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Love, Sex and Mysticism in the Search for the Meaning of Life: Naguib Mahfouz's Al-Shaḥḥādh as the Herald of Modernism

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Abstract:

This study offers a close reading of *al-Shaḥḥādh* by the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz. It aims to demonstrate that Mahfouz, in this novel, succeeds in breaking the norms of the classic realistic novel to create a new literary style heralding modernism in the Arabic novel. Behind the façade of a simple story there is a complexity of style and a thematic profundity. Features of modernism are shown in this paper by examining the techniques Mahfouz uses to present the protagonist's existential suffering in his quest to find a solid meaning of life, and portraying his thoughts and feelings in a language that sometimes seems poetic. Reading this novel in its socio-political context reveals the collapse of traditional values, including artistic values, and hints at the "absurdity" of revolution in Egypt and the Arab world.

Key Words: Mahfouz, *The Beggar*, Modernism, Meaning of Life, Love and Sex, Mysticism.

1. Introduction

The brilliance of this novel stems from its incisive portrayal of the hero's consciousness. In *al-Shahhādh* (*The Beggar*), Mahfouz succeeds in breaking the norms of the classic realistic novel to create a new literary style which suits the characterization of an alienated hero in his futile pursuit of a lost jouissance.

'Umar al-Hamzāwī, the protagonist, represents the existential suffering of man in his quest to understand life and to analyze his thoughts and feelings.

People's destiny results from an accommodation between their own personality and a given socio-political system. It is also obvious that we can not understand a literary character without knowing his/her relationship to other characters in the novel. Therefore, it is important to take this relationship into account, in addition to the socio-political context, to understand the hero's crisis. This enables us to explore the different approaches of the characters in this novel while searching for the meaning of life.

This paper aims to show how form and content work together in *al-Shahhādh*. Mahfouz introduces a philosophical issue vividly, by creating a story which

seemed so suitable for films' producers.[1] Moreover, in this novel, Mahfouz experiments with an innovative style, which this paper discusses. *Al-Shahhādh*, it can be claimed, heralds the start of modernism in Arabic literature.[2] Readers can note a complexity of style and a thematic profundity hidden behind the façade of a simple story.[3]

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[1] The first show of the film was on the twentieth of August, 1973, in Miami Cinema. According to Hashim al-Naḥḥās, the film "al-Shahhāt" (الشحّات) did not succeed in presenting the main theme of the novel, which is based upon the analysis of the feelings, thoughts and the inner state of the hero's mind and monologue. This is too difficult to be represented in the cinema's language. In al- Naḥḥās' opinion, the main theme of the novel concerns a disillusioned revolutionist who looks for certainty after his abandonment of the revolution. However, the film represents a revolutionist who became a corrupt and perverted person pursuing women and dancers. Though we see the hero, in the film, suffering sadness and distress, we never understand his spiritual crisis, which appears to be a result of his boredom with his marital life, or as an escape from his feeling of guilt towards a friend who has been jailed for political reasons. Therefore, according to Hashim al- Naḥḥās, the intellectual problem turns out to be a moralistic problem in the film, which emphasizes the sexual scenes.
See Hashim al- Naḥḥās, *Naguib Mahfouz fī al-cinema al-miṣriyya* (Naguib Mahfouz in the Egyptian Cinema) (Cairo: al-majlis al-a'la lel-thaqafa, 1997), p. 29.

[2] Every literary period is modern in its own perspective. Romanticism was once "modern" when it refused the rationality of neo-classicism while insisting upon the individual's experience, contemplating the beauty of nature, and entering the realms of the irrational, the imaginative, and dreams and myths. Realism was also a new, innovative form of writing which rebelled against Romanticism, and remained for years the favored style for most novelists. Modernism is the tradition of the new: "It is experimental, formally complex, elliptical, contains elements of decreation as well as creation, and tends to associate notions of the artist's freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form, with notions of cultural apocalypse and disaster".
Malcolm Bradbury, cited in: Peter Childs, *Modernism* (London & New York: Routledge, 2nd edition 2008), p. 2.

[3] Here I disagree with Hilary Kilpatrick, who considers this novel, in addition to *al-Summan wa'l-Kharif*, 1962 (*The Quail and the Autumn*), to be most artistically unsatisfying. According to Kilpatrick, these two novels suffer from an overly rational and at times unsympathetic presentation of the hero's consciousness and a certain poverty of imagination. See Hilary Kilpatrick, "The Egyptian Novel From *Zaynab* To 1980", *The*

In addition, this paper aims to show why 'Umar al-Hamzāwī is not a Don Juan in his mid-life crisis, although he apparently behaves like a Don Juan in his endless search for new love affairs.

The Arabic novel, as a new genre, is much younger than the European/Western one. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the Arabic novel was highly experimental, imitative, and unsure of itself. In its growth toward modern maturation, it depended on Western examples and on the intermittent efforts of a handful of experimentalists, mainly in Egypt.[4] Arab writers of fiction found their principal sources of inspiration in European models. Figures like Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), Emile Zola (1840-1902) and Henry James (1843-1916), who made the transition from realism to modernism in fiction,[5] were known to some Arab writers. Still, it took more than half a century for the Arabic novel to become a serious genre employed by many writers. The Arabic novel was established by the disciplined dedication of Naguib Mahfouz, who was prepared to sacrifice years of his life and creative energy to prove that it was time for the novel to become a major genre in Arabic literature. The turning point in contemporary Arabic fiction was the publication of his famous *Cairo Trilogy* (in 1956 and 1957). The *Trilogy* changed the whole balance of Arabic literature, making the novel accessible to millions of people and fulfilling a crucial role in changing their aesthetic taste. Mahfouz's reading in Western fiction did not invite a haphazard career in which the influences of certain writers were reflected in his works. On the contrary, his reading filtered through him to carry him over the historical stages of the novel, from romanticism to realism and then to the modern apprehension of experience.[6]

Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic Literature, ed.: M. M. Badawi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 255.

[4] See Salma Khadra Jayyusi, "The Arab Laureate and the Road to Nobel", *Naguib Mahfouz: From Regional Fame to Global Recognition*, eds.: Michael Beard & Adnan Haydar (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), p. 11.

[5] See Childs, *Modernism*, p. 81.

[6] See Jayyusi, "The Arab Laureate and the Road to Nobel", pp. 11-14.

The Beggar is one of several novels (published between 1961 and 1966)[7] that are concerned with essential questions of man's existence. Looking for features of Modernism in *The Beggar* can help better to understand this novel, in which Mahfouz succeeds in trying a new form of writing to represent his hero's way of thinking and feeling. Modernism is associated with attempts to render human subjectivity by exploring the character's consciousness, perception, emotion and relation to society by the use of interior monologue, stream of consciousness, tunneling, symbolism, defamiliarisation, and irresolution.[8] The modernists transformed the popular genre of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into something much more difficult to read. They drew on the techniques of poetry and drama in bringing about this transformation.[9] In analyzing *The Beggar* I shall try to look for these features of modernism.

2. The Mystery of the Title (the Hidden Link between the Title and the Theme)

As a door to a house, the title is to the text. Readers approach the text stimulated by the emotional and cognitive effect of the title. Indeed, it is an important threshold of every new text which reveals itself gradually to the reader. Therefore, it is expected to guide the reader to the content and themes of the text, although it may mislead him by its obscurity. The title may appear, after the act of reading, inappropriate to the development of events in the story, or to the type of the protagonist. Nevertheless, the title captures the reader and affects him positively or negatively.

Leo Hoek has defined the role of the title as a "set of linguistic signs […] that may appear at the head of a text to designate it, to indicate its subject matter as a whole, and to entice the targeted public".[10]

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[7] I refer especially to the following novels: al-Summan wa'l-Kharif (The Quail and the Autumn), al-Tarīq (The Path), al-Liṣ wa'l-Kilab (The Thief and the Dogs), Thartharah fawq al-nīl (Chattering on the Nile).

[8] See Childs, *Modernism*, p. 3.

[9] See Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. 156.

[10] Cited in: Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 76.

From this definition we may conclude that the title has the ability to influence the readers and to direct them towards various possible meanings, thus creating a possible horizon of expectations. It motivates the curious reader to explore the relationship between her/his initial meeting with the literary work (that is, the semiotics of the title and the cover of the book with its accompanying set of blurbs) and her/his later encounter with it, after the act of reading. The content may accord with the title, or it can disappoint the reader's horizon of expectations.[11] Thus, in our first meeting with the title we are at the stage of expectations, assumptions, sensations and guesses, without being able to answer many questions that are triggered by the title. The reason for this lies in the nature of the title, which is full of gaps, because it does not contain the essential, vital and necessary information that can help the readers in their interpretation. This information is postponed till the accomplishment of mutual communication between the reader and the text.[12]

[11] Hans Robert Jauss adapted Gadamer's notion of the "fusion of horizons" and changed it into "horizon of expectations". He did not supply an accurate definition of what he means by this notion. However, it appears to denote a system of references that a hypothetical individual brings to a given text. Therefore, the reader always reads a work within some horizon of expectations. The literary work may accord with her/his expectations or it may disappoint those expectations. If no disappointment of expectations occurs, the "aesthetic distance" between the reader and the literary work is easily bridgeable and the text will be close to culinary art. On the other hand, if the work breaks the horizon of expectations, the "aesthetic distance" is considerable, implying a work of high art that contributes to the establishment of a new horizon of expectations. It is worth noting that Jauss' Reception Theory focused on the interaction between the text and the reading public, rather than on the author or the isolated reader. It is concerned with the collective social effects of a work of art in a certain historical period, given the prevailing moral values and the cultural-sociological circumstances.

For full analysis of Jauss' critical theory, accompanied with a model for application, see Clara Srouji-Shajrawi, *Reception Theory in the Modern Arabic Novel: An Applied Study in Two Trilogies by N. Mahfouz and A. Mosteghanemi* (Baqa Al-Gharbiyya: Al-Qasemi Arabic Language Academy, 2011) (in Arabic).

[12] See Ibrahim Taha, "The Power of the Title: *Why Have You Left the Horse Alone* By Mahmud Darwish", *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3 (2000), pp. 71-72.

Al-Shahhādh shows the first aspect of novelty in its title. The reader gets to the end of this novel without meeting a "beggar", or at least a wealthy man who becomes poor. On the contrary, it is a story about a successful lawyer, married to a woman who was his passionate love twenty years ago and has two lovely daughters. Suddenly, at the age of forty-five, 'Umar al-Hamzāwī is struck by depression and angst. He feels no interest in his wife or in his work. Everything in the universe seems to him boring and meaningless. Even to stay alive is absurd, since the only truth that awaits all beings is death.[13] He consulted a doctor, who was a friend since youth, because he considered his condition as an "illness". The doctor assured him that he is fine physically, but it would be better for him if he had a diet and regular exercise, in addition to a vacation with his family. However, nothing seemed to ease his state of mind, and he could not free himself from his feeling of sickness with life.

He tried to find the joy of life through love. He first met a foreign singer named Margaret, but she left Egypt suddenly. Therefore, he turned to a young dancer named Warda and fell in love with her. He left his pregnant wife Zeinab to live with his new beloved, Warda, who quit her job for his sake. Initially, he seemed to find excitement and pleasure in love, and imagined that his passion for Warda would continue forever. But, once again, he returned to his jail of boredom and emptiness. He left Warda, as he previously had left his family and work, and went, unrestrained and indiscriminately, to catch any occasional woman/prostitute.

