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## Naguib Mahfouz: A Commentator of Human Complexities

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### Abstract

Very few authors in the world of literature have explored and fathomed the depth of intricacies of the lives that people lead like Naguib Mahfouz. The complications he portrays are so varied that they encapsulate almost all situations that humans go through – in mind and circumstances, that are either of one's own making or that of their destiny. His dexterity to provide insights into the situations that are too hard to decode make him a master in understanding life. The array of complexities that his characters face in his novels are mirrors that reflect the realities of life. Moreover, his writing style, and his depiction of the mental and emotional struggles of his characters along with the challenges they face, make him an author who can fathom and explain life and its workings to the minutest of details. His reflections and contemplations on the subjects of love, friendship, compulsion, duty and familial bonds along with all other experiences and emotions that a human goes through are lessons on the workings of life. The complex manner in which life works is in itself a subject of an exploration that is enormous in its extent, and novelists like Naguib Mahfouz, through their innate talent, comment on them with a mastery that showcases the highest form of comprehension of the complexities of mankind.

**Keywords:** circumstances, environment, mankind, struggles, human bonds

## The Intricacies of Human Bonds

The field of literature is as much about knowing the complexities of life, as it is about telling sagas and tales of characters with different characters and natures all assembled together. That is so because the confluence of those both helps an author to weave stories that provide insights into the intricacies of the approaches that a human takes to exist. Moreover, the interactions of characters help the reader to understand human emotions and thoughts under varied circumstances and environments. The change in a human's behavior when interacting with different people, highlights the closeness of bonds and the value of relations and relationships. It is difficult to find an author as prolific as Mahfouz and who also understands the origins of human behavior that leads to life's intricacies. A novelist of his repute and caliber seldom writes his novels in a plain and simple manner because they know that life is depicted through their works and life is a maze of complexities which needs to be mirrored in their words and plots.

Naguib Mahfouz cannot be bracketed into any single genre, and as a result, his works have constantly dealt with varied characters of mindsets that are different. By doing so, he has brought to the fore the intricacies of human bonds and through them, the difficulties of human life. Be it *Love in the Rain*, *The Coffeehouse* or *The Beginning and the End* to name just three of his enormous body of work, the situations that the characters find themselves in are real and relatable. Emotions and feelings of love, friendship, compulsion, hate, despair, ambition, hope and a plethora of other mental states are encapsulated in his novels so well that they offer unobstructed views and perspectives of the difficulties of life. What makes Naguib Mahfouz special and a master of his trade is his exact judgement of how a human reacts to a situation and with people they interact. Also, he seems to be very adept in depicting human complexities rather than simplicities. That in itself a testimony to his talent of having an in-depth knowledge about the behavioral patterns of humans that leads to an intricate and complicated life. His use of his understanding has resulted in novels that tell tales of mankind's problems that appear to be unlimited in all their forms when taken into account with all their permutations and combinations with feelings, emotions, circumstances and environments.

Additionally, Mahfouz not only brings the complexities into being through his plots but also develops the characters in a way where they get embroiled in situations where it becomes difficult for them to get out of them. With his intrinsic penchant to discover complexities, he entangles the characters in a web of difficulties – be it mental or situational – and places them before the readers. He can do that because

“Najib Mahfouz attempted to analyse various human activities and behaviors throughout his works. He was especially intrigued by how social developments affected common people psychologically.” (Paramanik 808).

Taking that into consideration, it would be highly accurate to say that Mahfouz understood the functioning of the human consciousness to a very great degree. His involved friendship, marriage, unfaithfulness, lust, greed and religion in his works and paved a way to highlight issues related to all of them. In fact,

“Mahfouz also depicts in his novels the relation between family and society. He criticizes the very bourgeois system, which works by depending on the other in its androcentric realm.” (Hassan 2372).

Hence, Mahfouz is also a commentator on societal functioning which brings all kinds of people together and focuses on their interactions to bring out their complexities. As an author who has explored life through hundreds of characters, Mahfouz is definitely a keen observer of human behaviors in real life because his works are relatable to the readers in one way or the other. More importantly, his knowing of the nitty-gritties of any relation come in handy when he needs to provide a twist to his plot or surprise the readers by suddenly unveiling the truth of a character. His brilliant practice of creating an amalgamation of different genres in certain novels and certain plots not only make him a master story-teller, but also highlights his quality as a writer who can create a story out of any situation because he was confident enough to know what a person would do in a particular situation. Therefore, the novels of Mahfouz are also a learning experience in terms of understanding the human mind because without knowing it, life's complexities cannot be unearthed because it's the behavior and thinking along with beliefs that create complexities in one's life.

