism, Naguib Mahfouz was born in 1911 in Cairo. He lived in the Cairo suburb with his wife and two daughters. He began writing when he was seventeen. He has been influenced by many Western writers, including Flaubert, Balzac, Zola, Camus, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and, above all, Proust. His nearly forty novels and hundreds of short stories range from re-imaginings of ancient myths to subtle commentaries on contemporary Egyptian politics and culture. In 1988, Mr. Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. His most famous novel is the Cairo Trilogy which consist of Palace Walk (1956), Palace of Desire (1957), and Sugar Street (1957). In 1988, he was the first Arab writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. He died in August 2006.

As it always occurs with Mahfouz, he has brilliantly built Omer Al-Hamzawi's feelings and his reasons as a common man. He let himself leave off his everyday and "normal" life, to pursue of something that, at the beginning, not even he himself knows. Boredom

and dissatisfaction are all he got from his surroundings, work and family. The search for "feeling alive" became an interior struggle which ends with the birth of a "beggar". The climax of the story is admirably led by Mahfouz, who, once more, had gifted us with a very human and touching tale. (Robert.28 Aug.2000)

The Beggar, is the novel which set in Cairo in the early 1950s. Naguib Mahfouz portrays the psychological torment of Omar, an ardent revolutionary in his youth who in middle age has been left behind by Nasser's 1952 Revolution. Omar Al-Hamzawi, a former revolutionary and now a member of the bourgeoisie living comfortably in Cairo, sacrifices his job, friends, and family for a series of illicit love affairs in his quest for psychological renewal. His conscience has died. As he struggles for psychological renewal, he gives up his work and his family to a series of love affairs, which simply increase his alienation from himself and from the rest of the world.

## II. OMAR AL-HAMZAWI AS AN EXISTENTIAL PROTAGONIST IN THE NOVEL THE BEGGAR

The lawyer Omar, the protagonist of the novel The Beggar, seems confined in his uneventful life. The doctors are helpless; as he seems in good health, but he is being eaten away by an anxiety and a feeling of futility. As a way of escape, he sets out to experience everything that goes against norms of respectable married life, he in hope of discovering his illness; loses himself in licentiousness and sexual pleasure. However, his nightly adventures disappear in the morning light, he remains absent on the world. He wishes to be in the heart of his lover. He seems to have become a dead man among the living, even when he meets his old friend the militant leftist Osman Khalil as the latter leaves prison, he cannot find himself again. He admires the energy of his friend, whose militant ardor years in prison have done nothing to cool, but Omar El-Hamzawi, is undermined from within, like a body that has neither natural impulses nor desire. A dead beggar among the living, he now calls upon death to give him a taste of living again and the feeling that he belongs to the world. The value of The Beggar does not lie in the dialogue. It contains about the superiority of science over art in the technological age, which is any case a theme was exhausted theme. Instead, it lies in the fact that this novel introduced the Arab reader to the opposition between nihilism, or a life without horizons and the belief that the world and society are open to change. In this novel, the latter belief is no longer tenable, being neither as full nor as positive as reforming discourse would have it be.

Instead, the 1960s citizen has discovered that his insignificance in the face of the nationalist State's repressive machinery. Not even free to be himself, he is forced into evasion, silence and the silencing of his conscience. (Zaidi. M.A.2002)

The Beggar is a thriller-like political novel which attacks the policies and economic measures. This attacks also include the nationalization of private property which takes by the revolutionary government under Nasser in Egypt. Omer Al-Hamzawi, falls into a deep apathy. Nothing interests him anymore, not his family, sex, nor politics. He retires from public life because he imagines that the life is as a lawsuit to win.

In his youth, the lawyer Omer Al-Hamzawi, was a member of a revolutionary group which one member had been captured and put in prison. But, fortunately, he didn't betray the other members. He said the men who tortured me, were the same sons of the people whom I had been fighting for. So, life is only cowardice and stupidity? Everybody believed that Nasser's revolution would erase everything, but all the revolutionaries of all stripes have long memories. The former co-fighters, which brought the monarchy down, split into hostile factions.

In his characteristic ironic style, Naguib Mahfouz paints a paralyzed society. It frustrated by the new regime which lost rapidly its revolutionary momentum and turned into a vulgar settling of scores between the victors. (Luc.R.23 May.2010)

### III. THE EXISTENTIALIST PREDICAMENT IN THE EGYPTIAN SOCIETY

The Beggar presents a general view of the predicaments in Egyptian society. It uses the systematic symbols and metaphoric elements in the novel. Mahfouz shows that the Egyptian identity is on the verge of collapse. To this end, Mahfouz employs the words and tone, the words he uses in the descriptions, dialogues are loaded with disappointment and reveal a mental crisis. All the events and crises society at various levels, are depicted in the novel based on subjective symbolism and social criticism perspectives. The novel vividly depicts the decadence in Egyptian middle class along with the problems of lower class. As a result, "The Beggar" finds its place in the genre of social realism. It provides the understanding of Egyptian values. The enlightened class has lost its goals in Egyptian society, finding itself at the table with the self-serving political leaders. Finally, some ideological elements of the middle class are instilled and highlighted. Naguib Mahfouz was one of the most famous novelists, aware of the huge narrative and epic stock of the Egyptian popular people. Through the characters of the alleys,

alleyways and popular areas, Mahfouz was able to reveal the aesthetics and tragedies of the alleys and his own philosophy and vision of life as a whole.

