THE IMAGE OF THE PROSTITUTE IN MODERN ARABIC LITERATURE

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Gevorg Hunanyan

Graduate Program in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

The Ohio State University

2012

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Joseph Zeidan, Advisor

Dr. Sabra Webber
Copyright by

Gevorg Hunanyan

2012
Abstract

This thesis analyzes the image of the prostitute in Modern Arabic literature. The focus is on four Arab writers: Naguib Mahfouz, Yusuf Idris, Nawal El Saadawi and Salwa Bakr. A close reading of the novels in discussion reveals a sharp difference between how male and female writers portray prostitutes. While in the novels of Mahfouz and Idris prostitutes know the value of their body and they try to use it in order to attract males or to gain material benefits, in the works of female authors, girls become prostitutes because of the male characters who deny women control over their own bodies.

Although both male and female writers in Egypt addressed problems of prostitution in their writings, female writers are more active in calling for social and political changes while male writers seem more content with traditionally accepted norms and behaviors.

The thesis also explores the relationship between a prostitute’s character and politics, especially how the interaction between different government bodies and prostitutes is depicted. Juxtaposition of politics and prostitutes can reveal the attitude of the author towards the oppressive regime.

Another way to look at the image of the prostitute is to read it as a symbol. As a symbol it also differs from male to female writers’ points of view. In many instances, male authors do not hesitate to portray prostitutes in a negative way, hence reinforcing
her stereotype as a criminal. Meanwhile, women writers are more inclined to break the established pattern and reconstruct our ideas about morality and honor.
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Joseph Zeidan, for his tireless encouragement and advice during the process of researching and writing my thesis and throughout my time at Ohio State. My gratitude for his help will be incomplete if I don’t also thank him for his understanding and patience at times of hardship.

I also would like to thank my other committee member Dr. Sabra Webber for her insightful critiques, corrections and suggestions that have significantly strengthened this thesis.

Without these two generous and devoted scholars this work would have been impossible.
Vita

October 12, 1982 ........................................... Born-Yerevan, Armenia

1999-2003 ................................................. Faculty of Oriental Studies,
Yerevan State University

2001-2002 ................................................. Institute of Arabic Language,
Damascus, Syria

Summer 2006 ............................................ B.A. International Studies,
The Ohio State University

2008 to present ........................................... Graduate Teaching Associate, Near
Eastern Languages and Cultures, The
Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Near Eastern Languages and Cultures
Table of Contents

Abstract--------------------------------------------------------------- ii
Acknowledgements----------------------------------------------------- iv
Vita------------------------------------------------------------------- v
System of transliteration--------------------------------------------- vii
INTRODUCTION--------------------------------------------------------- 1
CHAPTER 1: Prostitution through different lenses------------------ 10
CHAPTER 2: Politics and Prostitution------------------------------ 23
CHAPTER 3: Prostitute as a Symbol ------------------------------- 38
CONCLUSION---------------------------------------------------------- 50
BIBLIOGRAPHY-------------------------------------------------------- 53
### SYSTEM OF TRANSLITERATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic Letter</th>
<th>Transliteration symbol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ا</td>
<td>ā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ب</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ت</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ث</td>
<td>th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ج</td>
<td>j</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ح</td>
<td>ḥ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>خ</td>
<td>kh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>د</td>
<td>d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ذ</td>
<td>dh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ر</td>
<td>r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ز</td>
<td>z</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>س</td>
<td>s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ش</td>
<td>sh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ص</td>
<td>š</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ض</td>
<td>ḍ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ط</td>
<td>ṭ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ظ</td>
<td>Ṿ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ع</td>
<td>gh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>غ</td>
<td>gh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

In this paper I analyze the image of the prostitute in Modern Arabic Literature. My concentration will be focused on four writers: Naguib Mahfouz (Midaq Alley, The Beginning and The End, Cairo Modern, Respected Sir, The Search, The Beggar, Autumn Quail, Children of Gebalawi, and The Thief and the Dogs), Yusuf Idris (New-York 80 and Miss Vienna), Nawal El Sadawi (Woman at Point Zero) and Salwa Bakr (The Golden Chariot). I will analyze how prostitutes are portrayed and how their image differs from male to female writers.

Although the image of the prostitute is a common one in literary works produced in different time periods and different cultures, this image gained particular popularity in nineteenth-century European literature. The rise of the novel in mid-eighteenth century Europe is connected to the growth of urban life and the change in its landscape. Indeed, prostitution is an urban phenomenon and this fact is one of the reasons why great European writers like Dostoyevsky, Zola, Shaw and others gave this character an important place in their works.