Actually, he hoped to experience some kind of mystical ecstasy which would enable him to find the purpose of life and the hidden meaning of the universe. His failure stemmed from his search for the transcendent through enjoying the beauty of bodies. In fact, the resemblance between sexual arousal and mystical ecstasy misled him. Both experiences are intense, but mystical ecstasy leads man to a high spiritual joy, in the moment of revelation, and enables him to perceive the

[13] 'Umar al-Hamzāwī once said to his friend Moustafā that: "death represents the one true hope in human life". Naguib Mahfouz, *The Beggar*, trans. Kristin Walker Henry and Nariman Khales Naili al-Warraki (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1989), p. 32; idem, *Al-Shahhādh* (Cairo, The library of Egypt,1965), p. 39.

unperceivable which transcends "the confines of time and space".[14] This is the ultimate joy which 'Umar al-Hamzāwī sought to experience and not the momentary joy of a sexual union with a desired woman. In another aspect, 'Umar al-Hamzāwī may represent the predicament of man in modern society, which is not

[14] Ibid., p. 114; p. 145.

There is a connection between sexuality and religion, which can be observed in all religions, in different times and ages. In reading the poetry of the Egyptian Sufi Ibn al-Fāreḍ (d. 1235), for instance, one can be astonished by the affinity and resemblance between sensual love for a woman and the spiritual love for God. He speaks about the beauty of the beloved, his longing to see her (God) and his desire to be in an intimate union (*ittihad)* with her.

For a good study of this theme, see Mohammed Moustafa Hilmi, *Ibn al-Fāreḍ w'al-hubb al-'ilāhī* (Ibn al-Fāreḍ and the Devine Love) (Cairo, Dar al-Ma'ārif be-Missr, 1971).

According to Sufism, God has made possible for human beings to gain access to Him not only through knowledge but also through love and beauty. Real and authentic love between man and woman is a form of grace and a gift from Heaven. It causes joy as well as pain, ecstasy as well as longing. Something of the absoluteness of the love for God becomes reflected in such a human love that requires unlimited giving. This kind of love does not diminish if the beloved becomes less beautiful outwardly. Such love is turned to the spirit of the beloved. Even sexual intercourse, when it is combined with love, has a spiritual significance in the Sufi's thought. The male experiences the Infinite and the female the Absolute in this earthly union. Sexual union can lead to the experience of *fanā'* or annihilation, and therefore liberation from the bonds of separative existence. From the Sufi point of view, the urge for sexual union is, in reality, the search of the soul for union with God. Beauty and love go together. To love somebody means to be attracted to his outwardly and inwardly beauty. However, the supreme target of loving the beautiful in this world is to acknowledge the Source of all beauty. This means to approach the Divine Beauty, the Supreme Reality and Truth. This Divine Beauty can be experienced only in a mystical way, which cannot be described in human words, being a truly ineffable reality.

Hence, the beautiful objects/subjects, in this world, are the reflection of the One in the many. When he/she grasps this idea, his/her soul will be opened to the Infinite, and hence be freed from the confines of finite forms.

See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007), pp. 60-75.

so much sexual repression (Freud's assumption) as "loss of soul", a lack of perception of the sacred (Jung's perspective).[15]

How, then, can we understand the relationship between the title of this novel and its content?

This relationship can be grasped only metaphorically. As a "beggar" who asks for alms, thus is man, when he reflects on his existence and searches for the higher Truth, the absolute meaning of life, and the real path towards happiness and joy. He will remain a poor miserable "beggar", because he will never succeed in attaining what he wants. Man, in this world, is similar to a "beggar": he never stops "asking" questions about life, the existence of God, the existence and nature of the soul, the way to happiness, and the right ethics in society, without coming to a final and sufficient answer.

Questions indicate doubt and an urge to find answers. But, the questions cannot always be answered and given a sufficient solution (as the above questions). The question about the sense of life, for example, after a long period of speculation and philosophizing, never reached a clear answer, for it is not the kind of question that we meet in natural science.[16]

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[15] See Anthony Stevens, *Private Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 61.

My interpretation of 'Umar's state does not accord with Miriam Cooke's understanding of him. She sees that many of Mahfouz's male protagonists are torn between attraction to and fear of women. According to her, 'Umar cannot keep away from women, yet he rejects all who need him; the greater the need, the more violent the rejection. She tries to prove her opinion by mentioning 'Umar's abandonment of his pregnant wife, and then his turning from Warda when she begins to love him, so he fears that she will need him. Then, he grows to hate women, and his hatred is exemplified by his relentless chasing after anonymous women. See Miriam Cooke, "Men Constructed in the Mirror of Prostitution", *Naguib Mahfouz: From Regional Fame to Global Recognition*, p. 115.

[16] "'Umar smiled to himself. In a few years you'll be a grandfather, and *life will go on, but where to?* (my italics) […] He remarked, "The ancients used to ask where the sun disappeared to. We no longer question." Zeinab looked at the sun for a moment, then said, "How marvelous to have ended the question!"".

Mahfouz, *The Beggar*, p. 34; *Al-Shahhādh*, pp. 40-41.

The title of this novel points ironically to the misery and absurdity of man's situation in this world. He will never find the way to feel again the lost ecstasy of creation. And, though life is short, he cannot forget that his inevitable fate is death.[17] Hence, the "hero" in this novel carries the traits of a "beggar" when he wishes to understand the secret of being, which cannot be expressed in words because it belongs to the realm of mystery. Man (as an "intellectual beggar") feels inferior, impotent, lost and useless, whenever he dares to tame the mystery of life by using his reason to make it intelligible.

Mahfouz, by choosing this title, interferes, though indirectly and cunningly, in the interpretive work of the reader, who feels himself motivated to solve the riddle, i.e., the relationship between the title and the text.

The process of textual interpretation requires uncovering the dialectic between the literary title and the body of the text. The semiotic approach does not allow consideration of the title as a neutral, objective or independent name. It looks upon the title not as a mere name, but a name for a purpose. This attitude treats the title in terms of hermeneutics, which "aids" in the interpretation of the text.[18]

3. The Role of the Painting and the Variations in the Use of Pronouns

The novel opens with a description of a landscape, so vivid in its beauty as to deceive the reader and make him believe it's a real piece of nature. However, shortly after five lines, the reader comes to know that it is only a painting. Part one begins and ends with this painting, which indicates its importance in this novel, but also marks the labyrinth of Omar's life.[19]

The gaze of the child, mounted on a wooden horse, towards the horizon with a mysterious semi-smile in his eyes, draws the attention of 'Umar, more than other components in the painting. This can be demonstrated by the recurrence and

[17] See *ibid.*, pp. 44-45; 53.

[18] See Ibrahim Taha, "Semiotics of Literary Titling: Three Categories of Reference", *Applied Semiotics/ Sémiotique Appliquée (AS/SA)* 9:22 (2009), p. 59.

[19] It is important to note that part one, in its circularity of form, suits the content - i.e., the state of mind of the central personality. On the other hand, this painting is a motif in this novel, because it is mentioned and remembered in other places throughout the novel, as will be shown later.

insistence upon the child's gaze, in the beginning and ending of part one, but with a difference in its significance between the two cases, "A" and "B":
In case "A" we observe that 'Umar, though he likes the painting, looks neutrally/equally at all its components which are fully described by the narrator:

"سحائب ناصعة البياض تسبح في محيط أزرق، تظلّل خضرة تغطي سطح الأرض في استواء وامتداد، وأبقار ترعى تعكس أعينها طمأنينة راسخة، ولا علامة تدلّ على وطن من الأوطان، وفي أسفل طفل يمتطي جوادًا خشبيّا ويتطلع إلى الأفق عارضًا جانب وجهه الأيسر وفي عينيه شبه بسمة غامضة".[20]

However, in case "B" the narrator omits the description of the landscape and emphasizes the child's gaze, that gained a special meaning after the meeting with the doctor. It is worth noting that the process of narrating, in the third person, is "interrupted" by the questions of 'Umar that reflect his uncertainty and restlessness:

"في حجرة الانتظار رفع عينيه مرّة أخيرة إلى الصورة. لم يزل الطفل ممتطيًا جواده الخشبيّ متطلعًا إلى الأفق. وهذه البسمة الغامضة في عينيه أهي للأفق؟ وما زال الأفق منطبقا على الأرض، فماذا يرى الشعاع الذي يجري ملايين السّنين الضوئيّة؟ وثمة أسئلة بلا جواب فأين طبيبها؟".[21]

The importance of the painting stems from its symbolism. It summarizes the situation of the human being ('Umar as a paradigm) versus other creatures in the world. 'Umar was amazed, even jealous of the tranquility of cows: "why are the

[20] *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 5. In the English translation we read:"White clouds floated in the blue expanse overlooking a vast green land where cows grazed serenely. Nothing indicated the country. In the foreground a child, mounted on a wooden horse, gazed towards the horizon, a mysterious semi-smile in his eyes". *The Beggar*, p. 7.

[21] *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 14. In the English translation we read: "In the waiting room, Omar raised his eyes once again to the picture. The child was still riding his wooden horse, gazing at the horizon. Was it this which prompted his mysterious smile? The horizon still closed in upon the earth. What did the starbeams traveling millions of light years perceive? There are questions which no doctor can answer". *The Beggar*, p. 13.

cows so full of tranquility?".[22] He liked the child riding on his horse and looking at the horizon, as if his look reflects a hope coming from far in the future, and he noticed also the child's smile. The child in the painting may represent the childhood and youth of a middle-aged man, who is nostalgic for a period that reminds him of happy and funny days, allowing satisfaction, harmony and activity. Whereas the cows, that grazed serenely, symbolize the harmony between nature and animals, a state that 'Umar yearns deeply to experience. He cannot be tranquil nor can he hope for a better future. On the contrary, his condition is worsening, while waiting in the hall to see his doctor. He looks again to the painting:

"ها هو الطفل ينظر إلى الأفق ينطبق على الأرض. دائما ينطبق على الأرض من أيّ موقف ترصده، فيا له من سجن لا نهائيّ".[23]

Hence, 'Umar feels that he lives in an infinite prison: trapped with his suffering soul, imprisoned in the routine of work and marriage.

Unlike the realistic novel (as in Mahfouz's trilogy), which proceeds gradually in time and provides full description of the setting and characters, we are introduced to 'Umar's problem without any preparation, simply by intensifying the hero's interest in the painting. Even the personal name of the main character is mentioned only after one and a half pages (though in the English translation it is mentioned in line five) and information about him and his friends is presented to the reader gradually through a dialogue between the protagonist and his doctor, and not by the narrator. Right from the beginning the reader is astonished by the mixing of first- and third-person narration, which is wrapped in a beautiful "poetic" language. This style gives the impression that the narrator, in this novel, is so close to the protagonist as to unite with him: being "I" and "he" (the other) at the same time.[24] Therefore, the narrator, in *al-Shahhādh*, successfully plays two roles. In the

[22] *The Beggar*, p. 7; *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 5.

[23] *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 5.

"There the child looks at the horizon, and how tightly it grips the earth, closes in upon the earth from any angle you observe it. What an infinite prison". *The Beggar*, p. 7.