Mahfouz recreates the reality combined with imagination, symbolism and existentialism. Although a number of his characters bore an indecisive contradiction. These characters are as Ahmed Abdul-Jawad's character in The Trilogy and Omer Al-Hamzawi in The Beggar. These contradictions were a review of realistic human models in their psychological conflicts and existential crises.

The existentialism fixed in Mahfouz's works and can be observed along his literary journey, his works oscillated between realism, symbolism. But purely realism as narrative technique were very influenced by existentialism as philosophical research. Mahfouz highlights the nature of the human soul clearly in his work entirety. Sometimes, it vacillated between existentialism and absurdity. So, Mahfouz is undoubtedly influenced by postmodern philosophy.

The apparent resemblance between the story of "Zabalawi" in "Dunia Allah" and the work Samuel Beckett in his play "Waiting for Godot". Both are focusing on the irrationality and unreasonableness of human existence and its absurdity. Samuel Beckett, the pioneer of the theater of absurdity, shows waiting for someone who never comes. Mahfouz also is close to several other writers. Most notably Albert Camus, the French existentialist philosopher, playwright and novelist who shares Mahfouz's view that the human condition is illogical. Especially, Camus in "The Stranger" and Mahfouz in "The Thief and The Dogs", in which the characters live a state of alienation and unsatisfactory life and logic.

Mahfouz's point of view approaches Camus's existential view that there is no logical reason or clear meaning for the world. Mahfouz focuses explicitly on the major existential problems that have imposed themselves on human existence. These problems arise in the duals of death and life, injustice and justice, misery and happiness, freedom and oppression, and others. However, Mahfouz presented in a purely Egyptian literary effect. The technique of narration has crystallized the Egyptian social transformations and historical fluctuations in an existential manner.

Existentialism focuses on the issues of human existence and the value of the individual. It focuses individual freedom and personal choice. Man is the one who creates his beliefs and his individual way of expressing existence. The existential may be atheist, unifying, moral, immoral, believing freewill. For example, Crickgard, a religious philosopher, was an

existentialist. Also, The Nietzsche work, an anti-Christian, was characterized by an existential. While Sartre, the most famous philosophers of existentialism, was an atheist, Camus was also an atheist. Thus, existentialism as a philosophic direction has a wide range of theological orientations. Mahfouz usually depicts a panoramic image of people who have sought to understand the meaning behind existence. It focuses on the individual's existential dilemma. Existence also concentrates the human suffering to reach the life.

The novel, *Thief and the Dogs*, published in 1960, is the first work of the existentialism archive. It was concerned with the concept of fate, destiny and various philosophical problems of life. After four years, Said Mahran wanted to liquidate his old accounts. It was betraying and denying him the closest relative. Then, he fell into the hands of the security men. His wife, Nabawiyah, broke off her marital relationship during his imprisonment, she married Alish who was the closest friend to Said and his right arm. Said Mehran came out of jail carrying the burden on his chest and create a sense of loss. He has lost four years of age, his wife and daughter are dominated by the idea of avenging his enemies, traitorous dogs.

#### IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper uses the descriptive-analytical method. It investigates the linguistic, ideological and social aspects of *The Beggar*. At the levels of description, interpretation and explanation, Norman Fairclough's critical discourse Analysis, aims of understanding the sociological elements of this novel along with its interpretations. Norman Fairclough was Professor of Language in Social Life at Lancaster University, UK, until he retired in 2004. He appreciated the effect of sociological context on the novel and the processes which allow the emergence of such a novel.

Peyman, Salehi and Parvin Khalili (2015) in their article conclude that Naguib Mahfouz's novel *The Beggar* has offered a socio-political critique of his contemporary era using the stream of consciousness technique. The reason for taking a perspective of Fairclough's critical discourse analysis such is the prominence of this novel and its particular linguistic and social elements produced by Naguib Mahfouz.

