

Living Nonentities: The Life of Women in Naguib Mahfouz's *Palace Walk*

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Abstract

Naguib Mahfouz, in his works, demonstrates his concern for portraying the hardships endured by Egyptian women during 20th-century Egypt. Mahfouz's *Palace Walk* portrays his female characters, who suffer at the hands of patriarchal society. This paper aims to investigate the causes and manifestations of pain that the individuals were undergoing because of the norms and beliefs that were prevalent in their day. The female characters in the novel have a strong commitment to their families, faithfully fulfilling their responsibilities as daughters, wives, and mothers. Even after dedicating their lives to their families well-being, they still have to deal with misogyny and the fallout of living in a society that is fundamentally patriarchal. Women were mistreated in patriarchal cultures. The harsh restrictions and constant criticism they faced caused their identity and social presence to progressively fade. Women were brought up to be subordinate to the maids in the family. Their identity and presence in society were gradually obscured because of the severe limitations and unrelenting criticism they were subjected to. Women were raised to submit to the family patriarchs forever. The patriarchs deceived and exploited a number of female characters in the guise of tradition and faith. They are described by the author as selfless, obedient individuals who sacrifice their inner selves in order to survive.

Keywords: patriarchy, submissive women, Naguib Mahfouz

Naguib Mahfouz is an Egyptian-born novelist and short story writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. No other Arabic work can be compared with his literary talent. The *Cairo Trilogy*, his masterpiece, showcases his artistic ability as a writer. The novel earned him fame when it was featured in Everyman's Library. His credits include over 350 short stories and 26 screenplays for movies. His novels were written based on the happenings in Egypt during the 20th century, which were written in Arabic and later translated into English. Mahfouz's works address a variety of existential themes and have aspects of realism. The Arabic publication of the *Cairo Trilogy* came out in 1956, and *Palace Walk* is the first of the three published books.

Shrouding or wearing a hijab is a part of Islam. It is a practice in which women cover their heads and bodies with a cloth. Shrouding is a common practice in conservative Egyptian families. In Mahfouz's *Palace Walk*, shrouding symbolizes the oppressed state of women who lived in 20th-century Egypt, as it highlights how limiting individuals freedom affects their lives. Egypt being a predominant Islamic nation, the ethical principles followed in Egyptian society were often based on their religious text, the Quran. The Quran comprises the principles and ideas of Prophet Mohammad. Misinterpretation of religious texts and false propaganda has misled people, which has benefited religious leaders, and the patriarchs have used it to their advantage. Several rights defined for women in the Quran were denied by patriarchal and societal laws, and thus their domestic rights too got overshadowed by the dominating patriarchs. All traditions in general expect ardent loyalty from women towards their family and religion. They were taught to permanently obey the patriarch in their family. Several female characters within the novel *Palace Walk* were exploited and controlled by the patriarchs in the name of culture and religion. Patriarchal dominance is common in twentieth-century Egyptian society, and the subjugation of women is justified by pointing out the cultural laws and norms that exist in the society.

Men often claim superiority over women by pointing out the Verse from Quran which says "men are the protectors and maintainers of women because of what Allah has preferred one over the other and because of what they spend to support them from their wealth." The Quran says that women are equals to men, and it teaches them to be each other's protectors. The stereotypes and differences between both of these sexes were formulated only in society. Men are strong and dominant by nature, and along with that, society shapes men to command and gain control over their women. When people were nomads, men and women shared equal responsibilities and rights. When civilization and settlements were established, women were forced to stay inside their homes as childbearers. The power that the patriarchs possessed helped them take control over their counterparts. This eventually made women dependent on their men.