[24] There are such works of art that the reader cannot entirely free him/herself of the temptation that the narrator mirrors the author's conception of himself and of his world, at least in a specific period of his life. Mahfouz was 54 years old (the inverse of 'Umar al-

first role, he is responsible for the external narration. This means that the narrator gives an account of people, events, place, time, etc., as if he were outside the events and the play of characters. In the second role, the narrator is fully identified with the main character. He makes himself invisible to let the voice of the main character become audible vividly in all his desires, hesitations and sufferings. Hence, 'Umar's soliloquy is used as an internal narration which represents his contemplation and analysis of himself. Both roles, and hence the different pronouns, are mixed thoroughly. In Genette's typology, the extradiegetic narrator (as in *al-Shahhādh)* is always intervened with the autodiegetic narrator ('Umar), who tells the story as an element of his own experience, perceptions and thoughts.[25] Even when the extradiegetic narrator is clearly present in the passage, the reader may feel the effect of the main character's point of view and attitude towards things and persons. For example, when 'Umar saw his sincere, innocent and loving wife waiting for him in the balcony, after the meeting with his doctor, he did not feel any relief. On the contrary, his bitterness and boredom increased, while

Hamzāwī's age of 45 years) when he published *al-Shahhādh*. He wrote it years after the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, probably as an attempt to show the impact of socio-political change, especially upon the intellectuals and those who were enthusiastic for the revolution. Therefore, I think that Mahfouz is present behind his imaginary characters such as Kamāl 'Abd al-Jawād in his trilogy or, partially, behind al-Hamzāwī in *al-Shahhādh*, who may reflect the conflicts that the author suffered from and may reflect his own vision of existence. I agree with Charles Glicksberg's assumption that the writer presents, in his writing, a symbolic version of himself in different disguises, though this version represents a "second self" rather than a strictly autobiographical self.

See Charles I. Glicksberg, *The Self in Modern Literature* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press: 1963), p. xiv.

[25] Gérard Genette argues that every kind of narrator is to some degree intradiegetic, that is, involved in the story. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the distinction between narrative distance and involvement. The opinions, the knowledge and the style of the narrator will always have some effect upon the various elements of the narrative. Hence, it would be difficult to distinguish the stylistic characteristics of the narrator from those of his character.

See Richard Bradford, *Stylistics* (London and New York: Routledge 1997), pp.59-61.

focusing his eyes on her thick neck, fleshy cheeks and fat body, arousing no attraction inside him:

> "الوجوه تتطلع إليك مستفسرة، حتى قبل أن تردّ تحيّتك. حنان رقيق مخلص ولكن ما أفظع الضجر. الحموضة التي تفسد العواطف الباقية. ولاحت من ورائهم الشرفة الكبيرة المطلة على النيل من الدور الرّابع. وتبدى عنق زوجتك من طاقة فستانها الأبيض غليظا متين الأساس. واكتظت وجنتاها بالدهن، وقفت كتمثال ضخم مليء بالثقة والمبادئ، وضاقت عيناها الخضراوان تحت ضغط اللحم المطوق لهما، أمّا ابتسامتها فما زالت تحتفظ ببراءة رائقة ومحبة صافية".[26]

Though the description of the wife is given by an omniscient narrator, the reader feels that he/she is listening to the voice of 'Umar and looking at the wife through 'Umar's eyes. The internal beauty of the wife is obvious, but her body has lost its attractiveness. The negative emotions of bitterness and boredom prevent 'Umar from enjoying the sincere love of those who greet him.

The play with pronouns extends also to the use of the second-person,[27] which demonstrates the thesis about the identification between the narrator and the main

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[26] *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 14.

"The faces peered at him expectantly even before they'd exchanged greetings. Their concern was sincere, and he was troubled by his dissatisfaction, the bitterness which spoiled the remaining affection. Behind them the balcony overlooked the Nile. He focused on his wife's thick neck above her white collar, and on her fleshy cheeks. She stood as the pillar of faith and virtue. Her green eyes were pouched in fat, but her smile was innocent affectionate". *The Beggar*, p. 14.

[27] Second-person narration is less common in stories and novels. It is often used in poetry and song lyrics. See Ann Charters, *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 8th edition, 2011), p. 1734.

The following example, of the use of second-person narration in this novel, gives the reader the sensation of a dramatic intimacy with the character through the medium of poetic language: "When the night is spent and the relentless dawn overtakes us, you'll return inevitably to the dreary room where there is no music, no ecstasy, where sad eyes and a wall of stone close upon you. Then the chords of somber wisdom will ring out with

character. This is done without any previous arrangement or preparation. The beauty of Mahfouz's style appears in his changing and mixing the pronouns in the same passage. For example, he lets the main character remember extracts from his dialogue with his friends, twenty-five years ago, and then, without any preparation, this character speaks about himself and his two friends as a group. This can be exemplified in the first passage of part three, which seems to begin with 'Umar's speaking to himself and making comments. Shortly after several lines, however, the external narrator's voice enters to continue the description and narration, followed by 'Umar's remembrance of the past and use of first-person, till the return, once again, of the external narrator. The following passage shows also the change of time: from present to the past and returning, again, to the present in a circular mode.

"من الآن فصاعدا أنتَ الطبيب. فأنت حرّ. والفعل الصادر عن الحريّة نوع من الخلق [...] وأجهدكَ المشي وناءت به قدماك كأنّما تتعلمه لأوّل مرّة. والأعين ترمق العملاق وهو يوسع الخطى حتى ينال منه التعب فيجلس على أوّل أريكة تصادفه في طريق الكورنيش. وعيناك ترمقان الناس بعد ربع قرن [...] وقريبا سيخرج الماضي من السجن فيتضاعف عذاب الوجود.

- عثمان، لماذا تنظر إليّ هكذا؟
- ألا تريد أن تلعب الكرة؟
- أنا لا أحبّ الرّياضة.
- لا شيء غير الشعر؟!

وأين المهرب من نظرتك الثاقبة؟ وما الجدوى من مجادلتك؟ وأنت تعلم أنّ الشعر هو حياتي وأنّ تزاوج شطرين ينجب نغمة ترقص لها أجنحة السماوات.

- أليس كذلك يا مصطفى؟

وهتف المراهق الأصلع:

- هذا الوجود من حولنا ليس إلا تكوينا فنيّا..

reproaches as harsh as the dust of a sandstorm. Make your reply as resolute and final as your aversion". *The Beggar*, p. 62. *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 77.

ويوما هتف عثمان في حال من التجلي:

- عثرت على الحلّ السحريّ لجميع المشاكل..

واندفعنا برعشة حماسيّة إلى أعماق المدينة الفاضلة. واختلت أوزان الشعر بتفجرات مزلزلة. واتفقنا على ألا قيمة البتة لأرواحنا [...] وعندما اعترضتنا دورة فلكيّة معاكسة انتقلنا من خلال الحزن والفشل إلى المقاعد الوثيرة، وارتقى العملاق بسرعة فائقة من الفورد إلى الباكار حتى استقرّ أخيرًا في الكاديلاك، ثمّ أوشك أن يغرق في مستنقع من المواد الدهنيّة".[28]

The reader clearly is amazed by the density of the information in the above extract, which distinguishes this novel from the classic realistic novel. Instead of supplying full and sufficient description of the characters, the author, without any previous

[28] *Al-Shahhādh,* pp. 21-22.

"From now on you're the doctor and you're free. Freedom of action is a type of creativity, […] The exercise exhausted you and your feet ached as though you were learning how to walk for the first time. Eyes stared as the great giant slowed his steps and, overcome by fatigue, sat down on the nearest bench on the Corniche. After a quarter of a century's blindness, you looked at people again. […] Soon the past will emerge from prison, and existence will become more of a torment.

"Othman, why are you looking at me like that?"

"Don't you want to play ball?"

"I don't like sports."

"Nothing except poetry?"

Where can one escape your piercing glance? What's the use of arguing with you? You know that poetry is my life. And that the coupling of two lines begets a melody which makes the wings of heaven dance.

"Isn't that so, Mustapha?"

The balding adolescent stated, "Existence itself is nothing but a composition of art."

One day Othman in a state of revelation proclaimed, "I found the magic solution to all our problems." Trembling with fervor, we raced up the heights of Utopia. The poetry meters were disrupted by convulsive explosions. We agreed that our souls were worthless. […] But when other forces opposed us, we preferred comfort to failure and thus the giant climbed with extraordinary speed from a Ford to a Packard until he settled in the end in a Cadillac and was on the verge of drowning in a quagmire of fat." *The Beggar*, pp. 20-21.

speech, introduces to the reader the different "players" in his work. This motivates the attentive and active reader to build up, in his/her imagination, the picture of the character from the statements distributed throughout the whole work. This style contributes to its being a "writable text" (borrowing the concept from Barthes)[29] and supports my claim that this novel, from the sixties, is Mahfouz's attempt to experiment with new stylistic ways of writing the Arabic novel. The characterizations of the different "players" in this novel and their mutual and "shared" game will be discussed later on.

4. The Letter as a Literary Device

The beauty of the novel is its capability to assimilate other genres without affectation. For example, it can include poetry by writing passages in a poetic language (as does the Algerian writer Ahlam Mosteghanemi in her trilogy).

[29] In his famous book, *S/Z,* Roland Barthes differentiates between a readable (texte lisible) text and a writable (texte scriptible) text, between classic writing that complies with our expectations and avant-garde writing that we do not know how to read. The latter kind is the one that Barthes considers high art because it urges the reader to be an active producer, and not just a consumer, taking part in creating the work of art anew. The paradox is that Barthes has chosen a classic work in order to apply his distinction between the two kinds of texts. The reader of *S/Z* will be surprised by Barthes' deep analysis of *Sarrasine* (by Balzac) because he succeeds in turning this classic work into a writable text. Hence, *S/Z* helps to rescue Balzac's novels from an appreciative classical reading and treat his works as writing that explores its own signifying producers. It is worth noting that the readable text, Barthes affirms, is the text of pleasure (plaisir) because the reader knows how to read it. Yet, the writable text is the text of ecstasy (jouissance), because it imposes a state of loss and discomfort on the reader. It unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories and brings to a crisis his relation with language.

See Roland Barthes, *S/Z,* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 221-254.

Idem, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 14.

Jonathan Culler, *Barthes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.73-84.

Mahfouz chooses the art of writing a letter in order to delve freely into the hero's consciousness, and to make him express his thoughts and feelings in the first-person, without the help of an external narrator as a mediator.

The first sentence of part three embarrasses the reader and may make him incapable to decisively identify the voice of the narrator (who speaks?). This embarrassment and instability become stronger when (without any previous preparation and after a passage written in the third-person) we read a sentence such as the following (without quotation marks in the Arabic origin):

"عزيزي مصطفى. قرأت تعليقاتك الفنيّة الأسبوعيّة. بديعة ولاذعة وموحية. تقول إنك بائع لبّ وفشار؟. مهلا، لكنك من أصل كريم، وصاحب قلم تمرّس طويلا بالنقد الجدي والمسرحي".[30]

Initially, the reader may think that the above sentence is the beginning of a dialogue between the two friends. Only in the fifth line does the reader begin to understand that he is encountering a letter written by Omar during his vacation. By this device we get the following information through the perspective and voice of the hero:

a) Mustaphā is a journalist who writes articles to please the wide public. The theme about the meaning and role of art in society is discussed a number of times throughout the novel, often between the two friends ('Umar and

[30] *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 24.

The two translators of *al-Shahhādh* played well the role of an attentive reader and have chosen to clarify for the English reader that here she/he is introduced to another genre, or simply another voice, by writing the whole letter in a different font and in the regular form of a letter. By this they deprived the reader of the joy of exploration.

The above quoted sentence reads as follows in English:

"Dear Mustapha,

I read your weekly review of the arts. It was superb—both witty and provocative. You say you're a mere vendor of melon seeds and popcorn, but your inherent discernment and your long experience as a serious critic is evident." *The Beggar*, p. 21.