It is also worth mentioning that intricate relationships play a vital role in his novels and compel the reader to contemplate on human bonds, especially, the role of women in it. The manner in which women are pushed to the background in an Islamic society didn't go down well with him. Consequently, it is mostly evident through his later works that he depicted women as strong characters who were neither afraid to love nor feared its consequences. Mahfouz was a reformist who wanted women to have equal rights with those of men and depicted “the key challenges facing gender equality and tolerance in his works.” (Kehinde p.16). The state of women in Islamic countries, with all the restrictions placed upon them with the sole intention of taking away their birthright of freedom and expression is often countered with portrayals of women who are the source of strength in men. The presence of social issues and his awareness of religious fanaticism in the Islamic world made him comment that,

“Perhaps it is this atmosphere, which my generation imbibed, that makes it particularly painful for us to witness the growth of religious fanaticism. For us it is an alien phenomenon, and any harm inflicted on our Coptic brothers is inflicted on us all.” (Mahfouz 108).

Ultimately, it can be said with absolute surety that to understand the complexities of human bonds, it is totally necessary to look at life in a holistic manner. And Mahfouz did that better than anybody else and his understanding of the intricacies of humans and their situations are reflected in his works. Like all great writers across languages, Mahfouz offers penetrative insights into life, its complexities and the role of humans in Navigating them either through his characters, plots or works.

## Reflections on Mental States and Situations

At the mention of human complexities, people conjure up imaginations of struggles and challenges while forgetting that in a majority of cases, emotions and feelings or the mental states of individuals are responsible for them. A simple bad decision or giving in to temptations or the whims of the mind create problems and intricacies of such magnitude that an individual gets caught in them for a great part of their life. For an author, such situations make up a lot of content for their novels. The presence of emotions and feelings in a storyline makes for great reading. However, Mahfouz uses those two ingredients to penetrate the psyche of his characters so that they can display complex behavior and reveal the hardships that a human experiences on dealing with the people around them. Also, it requires a monumental effort on the part of the author to create situations with their characters with those two mental states as the plot of a novel and the flow of the storyline depends on the reactions of other characters to them. It would be a folly to think that all authors use the same approach. That is so because not all authors can convince the readers to react emotionally to the characters and their deeds.

Therefore, Mahfouz makes the reader a party or a witness to the happenings in the novels through their emotional reactions. That is an art that simplifies human complexities because it makes the reader to react to situations with the own capacity about their understanding on how life works and fathom the reactions to those circumstances. To further encapsulate the role of emotions and feelings it can be said that, “complexity focuses on emergent behaviors that result from interactions within and among self-organizing and adaptive systems.” (qtd. in Horn 126). The keywords in the quote are “behaviors” and “interactions” on whom Naguib Mahfouz has laid emphasis to bring to light the human complexities that arise from a mixture of bonds with emotions and feelings. Be it a bond by any name or a situation that is a result of a character’s doing, Mahfouz has covered a plethora of life situations that help the reader understand the complications of life which they might not be aware of. Mahfouz knew the psyche of humans very well and understood that human complexities mostly arise from certain individuals wanting their own way.

And that can be contextual, related and circumstantial. As Mahfouz has written his novels in and having Islamic settings, it becomes paramount to understand the culture of those lands because it is directly related to the human complexities that he brings to the fore. An argument that can be proposed for rejecting the importance of culture and nation would be that human complexities are similar in all the corners of the world, and hence, they cannot be differentiated or categorized. Though that argument is partially true, it is not the complete truth. Mahfouz had time and again reiterated that he was against the oppression of women and the restrictions put upon people in the guise of religion. He himself was an advocate of reform and deeply cared about women’s liberation and freedom from the written and unwritten laws that governed them. His reactions to the societal norms are reflected in his writings which are at both the ends of the cultural spectrum. A case in point are his female characters who either appear helpless or are in total control of their lives and have their way no matter what. Women who submit to men and women who manipulate and control men make their presence felt in his novels.

Therefore, “Naguib Mahfouz’s novels address several key themes related to women, including poverty, freedom, education, and economic independence. He also discusses the social and political challenges facing women, such as social discrimination and cultural pressures. Through his female characters, he emphasizes the importance of empowering women and realizing their potential despite social and economic challenges. The female characters in Mahfouz’s novels reflect the social, economic, and cultural challenges through their stories and personal experiences.” (Alruqban et al., 17). The above observations sum up the reactions of Mahfouz through his novels and his thoughts on the subject of women oppression and empowerment that he held so dear. The human in the author made Mahfouz take a stand on issues with his immense understanding of the workings of life and hurdles that need to be surmounted through a awareness. And that’s the reason as to why his novels are considered to be commentaries on social issues. And Mahfouz hardly strayed away from what he wanted to express or convey because he too was influenced by his emotional and mental states when he penned his novels.