A man is expected to protect his woman, and a woman is expected to be the caretaker of the family. The domestic, marital, and financial rights of women were determined by the patriarchs. The Islamic laws did allow women to go out and work with the consent of their husbands. But traditional ideologies did not permit women to assist men financially. Though women enjoy the privilege of benefiting from the financial wealth of their husbands, they are restricted from going out to gain wealth for themselves. Women were taught to willingly accept the societal laws upheld by the patriarchs. From their childhood, women were forced to act according to their demands throughout their lives. The opportunity to acquire knowledge through education is often minimized by societal laws. This makes the female characters totally ignorant of the world outside their home. The female characters in the novel are confined to predetermined domestic domains due to societal constraints that uphold gender roles. They are denied the chance to pursue their own identities and goals because they are expected to conform to traditional roles as devoted mothers and submissive wives. The female characters are greatly impacted by these expectations, which mold their lives and constrict their opportunities for personal development. The expectations from society and familial restrictions suffocate the female characters in Mahfouz's novels and leave them in a

frustrated state. The protagonist's wife, Amina, and other female characters suffer because of the patriarchal father, who adheres to tradition. Due to cultural expectations and her husband's traditional views, Amina and her daughters experience both physical and emotional suffering. El Saadawi in his book *The Hidden Face of Eve*, States that:

The mental and psychological development of a woman is greatly retarded, and she is unable to free herself from passive attitudes and the habit of depending on others. She remains like a child in the early stages of its life, but differs in the fact that her body has grown, and that she may have reached the age of thirty, forty or even fifty years... Experience is looked upon almost as a deformity to be hidden, and not as a mark of intrinsic human value... women, therefore, tend to nurture their ignorance and simpleness so that society continues to look upon them as being virtuous and of good reputation. Parents also encourage ignorance in their daughters and want them to be simple and naive. (44-45)

Amina, the central female character in the novel *Palace Walk*, struggles because of the limitations she faces as an individual living in society. Her patriarchal husband, Ahmad, treated her like a slave in her own house. Even while making decisions regarding their family, she was not allowed to voice her opinions. Her only duty is to execute what her master commands. Amina never questioned him because she believed that it was the role assigned to her by traditional society. Even if she expressed any kind of objection to his decisions, he would threaten her, saying, " I'm a man. I am the one who commands and forbids. I will not accept any criticism of my behavior. All I ask of you is to obey me. Don't force me to discipline you" (4). Amina sacrifices her desires and alters her preferences in order to obey her dominating husband. Quoting El-Enany's words from *The Pursuit of Meaning* "Her relationship with her husband is characterized by total and unquestioning acceptance of his authority," (83). Even though she willingly accepted to confine herself within the traditional spheres of life by prioritizing her family ahead of her own interests, deep in her mind she longed for her individual freedom. Amina's character reflects the true condition of all other women who lived in conservative Egyptian society during that period. Amina, along with her daughters, were kept ignorant about the outer world, and that made them entirely dependent on men for everything. Their knowledge of the world is truly based on the information they acquired while conversing with their men. They were manipulated and taught to believe in such a way that women should be caring and compassionate towards their husbands to get named as ideal women. El Saadawi in his book *The Hidden Face of Eve* States that like all other women Amina is taught from her childhood that "a woman who, at the moment of death, enjoys the full approval of her husband, will find her place in paradise"(140). The traditional society has conditioned Amina in such a way that she believes that "true manliness, tyranny, and staying out till after midnight are common characteristics of a single entity"(4).The traditional societal laws favored men by normalizing their constant night outs and parties. On the other hand, Amina and her daughter's lives are confined within their home. This shows how the preferences of both men and women are viewed differently within society. Her movement is restricted by her patriarchal husband, who does not want her to go out of the house for any reason. He has permitted her to go out only a few times to visit

her mother with his assistance. Amina's identity is unknown even to the people who make regular visits to her house. She is forced to stay inside the house. They were told by the patriarchal society that the isolation was to protect them from evil eyes. Yasin, in an argument with his wife, states, "Houses have been for women and the outside world for men. Men are like this" (44). The integuments imposed on women in the name of culture and religion shroud their identity and make them socially powerless. Thus, their identity in society is shrouded by patriarchal societal laws.