Mustaphā). Therefore, Mustaphā's sarcastic description of his own articles serves as a reminder of the dialogues between them.[31]

b) The letter shows that 'Umar usually enjoys talking to his friend, but in his absence 'Umar talks to himself. This exposes the urgent need which has motivated 'Umar to write the letter, but it also indicates that he does not find in his wife a suitable person to talk to and share his thoughts and feelings with. "Zeinab's speech is too sober, though why sober speech should annoy me these days I don't know".[32]

c) 'Umar is fond of his pretty teenage daughter Buthayna, but he wishes to understand her better, even to read her mind. Jamila, his little daughter, is considered by him as the happiest one in the family because she understands nothing yet.

d) What really amazed 'Umar during his stay in Alexandria was his meeting with a madman on the road, who assailed those who pass by raising his hand in the manner of "leaders" and delivering obscure speeches, which 'Umar considered not less strange than mathematical equations. 'Umar's announcement that, as a rational man, he will never know the pleasure of madness, may foreshadow his futuristic state of mind (in a retrospective reading).

e) Zeinab is anxious about nationalizing the apartment buildings, while 'Umar seems not to care because they have a lot of money. However, his carelessness must be understood as a symptom of his feeling the emptiness and nonsense of self and being. He writes in the letter: "I don't care about anything. Nothing concerns me, honestly".[33] What really concerns him is to participate with Mustaphā in their grand meaningless chats!

f) By chance, 'Umar writes, he heard a conversation between two lovers in the dark, which he includes in his letter. The conversation shows that the woman is unfaithful to her husband and the man to his wife, but the latter is afraid to destroy their homes. He speaks of responsibilities, while the woman refuses his

[31] See, for example, *Al-Shahhādh*, pp. 19-20, 37-39. *The Beggar*, p. 18, pp. 31-33

[32] *The Beggar*, p. 22. *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 24.

[33] *The Beggar*, p. 23. *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 26.

rationalistic way of speaking and considers it as no longer loving her. 'Umar's concern at hearing this conversation predicts his infidelity to his wife in the future, and reflects his deep desire to be in a love relationship outside marriage. Without any hesitation, he tells Mustaphā that his love for Zeinab is only a remembrance, but what he remembers are "events and situations rather than the feelings and agitations".[34] His suffering in loving Zeinab, twenty years earlier, lifted his soul to poetic ecstasies, and was the source of inspiration and creativity in poetry, which he no longer succeeds to write in the present.

As we have seen, Mahfouz uses the letter as a medium to present the protagonist's feelings and thoughts with great intensity and condensation. The letter serves to link the past, present and the predictable future.

Following the letter, there is a paragraph of first-person narrative, which ends in a statement with the third-person narrative that prepares for a dialogue between 'Umar and his daughter. This swinging between first-person and third-person pronouns is done in a coherent and consistent way. The first-person narrator ('Umar) is responsible for "showing" his feelings and thoughts directly, while the third-person narrator is concerned with "telling" about the external movements of the characters and events. Therefore, we may notice the difference between two kinds of writing (language): one that is more figurative and poetic, and a second, which is more definite and affirmative. The paragraph which follows the letter is an explicit example. The following is an extract from it:

"ما ألطفك يا بثينة. براعم صدرك تشهد للدنيا بحسن الذوق [...] وهذه النظرة الحالمة ماذا وراءها؟ ألم تضني عليّ بحلم رغم الصّراحة التي تبارك أحاديثنا؟".[35]

The above quotation is a monologue by 'Umar while he was looking at his teenage daughter in her swim suit. The exclamation and interrogative sentences are short, but "show" Omar's thoughts. He feels delight and even bodily pleasure looking at his daughter, yet he feels that she hides and veils her dreamy thoughts and

[34] *The Beggar*, p. 23. *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 27.

[35] *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 27. "How sweet you are, Buthayna. Your budding breasts are proof of the world's good taste […] What lies behind your dreamy look? Despite the frankness of our talks, haven't you withheld certain secrets from me?" *The Beggar*, p. 24.

imaginative intentions from him. Hence, these sentences, which try to "picture" the state of mind of the character, bear more meaning than the mere apparent words. We cannot "speak" about a hidden state of mind in the same way as we do about objects in the external world, but we can "show" and "describe" it in a metaphorical way, which necessitates another approach to language. Obviously, the above quotation differs in its use of language from the following sentence by the "external narrator," which "tells" something that occurs in "reality":

"وقال لها وهي تمدّ ساقيها العاريتين تحت مقعده المغروس في الرّمل:

- لم نهنأ ببعضنا هكذا من قبل!".[36]

5. Why Talk About Art?

The discourse about art recurs several times in *al-Shahhādh,* which points to its importance.

For example, in the dialogue between 'Umar and his friend Mustaphā, we learn that 'Umar, at one time, opposed Mustaphā and could not stand him because of his great commitment to art. Mustaphā explains 'Umar's attitude towards him, in the past, as battling his inner love for art. 'Umar suppressed cruelly this inner tendency or secret urge, to concentrate his efforts on law, and thus became a successful lawyer. Therefore, Mustapha appeared to him, at that time, as a "tortured conscience",[37] for he reminds him of his own neglect of all the wonderful ideals, a point that symbolizes his retreat from being a social revolutionary. Thus, 'Umar's withdrawal from art (he used to write poems in his youth) may be interpreted as a symbol of the intellectual's despair at the outcome of the Revolution of July 1952. This idea becomes powerful and intense when Mustaphā tries to comfort 'Umar, but in a tone of voice which seems ironical and even painful, describing his work with art as "selling watermelon seeds and popcorn via the mass media".[38] This sentence is of great importance. It reflects the collapse of social values and the dazzling of the people by culinary art. Mustaphā's decision to forsake good art in

[36] *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 27. "He said to her as she was sitting with her bare legs stretched under his beach chair, "We haven't had such a good time together before."" *The Beggar*, p. 24.

[37] *The Beggar*, p. 17.

[38] Ibid.

favor of art that amuses the wide public shows the despair of an old revolutionary who failed to accomplish the utopian communist society. Art had meaning in the past but became only a tool of amusement in these days. Thus Mustaphā, and those who behave like him, help, indirectly, the government in suppressing the public and in distracting it from real rebellion.

Mustaphā seems to point to another factor which may explain his withdrawal from sublime art - the influence of science upon society:

> "Art had meaning in the past, but science intruded and destroyed its significance".[39]

In a materialistic society, especially after the end of World War Two (which affected the entire Middle East and not only Egypt), the emphasis is on science, which brings prosperity, advantage, material wealth and affluence to the society. This may also explain youths' preference, in our days, to study science, while they turn away from studying art in its different forms. It shows their desire to seek a job that brings wealth and status. Those who still work with art, like Mustaphā, discover that manufacturing art that amuses the public is a wise step, because it will bring them money and fame. However, the question that should be asked is: are they content with this fame or do they feel shame, though not showing their feelings in public? In the battle between art and science, the latter succeeds and the former shrinks in shame. Mustaphā says to 'Umar:

> "Read the astronomy, physics or other science texts, recall whatever plays and collections of poetry you wish and note the sense of shame which overwhelms you".[40]

It seems from the above quotation that those who work with art suffer, first of all, from their own view of themselves. Secondly, they suffer from society's view because it appreciates scientists, as those who really bring power and progress, and looks at science, rather than fine art, as the right path towards advancing the nation. The artist, nowadays, disdains himself (not publicly, certainly) and feels impotent because he/she is unable to participate in a scientific field. For Mustaphā, science

[39] Ibid, p. 18.

[40] Ibid.

can give man what he desires and wishes, even aesthetic pleasure and ecstasy. Science gives meaning to life and vitality to the soul. Therefore, he says to ‘Umar:

> “Believe me science has robbed art of everything. In science you find the rapture of poetry, the ecstasy of religion, and the aspiration of philosophy. All that is left to art is amusement.”[41]

The motif of the tension between art and science is prominent in Mahfouz’s literary oeuvre. In this novel it recurs powerfully in the dialogue between ‘Umar and his daughter, Buthayna, after his discovery that she writes poetry. He, as a father, is anxious, though he is proud of his daughter’s talent, that poetry will distract her from science, especially when she does so well in science. He prefers that she would study engineering, though he recognizes her passion for poetry.

As in real life so in a novel, when we talk to others we do not stop thinking alone, especially when the conversation triggers our thinking and activates it to make associations, even without conscious choice. The person that we are dialoguing with can stimulate various memories and feelings in us, but we remain silent and do not reveal it to the other. However, in the novel, these memories and feelings can be shown to the reader, who will perceive more than the other character in the dialogue. Mahfouz is aware of such a state and uses it brilliantly and technically in Chapter Four (for example). He intertwines the dialogue between ‘Umar and his daughter with ‘Umar’s monologue, and he also intermixes two dialogues: an actual one occurring in the present, with reminiscences by ‘Umar of a dialogue between him and Mustaphā sometime in the past. Mahfouz creates this mixture and makes it look natural. Both dialogues deal with the issue of art thus indicating its importance. The narrator’s role in this chapter is very minor. It is limited to defining the place of the event (the balcony overlooking the sea) and its time (the sunset), as well as providing a brief description of the characters’ behaviors. However, his description of nature, in the penultimate paragraph of this chapter, is beautiful and impressive, in Arabic, but looses its poetical and

[41] Ibid. This idea appears again in Chapter Four when ‘Umar remembers his conversation with Mustaphā. See Ibid., p. 31, 32.

suggestive side in the English translation. Obviously, the two narrators (in the third- and first-person) are mixed together skillfully.

'Umar expressed his sincere enthusiasm for the poetry that Buthayna wrote, but as a typical father of a teenage girl, he asked her about the identity of the male that she has addressed in her lyrics. He was sure that she was in love, and reminded her that there are no secrets between them. She was disappointed by her father's question, and sharply denied loving a particular person. But she agreed with her father that she may be "enamoured of the secret of existence".[42] This sentence, which appears so naturally during their talk, is very significant. It points directly and clearly to 'Umar's search for a true and valid meaning of life. But it also paves the way towards some type of mystical experience in the last two parts of *al-Shahhādh* (which will be discussed later).

Buthayna confessed that her mother allowed her to read the poems that her father had written, and that she really admired her father and his poems. Yet she could not understand his quitting the writing of poetry. Though 'Umar considered his poetry to be just a "feverish delusion"[43] that he fortunately got over in time, it symbolized a period when he felt love and enthusiasm. In that period, life had a solid meaning, which it later lost. He confessed to his daughter that once he thought to resume writing, because it made him happy and content, but no one listened to his songs.[44] Every one who deals with art can understand well this desire to have an audience that is aroused after listening to them or seeing their performance or after reading their books. Always the artists/writers have an addressee in mind when they write or paint or compose. Therefore, they will feel hurt, frustrated and disappointed when no one pays attention to their creativity:

> "The silence hurt you, but Mustaphā urged, "Perseverance and patience," and 'Uthmān said, "Write for the Revolution and you'll have thousands of listeners".[45]

[42] Ibid, p. 29.

[43] Ibid, p.30.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

Mustaphā's perseverance and patience succeeded when the Tali'a (الطّليعة) troupe had accepted his play. But 'Uthmān's demand may remind the reader of the communist role for literature, i.e., the commitment of literature to the nation's issues. 'Umar's inclination, it seems, is different. He prefers to be an individualist in his writing, both in form and content, because only then can poetry be true, mirroring the human being in his/her crisis. 'Umar (as a poet) could not agree with 'Uthmān's quest - i.e., he refused to listen to the public. He could not write what the public expected from a poet/writer in the period before the Revolution. Therefore, he failed, and the silence, from the side of the public, became more oppressive.

As a consequence of his failure to be a poet, at a time when science has destroyed law, philosophy and art, 'Umar asked his daughter, once again, not to give up her scientific studies. We understand that poetry (and thus all kinds of art) must remain a hobby and not a job. He says to his daughter:

> "I don't want you to wake up one day to find yourself in the stone age while everyone around you is in the age of science".[46]

Yet why did Mahfouz put this emphasis on the issue of art? Did he wish to express his own attitude about art in general, in the communist country of Jamal 'Abd al-Nasser? Could it be a call to integrate art with science and the "revolution" in order to create a new free country that is based on freedom and reason? Why did he reiterate, in the voice of 'Umar, that what he wrote was not poetry, although it really stemmed from his soul? Did he wish to say that true poetry (and thus true art) could not stick to firmly-based and accepted norms, but, on the contrary, it must break down the classic norms and build new forms continuously? Or could it be Mahfouz's reaction to the new poetry that emerged in his time, although not all readers accepted or could understand its novelty and its right to break the norms?