Compared to its European counterpart, the Arabic novel is very young. Its “birth certificate,” is issued with the publication of The Story of Zaynab in 1913. Only some thirty years later does the image of the prostitute appear in modern Arabic fiction. According to Khalid Kishtainy, harlotry was suppressed with the advancement of Islam.
and the wicked seductiveness of women became a theme in Islamic literature, much as it did in European fiction and drama.¹

The image of the prostitute gained its place in Arabic literature starting in the mid-twentieth century. Pioneered by Tawfiq al-Hakim and especially Naguib Mahfouz, other authors also employed this character in their creative writings. Here arises the question: Why was the image of the prostitute employed and why specifically in this period of time?

The first prostitute character appears in Naguib Mahfouz’s *Midaq Alley* (1945), the first of his social novels. Events taking place in these novels correspond with the time of World War Two. It is well documented that during wars and occupation the number of prostitutes rises significantly.² The great number of British soldiers stationed in Egypt was a major factor in the spread of sexual activity. The second factor which contributed to the spread of prostitutes was the growth of urban areas, notably in Cairo and Alexandria. In agricultural areas, prostitution had seldom posited a problem as early marriage was encouraged and young females were under everyday scrutiny of traditional families, sexual activity were restricted. Kishtainy argues that before Western colonialism, prostitution had not been a serious problem for Middle Eastern countries.³

Other scholars seeking to explain the rise of this character in Arabic literature come to the same conclusion. One of the analyses of the prostitute’s image in world literature and particularly in Arabic literature is presented by Diana Ali Muhammed. In

---

² Kishtany, 34.
³ Ibid., 63.
her article, “Good Prostitute in Arabic literature,” explains that the image of the prostitute in literature rose in Europe specifically in France and Russia with advancement of urban life. In France, the number of prostitutes increased with advancement of a luxury lifestyle. This, of course, was reflected in French literature. Influenced by European literature, Arabic literature adapted the image of the prostitute in the 1930’s. Later on, with the political, social and cultural changes in Arab countries, the image of the prostitute also changed. Dayana Muhammad brings two main viewpoints about the prostitute that existed in world literature and their reflection in Arabic literature. One is a Romantic view and the other is Socialist one. In this paper, I am mostly interested in the second one because socialist writers depicted prostitutes and explained prostitution as an exploitation of the female population by capitalist systems. When Naguib Mahfouz wrote his novels (especially in the second phase of his career1945-1960’s), socialist viewpoints were very popular among Arab intellectuals. It seems that Mahfouz himself was a sympathizer with the Socialist cause. We also have to remember that Egypt was going through rapid change and capitalism was making headway during that period. At the same time his native Cairo was changing and growing very quickly that the transformation should have had a great impact on the lifestyle and worldview of the city’s inhabitants. An emerging class of capitalists, who enjoyed a high lifestyle, in conjunction with the presence of an extremely poor urban population created a world of inequality where the low classes’ only desire was to escape poverty. Therefore, all these factors can

---

also explain the existence of so many prostitute characters in Mahfouz’s novels. It is particularly revealing when we think of their choice of prostitution as the only available way out of the poverty.

As noted by Naum Tannus, the problem of poverty cannot give a satisfactory explanation as to why women take up this profession; otherwise, most poor women would have become prostitutes. In his book, Tannus argues that most of Arab writers of this period depicted the image of the prostitute in a negative way. At the same time, the image of the prostitute is a rich one worth analyzing from a psychological and social point of view. I would add the possibility of analyzing the image as a symbol and also in connection to politics. Tannus also explains that prostitution is a problem of society and the wrong doing of the person should not deny her place in this society.

In addition to the proliferation of the image of the prostitute in Naguib Mahfouz’s work, we also encounter it in the works of Yusuf Idris, Nawal El Saadawi, and Salwa Bakr.

Traditionally, literary scholars were more concerned about the circumstances and socio-economic conditions that led a person down the path of prostitution and ultimately, to self-destruction. Very little attention is paid to the role of politics and the role of male characters in the propagation of such a human tragedy. By using the image of the prostitute, Arab writers not only tried to capture the realities of their time but also in some cases, called for a social and political change.