Mahfouz was so skillful in showing the themes of alienation and loss of the ordinary men living in big cities. He is "a master at emphasizing the charm of a crowded city such as Cairo while purposely creating a feeling of loss that one often feels in cities." (Salti, 1989, p. 93). "Naguib Mahfouz's novella, *al-Shahhad* (The

*Beggar*) tells a story of the struggle for meaning, and the alienated anti-hero's struggle in 1960s post-revolutionary Cairo, during Gamal Abdel Nasser's rule. Omar El Hamzawi, the protagonist illustrates the existential suffering of man to understand his place in life and understand his consciousness." (Sabri, 2015, p. 26). Mahfouz has the talent to make a combination between seemingly opposite poles; nature and civilization which exist in many of his novels. It can be "a reflection of many Arabic residential quarters that are, unlike Western suburbs, often surrounded and merged with the wilderness, making nature a familiar sight, even to city dwellers." (Salti, 1989, p. 94).

Mahfouz wrote *The Beggar* at a point of his life. In the same time, some were committed to the Revolution and its conditions, while others remained silent. The results of the study, indicate that Mahfouz has created a remarkable harmony between the social concepts and linguistic features of the novel. Hence, Naguib Mahfouz has been able to portray concepts such as ideology, culture, restrictions and influential processes of the Egyptian society in his literary work. Mahfouz in his novel *The Beggar*, illustrates all the events and crises of the Egyptian society. He explicates these crises on different political and social levels from the subjective symbolism and social criticism perspectives. (Hosseini.A&Sattari.E.2018).

#### V. METHODOLOGY

Sartre attempts to say that people as humankind are destined to the trial of shaping themselves. This might be returned to the main principle of Existentialism that is 'existence' precedes essence. Sartre defines that as it follows: "first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards defines himself" (Sartre, 1947. P. 344). The concept of freedom for Sartre sometimes causes a psychological confusion. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre has introduced a theory in which human consciousness is a kind of nothingness, and it is encompassed by the heaviness of being. Due to the state of nothingness, the consciousness is free from determinism, and thus leading to the difficult state of one's being eventually accountable for our own lives. Man has the freedom to live to choose, and everything is up to his choice. Thus, it made a sense to his wise and famous dictum: "Man is condemned to be free" (Sartre, 1947.p.350).

However, without the essence to give directions, consciousness is yet again meaningless. Solomon proposed this reaction to Sartre through his imaginary discourse: "the question of freedom is a question of

subjectivity, a question of how the subject must see his own situation...Whether in fact one can do it is not the question of freedom. It is rather a question of will" (Solomon, 1987, p. 288-289). Choice is related to subjectivity and situation too. The concept of freedom by Solomon encompasses a situation in which the individual is no more restricted by the pressures and forces of a value system. Thus, based on this viewpoint, Guthrie has noted that "one is genuinely free by virtue of acting in accordance with what will be done" (Guthrie, 2011). Eventually, Sartre's well-known saying "Man is a useless passion" collides with one's will (Sproul, 2009).

Soren Kierkegaard introduced a three-category evaluation of human existence that contributes to the virtue of life's meaning. The first category, which is the aesthetic one, is more of a personal one, whose purpose is to gratify the human urge for self-complacency. In the second category, man struggles to identify certain absolute goods in order to discipline himself with. However, the ethical individuals find some problems at this stage, because all the efforts eventually lead to despair. Thus, a drastic belief in the existence of God is necessary. In the third category, Kierkegaard suggests that if one wants to realize the real meaning and value of existence, they must have been assisted by the divine providence.

The existentialism of Kierkegaard has several affirmations. He has attributed the tragedy and purposelessness of life to an abstract reasoning. The inclination to recognize life with its abstraction is the main feature in the dubious predicament of man. Pliny and Jacobson have already highlighted such tendency: "tragedy is at the root of all misplaced desire" (Pliny, 1952, p. 241). The inclination of the individual to confine his feeling in an abstract idea is part of a common and inescapable line that the individual, being a man who carries his culture and more importantly creates his culture, bends to accept things very naturally.

Given that the topic of existentialism constitutes a major theme in this study, one may need to shed light on the traits of Existentialism embedded in the examples in the texts that are selected for the present study. Existentialism is a philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which focuses upon the investigation of the existence and the way in which humans realize themselves in the real world. Mahfouz was able to draw a meaningful picture of Egypt through the details of the Egyptian identity at multiple historical times that depict certain religious theories, legends and modernity. He was also able to portray the typical Egyptian individual as prisoner of the curbed aspirations and hopes of a better life. Therefore, the researcher is here

tempted to refer to some textual analysis of the examples of the existentialist Predicament in Mahfouz's selected works.

## VI CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the concept of the Existentialism in the novel "The Beggar". The researcher also discussed how the protagonist of this novel, Omer Al-Hamzawi, looks for the meaning of his life and existence. He believes that the life is non-meaning. Egypt is the one of the Arab countries that faced the occupation. Naguib Mahfouz represented how Omer Al-Hamzawi want to stand with the revolutionaries. Then, he searched for his lost identity, and the real reason of existence. The researcher depicted the behavior of Omer Al-Hamzawi who found himself alone in a wide world.

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