In a meeting between the three friends, after the liberation of 'Uthmān Khalīl from prison, Mustaphā announced that he has a "Qassida" that 'Umar wrote just before renouncing poetry. In it, explains Mustaphā, 'Umar declares his revolt against reason:

[46] Ibid., pp. 32-33.

"Because I neither played in the wind
Nor lived on the equator
Nothing charmed me but sleeplessness
And a tree which doesn't bend to the storm
And a building which doesn't shake".[47]

'Uthmān's first reaction was that he did not understand a thing. 'Umar (the poet!), in response, said that he did not consider it poetry, just hallucinations while he was in a morbid frame of mind. Mustaphā, on the other hand, observed that "modern art in general breathes this spirit of rebellion".[48] The continuity of their dialogue is important to understand the phenomenon of different reactions to a new piece of art. In addition, we can observe that the reader's personality and his/her frame of mind may play a crucial role in establishing a certain reception. Every one of the three friends represents a group of readers: 'Uthmān as a pragmatic socialist who wants literature to have its role in changing the society for the benefit of millions of people, Mustaphā as an old artist and a new critic, while 'Umar, as both a writer (who has an amount of authority) and a critic of his own writing, is really concerned with art as a representation of the human soul. However, he keeps silent as if the entire discussion is of no concern to him.

The dialogue between 'Uthmān and Mustaphā represents the crisis of the writer in the modern era, in addition to the different attitudes towards "new poetry". 'Uthman saw the above "Qassida" as "the whimper of a dying order".[49] We may understand his statement as an announcement of the rise of a new political regime. Yet we may understand it as breaking the norms of the old "Qassida", for it no longer suits modern times. Mustaphā accepts 'Uthmān's interpretation as a possibility. However, he sees in this poem a crisis of an artist that is fed up with his subject matter, because whenever he tries to deal with a subject, he finds it hackneyed. Therefore, he searches for a new form. 'Uthmān does not completely agree with him, for whatever subject the artist hits upon can turn to be new when

[47] Ibid., p. 106; *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 136. (To tell the truth: I liked the poem much more in the English translation!).

[48] *The Beggar*, p. 106.

[49] Ibid.

he confers his own spirit on it. This idea may please the artist, but it sounds insufficient to Mustaphā, in an era when science has ascended the throne, keeping the artist among the banished entourage. The artists' wish to impress the public and attract its attention pushed them towards producing anti-novels, absurd theatre, and obscure, strange and abnormal poetry. All their efforts failed, while the scientists achieved admiration and respect. Therefore, Mustaphā abandoned profound art and chose to be a "clown". By this honest and perceptive but despairing approach to the new situation in the Arab world, Mustaphā captured the attention of the public.

6. The Road to Ecstasy

Reading this novel, one can feel perplexed by the secret behind 'Umar's search for pleasure and ecstasy. He always goes to the desert by the pyramids, watches the moon with his beloved woman, whom he had caught in a bar, and they wait together for the coming of dawn. One night, he gazed at the moon with Warda, following its languid beams on the sand:

> "No power on earth can preserve this godly moment, a moment which has conferred a secret meaning to the universe. You stand on its threshold, with your hand stretched out imploringly towards the darkness, the horizon and the depths where the moon has fallen. A firebrand seems to burn in your chest as the dawn breaks forth and fears of bankruptcy and want recede".[50]

The splendid beauty of nature, the grandeur and harmony of all parts in the universe, the bewitching stars and moon in the heaven, the rejuvenation of life and emotions by every sunrise in the desert - all fill man with unexplained ecstasy. The desert, as a wide open place which seems without an end, touches the soul of man as if to remind him of the secret of existence, which presents itself to man outside the boundaries of reason, but gives assurance without proof. Many philosophers have reached God, who for them gives meaning to life; they move from the existence of the world to the existence of God as the first cause or necessary being

[50] Ibid., p. 56.

"لا من قوّة تستطيع أن تستديم اللحظة الإلهيّة. اللحظة التي وهبَت الكونَ يومًا سرًّا جديدا. وها أنتَ تقف على أعتابها مستجديا. وتبسط يدك في ضراعة للظلمة والأفق. والغيابات التي يهبط إليها القمر. لعلّ قبسًا يشتعل في صدرك كما ينبثق الفجر. وتتوارى مخاوف الإفلاس والعدم". **الشحّاذ**، ص. 68-69.

- the cosmological argument (in its several forms). Another approach to the existence of God is known as the design argument. When we are bewildered with the designed universe, we then infer it was designed surely by an intelligent agent.[51] However, it seems that Mahfouz implies that any proof of the existence of God, by the use of logic and reason, is not sufficient and cannot help turning an atheist into a believer in God. The path to belief is only by individual experience, which leads to a spiritual exaltation not dissimilar to that of the Sufis. Hence, 'Umar's return to the desert signifies his will to experience, once again, this high mystic ecstasy. Far away from the closed artificial places made by man, that are not always the source of joy and solace, but rather a prison of hard work and torture, 'Umar searches for the undefined and endless in the desert.

This Egyptian desert is unique with its Pyramids, which symbolize the Egyptian's heritage. They epitomize ancient Egyptian civilization. With their external shape (step-pyramids being reminiscent of ladders or stairways), they are symbols of ascension. The shape also represents the rays of the sun. However, the inverted pyramid is the image of spiritual development. The more spiritual the individual becomes and the higher he or she rises, the wider and broader grows his or her life.[52] We cannot resist feeling mystery and awe when we stand gazing in wonder at the pyramids, as if they designate the divine elucidation of geometry and magical power. Hence, this may explain 'Umar's several returns to the desert by the pyramids. He is looking for his roots in the history of his country, and searching for the imprints of life in the dead stones. The pyramids are the convergence of death and life. Besides their obvious symbolization of the greatness of the Pharaoh's period in ancient Egypt, they reflect the suffering of the millions of people for the sake of "giving" immortality to those in power. In spite of (or

[51] See for example, William L. Rowe, "Cosmological Arguments", *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion*, ed.: William E. Mann (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing: 2005), 103-116; Alexander R. Pruss and Richard M. Gale, "Cosmological And Design Arguments", *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed.: William J. Wainwright (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 116-137.

[52] See Jean Chevalier & Alain Gheerbrant, "Pyramid", *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. John Buchanan-Brown (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), pp.776-778.

because of) all these contradictory implications of the pyramids, they still, in the twenty first century, stimulate our admiration.

6.1 From Open Space to "Semi-cave"

'Umar's psychological/spiritual situation has worsened and everything in his life seemed absurd and without purpose. For him, there is no point in continuing to look upward as if waiting for salvation coming from heaven. His actual behavior mirrored his miserable soul. He sought relief by speeding like a madman to the outside of Cairo. Sometimes, he would join a funeral procession, honoring some unknown deceased. Many times he slept in his car or on the banks of the Nile.[53] Life and death had equal signification for him, for nothing concerned him in this world. He therefore decided to leave everything: his work, family and friends.

His soul longed for the moment of complete liberation. He lived in a small isolated house surrounded by a garden, waiting for the moment when everything around him would fall silent. He looked for that day when memory would lose its tyranny so he would merge into nothingness.

He entered into a new phase that left him incapable of differentiating sharply between the realm of reality and the realm of imagination/illusion or dream. While he wanted to escape the call of life, he found himself unable to forget those he loves and appreciates. They (Buthayna, Mustaphā and 'Uthmān) appeared to him and talked to him every time he fell asleep. During his waking hours, he thought of "him" (as readers we may assume that it is God or any supreme power that he once considered as the secret of life). However, fantasies from real life always mocked his sleep.

By using the dream technique of irrationality, condensation, symbolism and pictorial narrative, the writer tries to show 'Umar's state of mind. Yet, at the same time, he opens the gate of confusion, uncertainty, unfamiliarity, mystery and the bizarre for the reader of Chapter 18, who may feel him/herself joining 'Umar's extraordinary experience. In fact, Chapter 18 is an incessant stream of strange and obscure dreams. The obscurity of the dreams comes from the fact that the writer is trying to translate the emotions into images. In every new dream, the degree of

[53] See *The Beggar*, p. 109.

strangeness, frightfulness and horror increases, letting 'Umar feel that he is losing himself/mind without any benefit, without arriving to the goal, which eludes him despite his recurrent yearning "to see". Even the writer's shift from describing 'Umar's state from the third-person point of view (in the first two pages of Chapter 18) to the first-person (up to the last few lines prior to the end of the novel) seems to be meaningful. This may point to 'Umar's developing process of detachment from reality and movement to hallucination, from being seen and understood by others to being concentrated on his self in its complete solitude. He stayed in this isolated situation, hallucinating and dreaming, a year and a half, though the reader does not feel this long time, but rather imagines it to be only of a few days' duration. From the conversation between 'Uthmān and Omar, in the last chapter, we are told that his family knew where he lived but did not disturb him all this long period.[54] However, they asked the peasants to bring him food and take care of him. Obviously, this shows the ethics and loyalty of the Arab family, in general, and the wife in particular.

As an example of narrating 'Umar's dreams, we may mention his "dream" of 'Uthmān (which is written in the first person): 'Umar was roaming around the garden, reciting the poetry of Majnūn, when suddenly he heard a voice coming from behind the northern wall where the canal runs. The voice asked about the front door. It was 'Uthmān on a motorcycle that was decorated with little flags like those used by villagers on feast days. 'Umar refused to let him enter. So 'Uthmān spoke about miracles and succeeded to cross the surface of the canal. He said that he came to him as the family delegate, but 'Umar insisted on not having a family. 'Umar tried to convince 'Uthmān that the real family is nothingness. However, 'Uthmān continued speaking about miracles, and told 'Umar that he has new branches of his family that have appeared in all five continents. Then he asked him whether he would like to return to that remarkable mixture of platinum and coal. When 'Umar refused, 'Uthmān threatened him that he would chase him with a pack of trained dogs. Then, the motorcycle roared and the dogs yelped. 'Umar sighed wearily and opened his eyes to the darkness.[55]

[54] See Ibid., p. 121.

[55] See Ibid, pp. 116-117.

This dream, which is styled on the model of a very modern short story,[56] is not easy to interpret. My interpretation attempts to understand it in accordance with the general scenery of this novel.[57] I shall try to consider the entire context of the dream-image. However, as Carl Jung says: "every interpretation is a hypothesis, an attempt to read an unknown text. An obscure dream, taken in isolation, can hardly ever be interpreted with any certainty".[58] This dream has a premonitory feature. Therefore, it must be understood in a retrospective and prospective reading.[59]

In working on a dream, the starting point for Jung was to enter into the atmosphere of the dream, to establish its mood as well as the details of its images and symbols, in such a way as to amplify the experience of the dream itself.[60] The

[56] Jung distinguishes between the dream and the story. According to him, a story told by the conscious mind has a beginning, a development, and an end, but the same is not true of a dream. To understand a dream, one must examine it from every aspect, as if taking an unknown object in your hand and turning it over and over until you are familiar with every detail of its shape. See Carl G. Jung. *Man and his Symbols* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968), p. 12. This may be true for the "traditional form" of short stories. However, in contemporary modern Arabic literature, we may confront the new minimalist story that has the features of the dream or those of free verse. For further reading about the nature of the very short story, see Ibrahim Taha, "The Modern Arabic Very Short Story: A Generic Approach", *Journal of Arabic Literature* 31:1 (2000), pp. 59-84; idem, *Arabic Minimalist Story* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2009).