---

By adapting new literary modes, Arab writers appropriated the goals of European literature. An important goal was to address social ills. Salama Musa, a contemporary intellectual, formulated this notion in one of his articles where he argued in 1929 that Egypt must adopt scientific way in looking at life and society and that literature should be written for the people about the problems of the people and in the language which is understood by the people. According to Muhammad Badawi Naguib Mahfouz was one of the writers who followed this slogan.\(^6\)

Many scholars like Roger Allen pointed that Mahfouz not only brought the genre of fiction to an artistic level but also developed and crafted it into an expressive instrument for the analyses of his own society.\(^7\) This point is also supported by the accounts of several interviews, when Mahfouz admitted that in his works there is always critique of society and where he stated that art would not exist if the world is perfect. Similar to how Abbas and Hamida critically gaze in the mirror in *Midaq Alley*, Mahfouz’s novels critically gaze at society. As Gaber Asfour stated, novels are a well polished mirror in which society can see its reflection.\(^8\)

The details through which historical events are captured are astonishing; we can see the colonial force which needs prostitutes in order to serve its soldiers, the abolishment of the prostitution houses after the revolution of the free officers and the rise of the middle class and the influx of female students to the universities. The latter phenomenon is discussed in the article of Fatma Moussa Mahmoud, where she explains that an


unprecedented expansion in female education has naturally upset the old balance of relations between the sexes. The rising cost of living is to the advantage of the working women in the marriage market. ⁹

Novels of the above discussed authors not only reflect the realities of the time, but also give an interpretation of that very same reality. The pressing question becomes: what are the interpretations of the conditions for a woman’s becoming and practicing prostitution? The first chapter of my thesis analyzes the difference between images of the prostitute in the writings of male and female authors. Are we looking at the same phenomenon through different lenses? Indeed, in the novels of Nawal El Saadawi and Salwa Bakr, the prostitutes are portrayed as victims of males. In the works of Mahfouz and Idris, they are more of victims of circumstance and their own greed rather than the victims of male characters.

A close reading of the novels in discussion reveals a sharp difference between how male and female writers portray prostitutes. While in the novels of Mahfouz and Idris prostitutes know the value of their body and they try to use it in order to attract males or to gain material benefits, in the works of female authors, girls become prostitutes because of the male characters who deny women control over their own bodies. They are trying to separate themselves from them. In both cases prostitution led only to a destruction of the person. The question is how do we explain this tragedy? What are our interpretations of it? Besides capturing the human tragedy, these novels give voice to marginal people

and try to re-evaluate the system of values of the society and in some cases alter stereotypes surrounding prostitutes.

In the works of Naguib Mahfouz and Yusuf Idris, prostitutes have self-esteem; they know how to manipulate their body in order to achieve their goals. In some instances saved prostitutes even go back to their old profession such as in *Children of Gebelawi* or in *Beggar*.

In the writings of Mahfouz, one of the main reasons for a young girl to resort to prostitution is the absence of father in the house. However, in the writings of El Saadawi and Bakr, a male head of the family is the one who had the first sexual intercourse with the young girls.

The above discussed novels also dramatize political figures and representatives of the government. The second chapter of my thesis explores the relationship between a prostitute’s character and politics, especially how the interaction between different government bodies and prostitutes is depicted. Juxtaposition of politics and prostitutes can reveal the attitude of the author towards the oppressive regime.

Indeed, politics always played a huge role not only in Naguib Mahfouz’s work, but also in the whole body of Arabic literature. Once Mahfouz admitted that "in all my writings you will find politics. You might find a story which ignores love or any other subject but not politics: it is the very axis of our thinking." 10

As it is pointed by Samia Mehfez’s article, “*Respected Sir,*” in the Arab world we cannot dissociate art and politics (Haydar61). State and society can listen to or ignore the

---

voice of the writer. At the beginning of his career, Mahfouz provoked the Islamic authorities but he always tried to avoid such confrontations like in the case of *Children of Gebelawi* (1959); however, this did not prevent these authorities from attacking him in 1994. In this article, there is a quotation from Mahfouz about neutrality that many scholars see in his novels where he says: “You know that there is no such thing as neutral language…I know only one thing: when I represent the world with neutrality, I do so without being neutral.”

For this reason, I will try to show in this chapter the influence of politics on the development of prostitution in the face of government, police, soldiers and other political institutions. I will unravel the means by which these institutions abuse and exploit women using the power given to them.

If we read Mahfouz’s prostitutes’ behavior as an act of revolt as suggested by Miriam Cooke, then women writers take it into the next level. Another approach in understanding a prostitute’s image is analyzing it as a symbol. In my last chapter, I will analyze how the prostitute’s character can be viewed as a symbol. It is well documented that from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the image of a woman was used to symbolize Egypt. For every Arab and Egyptian man, his honor is his wife and daughter. If we think about Egypt as one entity, womankind would symbolize its honor—an honor which needs protection and not abuse or humiliation. Here again we are dealing with traditional stereotypical view of prostitution very much reinforced by the works of male

---

authors. At the same time, women authors are trying to get into a deeper level of understanding of this phenomenon and ultimately deconstruct the existing norms and stereotypes. Here I will try to explain how the prostitute can be read not as traditional symbol of immorality but also as a symbol of oppression.