### **Mahfouz as an Observer of Human Intricacies**

The vast works of Naguib Mahfouz have a common thread that runs among all of them, and that is his ability to narrate tales firstly as an author and then as a human. Any person can become an author and keep the readers glued to their sagas and stories. However, the one significant quality that sets a great author apart from the best is their ability to relate to the reader by arousing in them the feelings of involvement with the plots and the characters, if not the complete novel. Mahfouz was an author of the classes and the masses, and therein lies his talent to adapt. But, he knew very well that all people, regardless of their financial or social status, have encountered complexities in their lives. His dexterity in entering different realms of humans in the same novel, i.e., from the high class to the low, can be attributed to his own experiences based on observing human complexities. Mahfouz wrote with total authority and with a realistic approach that appealed to the readers because he addressed the intricacies of life with utmost clarity through his words which encapsulated the workings of the mind in the form of feelings, thoughts through words that made the reader totally engrossed into the lives of the characters.

Therefore, it can be mentioned without a doubt that Mahfouz was a master in reading the circumstances and situations of an individual and the role of environment in it. From his most famous work, The Cairo Trilogy, to the works mentioned before, are considered to be commentaries on human complexities because of the wide range of human situations that they cover – in terms of relationships and the genre of his novels. It is often said that an author has to live a certain situation before they are able to write on it. However, Mahfouz defies that logic as life is too short to experience all experiences and he has written on almost all situations and problems that humans find themselves in. That explains his talent to learn from observations and to decode the harsh realities that people face. As a result,

“His writings often explored profound themes such as existential dilemmas, social and political dynamics, and the intricate nature of human relationships. A hallmark of Mahfouz’s storytelling is his deep engagement with Egyptian society, vividly portraying the lives, struggles, and aspirations of ordinary people.” (Ahmed et. al. 329).

Additionally, the manner in which he scripts his novels is a lesson in understanding the fickleness of life and the plans that one makes for it. Mahfouz realizes that life can turn around in a jiffy, without warning, and that causes an immense turnaround in an individual's life making it go topsy-turvy. And in that belief lies his secret of spinning sagas and tales that depict themes from rags-to-riches and vice-versa. The theme of existentialism was at the core of his writings and struggles, challenges and uncertainties were also a big part of them. In a way, Mahfouz chartered a different course from the other Arabic novelists and writers because he was able to see the complexities of life that others could not. Comparisons are odious, especially in the world of literature because each and every novelist differs from the other in their perspectives of life. However, Mahfouz blurs the boundaries of perspectives and gives the readers an introduction to life the way it is. There are no exaggerations and no embellishments to his opinions on life and that make his novels as realistic as they can be. Moreover, the prolific pen of Mahfouz made him a master of a genre that included a little of everything, just like life itself.

It is also paramount and necessary to know that "while Arabic has a rich tradition in poetry, the novel was not a strong art form in that language until Mr. Mahfouz made it accessible." (McFadden). Hence, Mahfouz is not only the trailblazer of novel writing in the Arab world, but also made it popular. And the only reason that he could make prose more popular than poetry was because of his ability to define human complexities by portrayals that were lifelike and more importantly, with all the complexities that life brings along with it. As an Egyptian, Mahfouz commented not only about life situations but also about his country and his nation. The patriot in him could never resist to talk about the troubles of his fellow countrymen that were brought upon by the governments. In essence, Mahfouz was a writer who encompassed not only the people but the fate of his homeland in his writings. The amalgamation of all those situations enabled him to comment on human difficulties like nobody else and therein lies his greatness.

Finally, it can be concluded that Mahfouz was a writer of the people, be it classes or the masses. He not only wrote novels that spoke about what life entails but also commented on the environments, circumstances and situations that led to complexities in the survival of humans. His extraordinary talent as a novelist can be attributed to his ability to fathom life in all its hues and colors. The role of feelings and emotions in the complexities of human existence allowed him to depict the challenges that man needs to face and surmount under the most testing of times. The references to the complicated situations in Egypt either directly or indirectly, reveal his profound concern for his country and the effects that had on his people. His understanding of relations and relationships and their intricacies did not only make him a popular writer but also gained him global recognition with his winning of the Nobel Peace Prize in Literature in 1988.

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