[57] To understand some symbols in this dream I have referred to Michael Vigo book: *What's in your dream?-An A to Z Dream Dictionary*. It is available online. See http://www.dreammoods.com/

[58] Anthony Storr, *The Essential Jung: Selected Writings* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 178.

[59] In older literature, dreams are very often prophetic, and their message may be straightforwardly literal or couched in a dark symbolism that demands a decipherer. See Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition 2007), 64.

[60] See Stevens, *Private Myths*, p. 56. This may call to mind the notion of "unity of effect," which Edgar Allan Poe saw as the principle of the short story. For this reason, I see that the analyses of dreams and of very short stories are complementary to each other. About Poe's notion of "unity of effect," see Edgar Alan Poe, "The Importance of the Single Effect in a

first impression that we get, as readers of 'Umar's dream, is that the dreamer was disturbed by a voice, and a person entered his garden against his will and penetrated into his solitude without his permission. 'Umar's refusal to return with this intruder exposed him to the danger of being chased by trained dogs. He even heard the yelp of dogs and the noisy roaring of the motorcycle, until the moment he could no longer bear it and woke from his dream. Hence, the general atmosphere of the dream is fright and alarm, with continued threat and chase. However, looking deeper into the details of the dream, we can figure good omen and a loving attitude.[61]

'Umar saw himself in a garden reciting the poetry of Majnūn, which reflects his identification with the "madness" of the poet Qays (قيس بن الملوّح) who was prevented from marrying his beloved girl Lailā and chose death rather than a life without his great love. 'Umar also was deterred from arriving at the hidden secret of the universe, which makes life meaningful, therefore he chose the road of loneliness and even death, as the only truth. A "door" in the dream, whose location 'Umar refused to let 'Uthmān know, suggests that he is closing himself from others, and does not wish to reveal his feelings and thoughts to others. It is also indicative of some fear and low self-worth.[62]

Prose Tale" (1842) in Ann Charters, *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's Press), 8th edition, 2011, pp. 1684-1686; Charles E. May (ed.), *The New Short Story Theories* (Ohio: Ohio university Press, 1994), pp. 61-62. Briefly, Poe means by single effect/unity of effect that the artist should decide what effect he wants to create in the reader's emotional response and then proceed to use all his creative powers to achieve that particular effect.

[61] In ancient China, dreams were interpreted as predictions of events directly opposed to their contents. See Hans Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Icons And The Meanings Behind Them*, trans. James Hulbert (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 105. In accordance with this approach, it might be concluded that we should not make seemingly rushed obvious interpretations but try, from a modern point of view, to interpret a dream in its context.

[62] See "door", http://www.dreammoods.com/

However, there is still a hidden, lighter side in the dream. This can be seen in the following symbols:

a) ‘Umar was roaming around the garden: this means that the dreamer would experience great joy in the future, according to the technique of dream interpretation that was developed by ancient Egypt priests. Their interpretation of dreams was based on the assumption that dreams contained milder versions of future events.[63] It is also symbolic of stability and potential inner growth. But, the dreamer needs to cultivate a new skill or nurture his spiritual and personal growth to achieve this inner state.[64]

b) ‘Umar saw that ‘Uthmān succeeded in crossing the surface of the canal by a motorcycle! The scene is strange, irrational and cannot be actualized in reality, though it is natural in a dream. “Canal” symbolizes restraint and constricted emotions.[65] Hence, ‘Uthmān’s successful crossing over the canal, as if flying over it, may hint at his marriage to Buthayna, which is a great success in itself, but it also explains his successfully reaching ‘Umar in spite of several obstacles. ‘Uthmān was riding a motorcycle, which symbolizes his desire for freedom and adventure[66] after twenty years of being in jail, a situation that ‘Umar knows well. However, it foretells also his escape from some situation or responsibility that the reader will discover afterwards.

c) “Dog” may have contradictory meanings. One of them is loyalty, protection and fidelity. These values are characteristic of ‘Uthmān. However, hearing the dogs barking in the dream suggests that ‘Uthmān will continue to “annoy” ‘Umar to convince him, even by force, to return to his family and work. ‘Uthmān plays the role of protecting his friend from the evil/conflict of his inner soul.[67] ‘Umar,

[63] See Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism*, p. 105.

[64] See “garden”, http://www.dreammoods.com/

[65] See “canal”, http://www.dreammoods.com/

[66] See “motorcycle”, http://www.dreammoods.com/

[67] Some Tatar tribes believed that, at the Creation, God entrusted man to the protection of the dog to guard him against the assault of the Evil One. See Chevalier & Gheerbrant, “Dog”, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, p.302.

in the dream, was threatened to be chased by dogs, which indicates his tendency to run away from his situation instead of confronting it bravely and actively. Therefore, 'Uthmān reminds him of that "remarkable mixture of platinum and coal", which symbolizes his work that offered him, in the past, success, prosperity and wealth. Yet 'Umar refused to return with his friend.

d) 'Uthmān talked about miracles, which usually signify the realization of something extraordinary, but he associated the miracles with the "evidence" that 'Umar has new branches of his family that have appeared on all five continents. This new branch is intended to foretell Buthayna's conception from her husband 'Uthmān (who represents the rebellion in this novel). The "new branch" may also refer to 'Umar's little child, Samīr, who must be a source of happiness to his father, and a reminder that he should take responsibility for his life for the sake of those who are dependent on him.

According to Jung, by studying a dream we can gain knowledge of the hidden parts of the mind. The images are symbolic of conscious and unconscious mental processes:

> "Consciousness acts upon our nightly life just as much as the unconscious overshadows our daily life".[68]

Hence, dreams are not attempts to conceal our true feelings from the waking mind, but rather they are a window to our unconsciousness. They serve to guide the "dreaming self" to achieve a solution to a problem that we are facing in our waking life. Very often dreams have a definite, evidently purposeful structure, indicating an underlying idea or intention, though the latter is not immediately comprehensible.[69]

This may explain 'Umar's continued attempt to free himself from all those who really care for him and who populate his dreams. His yearning to achieve a kind of Sufi revelation (in the waking phase) always fails because his unconscious

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Note that the significance of dogs, in *Al-Shahhādh*, is contradictory to that in Mahfouz's novel: *The Thief and the Dogs*.

[68] Storr, *The Essential Jung: Selected Writings*, p. 180.

[69] See Jung, *Man and his Symbols*, p. 12.

wants him to return to life. But, as he stubbornly refuses to heed this call, he fails to understand his dreams as a way of communicating and acquainting with his unconscious. Despite a series of horrible nightmares, he incessantly urges himself, upon waking, to "see" (the divine image underlying the "secret of life"). Later, a sudden surge of happiness filled 'Umar's heart, a sudden sense of victory. He remembered the glowing sensation which preceded the other revelation that dawn in the desert and was sure that ecstasy was approaching.[70] When the vision became clearer to him he felt disappointed, for it was not what he had waited to see. He saw the faces of Zeinab, Buthayna, Samīr, Jamīla, 'Uthmān, Mustaphā and Warda. Then the figures played tricks in a way that frightened him too much.[71] We may say that most of the dreams in this chapter have a surrealistic structure reminiscent of Salvador Dali's paintings.

"Ecstasy has become a curse and paradise a stage for fools",[72] concluded 'Umar. Therefore, he lay on the ground submissively, without trying to resist.[73] Only towards the end of the novel does he get the feeling of returning to the world. The pain in his injured shoulder, observes Rasheed El-Enany, forces him out of his mystical trance and back into reality.[74] He found himself trying to remember a line of poetry. Then the line reverberated in his consciousness with a strange clarity, "*If you really wanted me, why did you desert me?*" [75]

Unlike the fettered one who succeeded in freeing himself from the cave, like the abode of ignorance in Plato's *Republic*, after seeing the true "light", 'Umar had chosen to leave life (the real light) for the sake of a secluded hut (representing darkness). He sought isolation in his semi-cave as a way to enlightenment and as a

[70] See *The Beggar*, p. 118; *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 150.

[71] See Ibid.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Note that also Saʿīd Mahrān (سعيد مهران) at the end of the novel *"The Thief and the Dogs"*, surrendered to the policemen after he had acknowledged that all he had tried to do was dealt to failure, so his life also was meaningless.

[74] See Rasheed El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), p.109.

[75] *The Beggar*, p. 124; *Al-Shahhādh*, p. 159.

means for approaching the divine truth through a mystical experience. He thought that a secluded hut would eliminate external stimuli, and thus force his mind to concentrate upon itself, while, actually, he was entering into the realm of wild hallucinations.

The meaning/purpose of life was too close to 'Umar's eyeballs, so he could not have a clear view of it. Perhaps, the meaning of life is not some goal to be pursued, but something which is articulated in the act of living itself. As Terry Eagleton remarks: "the meaning of a narrative, after all, is not just the "end" of it, in either sense of the word, but the process of narration itself".[76]

As we have mentioned, this novel ends with a clear question: "*If you really wanted me, why did you desert me?*" without offering a clear answer. We are not sure whether there is still hope for 'Umar to really return to reality/sanity! This novel leaves the reader without sufficient answers about the destiny of 'Uthmān and 'Umar in particular. In addition, it is not clear whether the relationship between 'Uthmān and 'Umar's family will expose them to danger and to all sorts of abuse from the government.

On the other hand, the above quotation may point to the core of the theme discussed: in life we do not have to look for the meaning of life, rather we should put meaning in life. Any attempt to look for an ultimate meaning, a higher truth, an ideal goal, won't yield the happiness and joy that is desired. Perhaps the use of the word "life" is misleading. It is used in the singular form, as we use any word in language that refers to "things" like "table", "banana", etc. We tend to reify the word "life" and then expect to get a strict meaning of it. All the issues and problems dealt with in philosophy are caused by misunderstanding the logic of our language, for "essence is expressed by grammar".[77] Therefore, the role of philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, is summed up in the elucidation of language. Hence, the process of searching for the meaning of life is, in its essence,

[76] Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning Of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.50.

[77] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 3rd edition 1967), paragraph 371.

a mere delusion. Only we, as active and responsible human beings, can create meaning in life. With our deeds, and by the fulfillment of our creative faculties and talents, we may approach the road to joy and happiness, and thus we aid in nurturing and cultivating the whole universe, and confer true meaning to our "humanity".

Mahfouz does not believe in religion (mysticism/Sufism) as the only way to spiritual enlightenment. Rather, progress is obtained by the convergence of science and "art" in its wider meaning, encompassing all aspects of our spiritual activity. I agree with El-Enany that Mahfouz, over and over again, expresses his firm rejection of any form of transcendental escapism. The ultimate truth is in the reality of the world, and not somewhere outside or beyond it.[78]

[78] See El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning*, pp.109-110.

7. Is There a Hero in the Text?

The common, unexamined, view of a literary hero is shaped predominantly by the concept of the classic hero/heroine. In mythology and legend, a hero/heroine is often of divine ancestry, endowed with great courage and strength, celebrated for his/her bold exploits, and favored by the gods. The hero/heroine, in a work of literature or in a movie, may risk his/her life for the greater good of his/her nation. He/she is admired or idealized for outstanding achievements, or noble qualities, and is typically identified with the good qualities that the reader is expected to sympathize with. It is almost stating the obvious to say that the hero/heroine is the main character in a narrative or dramatic work.[79]

In contrast to this traditional and "old-fashioned" type of heroes and heroines in the popular kind of romantic novels and epics, stands the anti-hero who is given the role of failure. The "new hero" has lost his super-human status and became an ordinary character. This type of "heroism" is an important feature of many modern novels.[80] The disintegration of classical heroism may be seen in the introversion of the main character, individualization, alienation, hopelessness, and even in the apportioning of heroism among multiple characters. Modern literature relinquishes the hero for the sake of the simple and ordinary man. However, the classical hero and the "new" anti-hero share the same status from the aesthetic point of view. The only significant and principal difference between the two is that the anti-hero fails to accomplish the mission he undertakes. The anti-hero is marked by his

[79] See *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company: fourth edition 2006), p. 822; *The New Oxford American Dictionary* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, second edition 2005), p. 791.
A more neutral term for the main character is the" protagonist," which is often preferable, to avoid confusion with the usual sense of heroism as admirable courage or nobility. In many works, the leading character may not be morally or otherwise superior. See Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 98.