Ahmad, as well as his son Yasin, did not have any kind of concern or love for their women and treated them like lifeless objects. Yasin, in his words, says that "they (women) stay at home until we (men) are free to play with them" (338). To their eyes, women are just an object of delight to play with. "What more does any woman want than a home of her own and sexual gratification? Nothing. Women are another kind of domestic animal and must be treated as one." (44) These men reflect the traditional patriarchal mentality, which subjugates women. Yasin describes his stepmother, Amina, as follows: "A woman. Yes, she's nothing but a woman. Every woman is a filthy curse. A woman doesn't know what virtue is, unless she's denied all opportunities for adultery. Even my stepmother, who's a fine woman - God only knows what she would be like if it weren't for my father." (88)

The limited opportunity to acquire knowledge is one of the primary reasons for their ignorance. Because of the lack of education, their intellectual and individual growth gets affected. And so they were unable to break free from the shackles of traditional societal laws. Ahmad, the family's head, believed that educating women was unnecessary, as he did want women to get employed, so he did not encourage his daughters to get educated like his sons. Because of the lack of opportunity to achieve financial stability, they become dependent on men for everything.

The women in Ahmad's house did not have the autonomy to make their own decisions. Even in marriages, they were not allowed to decide upon their partner, as all the major decisions were taken by the patriarchal father. He never cared about his daughters consent, even while taking the crucial decisions of their lives. Both Aisha and Khadija disliked their father's decision, but out of fear, they never dared to question their father's decision. Aisha always wanted to marry the man she loved, who was a police officer. Ahmad rejected the proposal as he disliked strangers' asking for his daughter's hand. Khadija, his elder daughter, is married to an elderly man, which she never expected. Ahmad is very conservative and believes that women in general lack the ability to make correct decisions. He believed that "no woman has a fully developed mind." So he never allows them to talk or make choices on their own. Amina has no other option but to agree with his decisions. "My opinion," says Amina to her husband, "is the same as yours, sir. I have no opinion of mine." (156)

Amina is deeply impacted by the sensation of being bored with her repeated household duties. She is tired of her life's repetitive rituals, which have a steady negative impact on her behavior and mood. She has to look for some diversion because she is bored and needs to escape reality to feel better. However, the weight of her boredom grows despite all of her efforts. Amina spends all of her time and energy taking care of her family. The only

thing that gave her some relief was the time she spent in the roof-top garden. Other than the large room in her house, it is the only place that is known to her. She spends her time looking at the caged birds, and the roof top gave her a glimpse of the world outside her house. The beautiful domes of mosques and buildings in the street's added beauty to the scene. She always wanted to explore the sites that were visible from here but was afraid to ask her husband, fearing his verbal abuse.

This roof , with its inhabitants of chicken and pigeons and it's Arbour garden ,was her beautiful beloved world...Then her eyes would fix on the minarates of the mosque of al - Husayn... her yearnings mingled with sorrow that pervaded her every time she remembered she was not allowed to visit the son of prophet of God's daughter, even though she lived only minutes away from his shrine... what could this world of which she saw nothing, but the minarates and roofs be like . (38-39)

Her desire for exploration is brightened by the motivation given to her children. They convinced her to visit the shrine of Al-Hussayn while her husband Ahmad was out on a business trip. Finally, she was able to experience freedom, which she had been longing for decades. But her initial exploration ends in disaster as she meets with an accident, which revealed the matter to her husband Ahmad. Ahmad did not give her any chance to explain and asked her to leave his home for violating the familial rules.

Social norms limit people's freedom and place them in difficult situations. Analyzing Mahfouz's characters enables us to comprehend the detrimental effects of societal constraints on the physical and psychological health of female characters. People's views, morals, and individuality are put to the test by social forces. When their voices and desires are silenced, it creates in them a deep sense of disappointment as well as feelings of inadequacy. As responsibilities and behaviors are dictated by social standards, their aspirations and desires become limited. The obstacles placed in their way make them feel confined and annoyed. Their lack of employment opportunities and education that support them in pursuing their unique identities gives them a feeling of being trapped and frustrated. The biggest limitation of society is that all of these internal and external emotional conflicts are the result of societal limits that have an impact on individuals.

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