[80] See Ibid., p. 11; J. A. Cuddon (ed.), *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 42-43.

incapability to adapt to society and its values, and he tries to attack what he considers negative values.[81]

Ibrahim Taha evokes the term semi-hero, which can be closer to the hero than to the anti-hero, or vice-versa, depending on his success or failure.[82] He explains that the conception of the semi-hero is a realistic reaction to two extreme conceptions which depict human beings in two contrasting colors, black and white. The concept of the semi-hero fits better the literature in the post-modern era, which portrays characters in various and complex hues. In addition to that, the character in current literature is less intense and rebellious and less extreme.[83] We have to note that the nature of the literary work determines which concept of heroism should be applied. But, all three concepts have equal aesthetic status (centrality in the text) and have the ability to stimulate emotional involvement by the reader.

Taha presents a semiotic model made up of five stages in order to distinguish these three conceptions of heroism, and by this to examine the essence of the main character. The model deals with the performance of the protagonist's activity and its consequences for the protagonist himself. Even when the protagonist represents negative norms, he can still be a hero according to this model. The semiotic approach relates to the protagonist as a whole system of various signs. However, Taha's proposed model does not refer to the text and to the protagonist as a closed statement, but opens the text to the participation of the reader and the historical context.[84]

The suggested model aims to focus research on the protagonist. I agree with Ibrahim Taha, who studies the main character by following his/her performance from a condition of pre-action to a condition of action and finally to a condition of post-action. However, I claim that it is beneficial to apply these stages to other characters in the same novel. To my mind, one of the features of the modern novel (and *the Beggar* is an example as I see it) is to present man in a system of relations

[81] See Ibrahim Taha, "Heroism In Literature: A Semiotic Model", The American Journal of Semiotics, 2006, pp. 111-112.

[82] See Ibid., p. 113.

[83] See Ibid.

[84] See Ibid., pp. 122-123.

and not only as an isolated person. We, in actual life, understand ourselves better through the "look" of others to us, and accordingly determine our attitude towards them. No person, even as a participant or sign in a text, can achieve "heroism", by his own power. Rather, the other (secondary) participants contribute, by their activity, to this "heroism" which gives the protagonist the privilege of being the focus of the text.

The semiotic model of Ibrahim Taha aims to have a methodological-scientific character.[85] This is not meant to deny that the reader is still able to give evaluative judgments (i.e., liking or disliking a character and looking upon them as positive or negative agent). The aesthetic experience includes our emotional attitude, our state of mind during reading, and our identification with the characters (not only with the "hero"). We are not, as readers, purely logical creatures, but human beings with human psychology. Therefore, there is no pure scientific model for dealing with a work of art. The aesthetic pleasure, and our emotional involvement, cannot be neutral. For this reason, I am going to apply the proposed model of heroism not only to the protagonist, but to other characters in this novel. In following their activity, I see them through the prism of my evaluative judgment. The following chart summarizes Taha's proposed model:

1. motivation

Pre-action 2. will

3. ability

4. Action

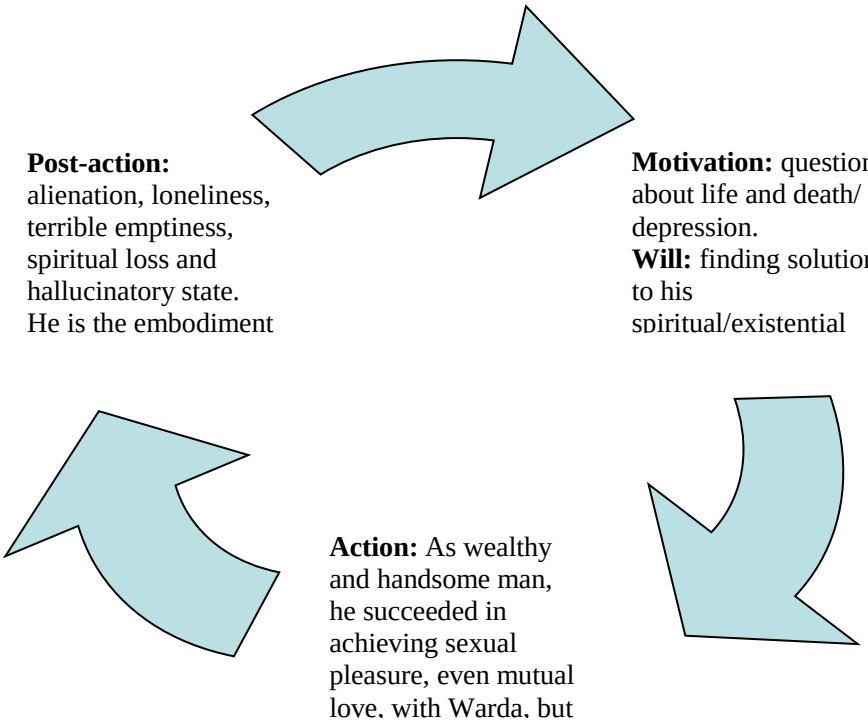
5. Post-action (outcome)

[85] See Ibid., p. 123.

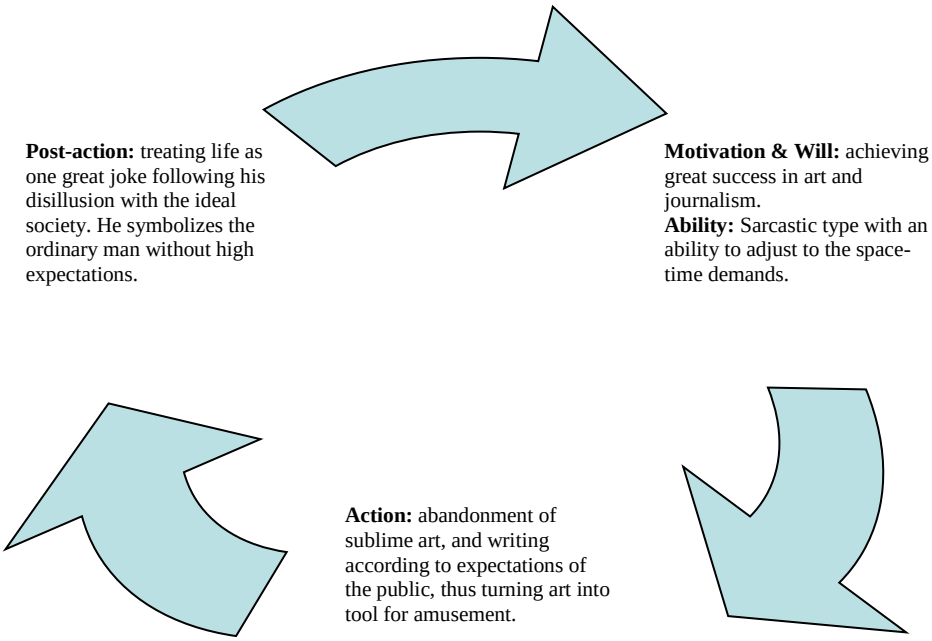
7.1 Who Is the Real "Hero"?

In this part I shall apply the above model to the protagonist (‘Umar), Mustaphā, ‘Uthmān and Buthayna. Though ‘Umar is the focus of the text, the other three characters form the hidden sides in ‘Umar’s personality. By treating these four characters, as a system of relationships, we can arrive at the *telos* of this novel. The following diagrams show the behavior of these characters according to the proposed model:

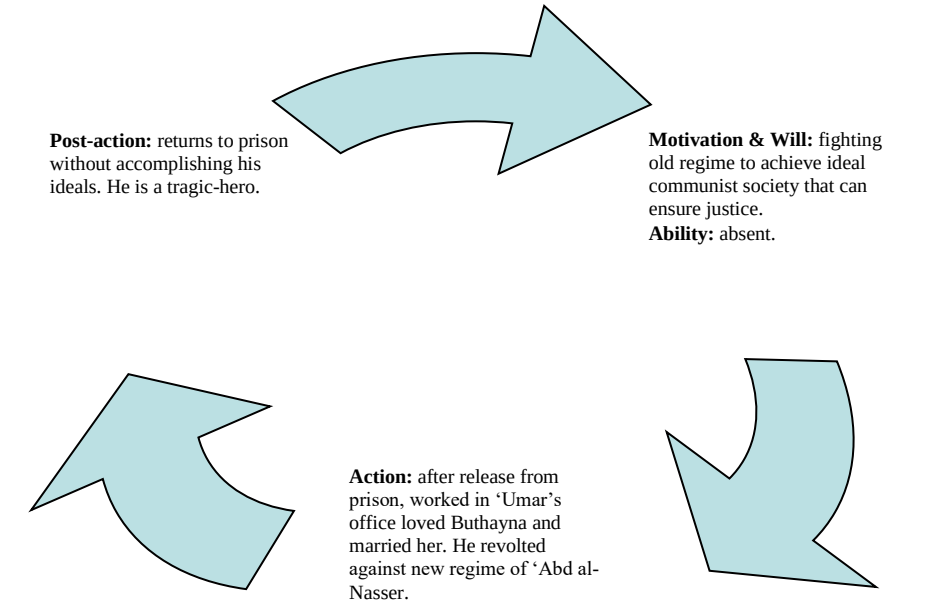
‘Umar al-Hamzāwī

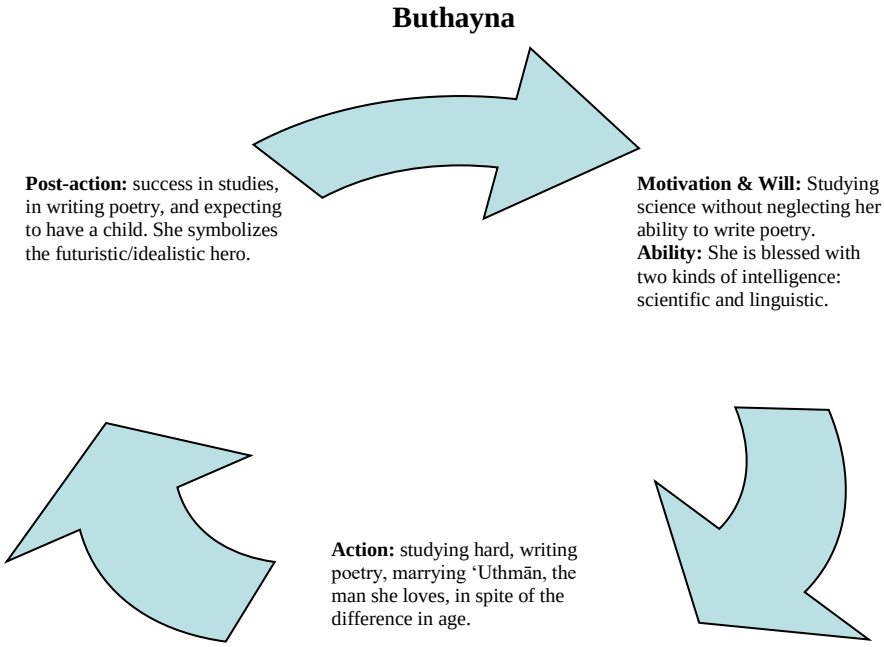


Mustaphā



ʻUthmān Khalīl





As we see from these diagrams, true victory is attained by a woman (Buthayna) who combines different faculties. She symbolizes the hope for a progressive society whose scientific achievements do not sacrifice the higher values crucial for spiritual enlightenment. She is also an embodiment of the revived revolution. By the realization of her faculties and talents she succeeds in bringing harmony and balance to her life, something that her father failed to achieve. Her mother, Zeinab, (who is reminiscent of Amina in Mahfouz's trilogy) is also pictured in a positive way. She represents the wife who strives to keep her family together, acting reasonably, and caring for her husband though he betrayed her several times. On the other hand, she is also presented with her negative aspects, as many married Arab women, who neglect their appearance and thus become unattractive.

8. The Three Friends from an Existentialistic Point of View

The most famous of existentialist dicta is "existence precedes essence". Unlike the stone, whose essence or nature is "given", a person's existence consists not in what it is already, but in what it is not yet. Hence, existence is a continuous process of realizing our aspirations, as Kierkegaard would say: "an existing individual is constantly in the process of becoming".[86] Man has to make his own existence at every single moment. How a person is at a given time results from the free decisions he has made.[87] Freedom is not an "optional extra" with which a human life may or may not come equipped. To be free *is* to have that kind of life, viewed from the perspective of the responsibility which such a life has for itself.[88] Therefore, according to many existentialists, every act and every attitude must be considered a choice.[89]

Actually, each one of the three friends/characters chose his own life-style, and by this he expressed his individual attitude of self-consciousness. Mustaphā represents the attitude of the pragmatic opportunist who has a clear vision of his socio-political situation. He adjusted himself to the new regime (after the revolution) to achieve fame and wealth. He abandoned the ideals of the revolution and the realization of a utopian country. Sometimes, he confessed, he was bedevilled by questions about life's meaning but he soon repressed them, like shameful memories,[90] because he knew that these questions were useless.

'Uthmān, on the other hand, was the only one who remained loyal to his principles. He represents the philanthropic attitude, as shown in his statement: "we work for humanity as a whole, not for one country alone. We propose a human nation, a world of tomorrow founded on revolution and science".[91]

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[86] See David E. Cooper, *Existentialism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 3.

[87] *Ibid*, p. 69.

[88] *Ibid*, p. 164.

[89] See Robert C. Solomon, *Existentialism* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. xiv.

[90] See *The Beggar*, p. 73.

[91] *Ibid*., p. 97.

'Uthmān is the antithesis of Mustaphā, for the latter represents the individualist, the sarcastic, the one who is not ready to sacrifice himself for the sake of humanity. 'Uthmān, on the contrary, thought that if man did not shoulder the burden of humanity as a whole, he would be nothing.[92] He represents the ethical life of moral principle and duty.

'Umar, the "alienated hero," could not adopt the life style of Mustapha or that of 'Uthmān. His character is like one of the Dostoevskian characters (especially Ivan Karamazov). He discovered that all our moral, religious and political claims are without foundation. Hence, it was no accident that he worked as a lawyer, so he could discover the injustices and hypocrisies in society. He adored only science, but was unable to study it. His doubts about God's existence played a crucial part in developing his *Angst*.[93] The death of God (a Nietzscheian declaration) meant for many intellectuals that the highest values were devalued, i.e., the invalidity of morality. Even the foundations of science were but errors, though they were necessary for the life of the species, yet not true.[94] This would explain 'Umar's continuous search for bodily pleasure, with several women, not inhibited by any residual care for his wife's feelings or by a torturing conscience. All his responsibilities towards work and family turned out to have no meaning.

When 'Umar declared that his life was meaningless he meant that it lacked purpose, quality, value and direction. Therefore, the statement "my life is meaningless", as Terry Eagleton says, is an existential statement, not a logical one.[95] We are born biological beings but we must become existential individuals by accepting responsibility for our actions.[96]

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[92] *Ibid*., p. 104.

[93] See, for example, Ibid, p. 68, 86.

[94] See Solomon, *Existentialism*, p. 65. See also an extract from Friedrich Nietzsche's work: *The Gay Science*, in Ibid, pp. 67-71.

[95] See Eagleton, *The Meaning Of Life: A Very Short Introduction*, p.38.

[96] See Thomas R. Flynn, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), preface.

9. Conclusion

Though *Al-Shahhādh* is rather short for a novel (159 pages in Arabic/124 pages in English), it is very complicated, condensed and requires attentive reading. It may probably be better considered a novella in terms of its length, focus on one character and unity of effect.

The importance of *al-Shahhādh* stems from its new style, which differs completely from the realistic novel. We may find some resemblance in the overall structure with other novels that Mahfouz wrote during the years 1961 and 1966 (especially al-Liss wa'l-Kilab), but, in *al-Shahhādh,* the microstructure is more profound and sophisticated. The literary devices in *al-Shahhādh* are varied, displaying several features, such as: the elusive title, introduction of the protagonist's crisis indirectly by a complete description of a painting, giving information about the other characters in through a letter written by the protagonist, variations in the use of pronouns, interior monologue, hallucinations and symbolic dreams. The dialogues, which are interrupted occasionally by monologue, seem apparently common, familiar and even naïve, but they actually represent socio-political and artistic issues that bothered intellectuals before and during the Nasserite regime.[97]

Al-Shahhādh, as modernist prose, is enormously compressed. It needs to be read with the attention normally reserved for poetry or philosophy. It also manifests Mahfouz's serious attempt to harmonize form and content.

The novel exemplifies the following features of modernism:

[97] It is well known that Mahfouz was not satisfied with the Free Officers' regime, and embarked on a series of novels, beginning with al-Liss wa'l-Kilab (1961) and culminating in *Miramar* (1967), which may be seen as an increasingly pointed series of protests at the direction the new regime was taking the country. Common to these novels is a distinctive combination of often veiled social criticism with elements of metaphysical and existential concerns. See Paul Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2007), p. 124.

1) The disappearance of a well- and full-demarcated description of the characters. Not following the usual conventions of story-telling, the narrator provides slight hints about the characters so the receptive audience may construct the entire image, every reader according to his/her understanding. The uniqueness of *al-Shahhādh* is the representation of the three friends plus Buthayna as forming one "self" with diverse, multiple and contradictory aspects (which might remind the reader of the shaping of characters in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*). Hence, we cannot talk about these characters as mimetic of real persons in life, but rather as "semiotic" beings in a literary context. Therefore, it is wiser to study the protagonist in the network of his relations to other characters.

2) The "new hero" lost his super-human status and became an ordinary character. 'Umar al-Hamzāwī represents the "anti-hero" who fails to accomplish the mission he undertakes, and to achieve serenity of soul. The disintegration of classical heroism may be seen in the introversion of the protagonist, individualization, alienation, hopelessness.

3) We do not find the linear plot with a climactic turning point and clear resolution (the pyramidal pattern). Instead, the novel begins with the fact of 'Umar's suffering from great emotional and existential tension, and ends without a resolution. Between the opening and ending of the novel we are led by chronological leaps in time, and fragments of remembered events and situations.

4) Instead of the single, authoritative, godlike observer, omniscient point-of-view, we find a type of apportioning the process of narration through moving smoothly and simultaneously from the position/focalization of the third person to first and second person.

5) The emphasis on the protagonist's state of mind leads to a non-linear thought process, moving by free association that seems sometimes logical and rational, while at others appearing imaginative and illogical. Consequently, this emphasis on the process of the protagonist's perception leads to the use of several literary devices to present it artistically and more closely. The

modernist tries to show not necessarily how things are, but how things are experienced.[98]

6) There is a disjunction between internal and external time. The external events of the plot proceed in chronological order, though the protagonist's mind continually flashes back into the past, or sinks in his current sad thoughts, hallucinations and dreams. Hence we find a juxtaposition of events of different times going inside his mind.

7) Unlike the realistic novel, there is an absence of full and detailed description of the place (contrary to the realistic novel). The place has to be understood metaphorically as a symbol, and its brief description serves the character's psychological state.

8) *Al-Shahhādh* as a modernist work focuses on spiritual and personal collapse. It may be considered also as a political and sociological response to the regime of the Egyptian president Jamal 'Abd al-Nassir, for it did not actualize the dreams/ideals of "some" revolutionists (as 'Uthmān).[99] The search for a "solid" meaning of life continues in a world that witnesses the collapse of traditional values (even artistic values), the doubt in God's existence and the loss of hope in life because the only remaining and inevitable truth is death. Hence, the relation between modernism and existential questions is clear and almost inescapable.

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[98] See Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, p. 158.

[99] Naguib Mahfouz had a strong affection for the *Wafd Party*, and during the Nasserite regime he was still yearning for the *Wafd* period. Some critics, such as 'Abd Allah Khalifa, regarded this attitude of Mahfouz as a kind of regression and backwardness. They wanted him to be a Marxist and to stop his continual criticism of the national military regime in his novels (especially in *Miramar*). Their opposition to Mahfouz increased after his declaration of support for and loyalty to the Egyptian president Al-Sadat. Mahfouz saw in al-Sadat's regime a new and different period which is distinguished by pluralism, diversity, openness and peace with Israel. See 'Abd Allah Khalifa, *Mina al-riwaya al-tarichiya ila al-riwaya al-falsafiya* (*From the historical novel to the philosophical novel*), (al-Jazaer: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2007), pp. 8-12.

9) Modernism is concerned with language. The language of the novel is successfully suited to the description of different situations and types of characters. Few words are in the spoken Arabic of Egypt. Generally the language is literary, beautiful and approaches the poetic. Later in the novel, the language becomes surrealistic and symbolic in order to fit the scenes of dreams and hallucinations.

Modernism is better understood not as a precise label which denotes a certain historical period in the history of literature, but as an attitude. There are always some pioneer individuals who try to move away from the established, almost institutionalized, modes of seeing/representing reality and human consciousness, and try to create a fictional world with a new style that better fits their experience. They bravely continue to experiment with new forms and contents by reconsidering the fundamentals of imaginative writing. No doubt, Mahfouz, as the father of the Arabic novel, deserves to be considered a major figure among these pioneers or avant-gardes. His works may be seen as a barometer of the changing tastes in the modern Arabic novel. Still, reading a modernist novel may not be as easy as reading a realistic novel. But, who says that beautiful things are accessible and easily approachable?

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الحبّ، الجنس والتصوّف في البحث عن معنى الحياة: "المودرنيزم" في رواية "الشحّاذ" لنجيب محفوظ

كلارا سروجي-شجراوي

تلخيص:

تقدّمُ هذه الدّراسة قراءة متعمِّقة لرواية "الشّحّاذ" للرّوائيّ المصريّ نجيب محفوظ. وهي تهدف إلى إثبات رغبة محفوظ في تجريب أشكال جديدة من التعبير تكسرُ المعاييرَ التقليديّة للرّواية الكلاسيكيّة الواقعيّة. تتحوّل "الشّحّاذ" إلى مبشّر ريادي بالحداثة (المودرنيزم)؛ فوراء واجهة القصة البسيطة هناك الأسلوب المركّب والمعقّد والعُمق الفكريّ. يُسَلَّط الضّوء على معالِم "المودرنيزم" من خلال فحص التقنيّات التي يستخدمها محفوظ حينَ يعرض أزمة "البطل" الوجوديّة، في بحثه عن المعنى الحقيقيّ للحياة، مُصوِّرًا أفكاره ومشاعره بلغة تبدو أحيانًا شاعريّة. تكشف هذه القراءة لرواية "الشّحّاذ"، في سياقها الاجتماعيّ-السّياسيّ، عن انهيار القيم الموروثة، بما في ذلك القيم الفنيّة، كما تلمّح إلى "عبثيّة" الثورة في مصر وفي العالم العربيّ