Although both male and female writers in Egypt addressed problems of prostitution in their writings, female writers are more active in calling for social and political changes while male writers seem more content with traditionally accepted norms and behaviors. If in Mahfouz’s novels women revolt against existing social and traditional norms by choosing prostitution, in El Saadawi’s novel a prostitute revolts against the mentality that led her to take the path of prostitution. Unfortunately, every type of revolt attempted by women is eventually brutally crushed.
CHAPTER 1: Prostitution through different lenses

What does the image of a prostitute signify in the modern literature? Is she a criminal or a fallen angel? What circumstances forced her to lose her honor and practice prostitution? Is society responsible for propagating prostitution or is it solely the prostitute’s fault? We can find many images in world literature and the answer to these questions vary depending on which point of view we adopt in looking at this phenomenon.

Different images of prostitutes are analyzed and categorized in *The Image of The Prostitute in Modern Literature*\(^\text{13}\). At first I would like to apply some of the prevailing descriptions to prostitutes in Arabic literature and specifically to the novels under consideration. The first type of prostitute is the so called “*the hapless harlot.*” This type of prostitute is portrayed as a victim of social and economic circumstances. Poverty and misfortune are two main causes that drive a female to prostitution.\(^\text{14}\) Socio-economic circumstances have been the number one explanation for females’ downfall in world

---


\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 5.
literature and in Arabic literature as well. Many critics point out to the fact that most of the characters in discussed novels struggle with a high level of poverty.

All the heroes of the social novels of Mahfouz are poor and unfortunate; events even push them deeper into the trap of degradation. In the *new Cairo*, poverty forces Ihsan to earn income to feed her brothers. Poverty also forces Hamida to seek ways to leave the alley. Her previous fiancé Abbas Halu was away to earn money so they would be able to get married. In *The Beginning and the End*, the family is faced with the loss of the father and the breadwinner of the family. Nafisa and her brothers struggle with poverty. The only way out of the situation was her job as dressmaker.

Poverty is also the dominant background in El Saadawi’s and Salwa Bakr’s novels. We cannot ignore the deep poverty and its effects on Firdaus’s life. In Salwa Bakr’s novel it is presented not only in the prostitute Huda’s family but also in the lives of all other characters. The question becomes the following: can it be the sole explanation for prostitution?

As we will see, the prostitute is a complex character in the novels and the factors which led a female to prostitution cannot be sufficiently explained by poverty. In my opinion, the poverty in the discussed novels is only background information which creates extreme situations for the characters. It also corresponds to the situation in which most of Egyptian society lived in at the time.

The second type of prostitute is the seduced-and-abandoned. After losing her virginity, such a character is doomed to become a prostitute.\(^\text{15}\) Most of the prostitutes in

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 4.
Mahfouz’s novels are in between these two categories. Ihsan is seduced by Qasim Bey. Hamida is lured into the world of prostitution by Faraj. At first she hoped that Faraj would marry her, but her hopes were in vain. The only thing Faraj cared about was his interest in selling Hamida’s body. Nafisa was seduced and had sexual intercourse with Jabir Suleyman. After that, she was abandoned. With the full realization that she does not have anything to lose she turned to prostitution.

The saved prostitute is represented as another type of prostitute. She is a person who is redeemed from her profession. This type of prostitutes is very rare in world literature, including Arabic literature. Even if the prostitute gets a chance to honorably earn her living or someone risks his reputation to save her, she eventually goes back to her old profession. This happens in Children of Gebalawi with Rafa and with Qaderiya in Respected Sir.

The femme fatale is a woman who uses her seductive power not only to earn money but also to gain social status.16 This type of prostitutes brings short-lived happiness and then suffering. This is the case with Karima in Al-Tariq. The same categorization can be applied to another female character Nadira in The Golden Chariot.

Another type of prostitute is a prostitute who could turn her profession into profitable business.17 A clear case is Basima in Al-Tariq. Her prostitution allowed her to become a well off entrepreneur.

I would place the prostitute in Yusuf Idris’s New York 80 in between all the above mentioned categories. This prostitute is a very well educated person who changed her job

16 Ibid., 3.
17 Ibid., 5.
from sexual therapist to a prostitute because the latter pays better. She is very proud of her profession and at the same time she will do everything to seduce the man she wants.

The weak but wonderful prostitute is a prostitute with highest humane qualities. She has a golden heart, but under certain circumstances is forced to become a prostitute. We see this type mostly in women authors’ writings. Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* is an example of this type of prostitute,

This categorization obviously shows that female writers are more inclined towards depiction of the prostitute as a good-hearted person who falls victim to terrible circumstances and sometimes is forced into prostitution. We can hardly blame Firdaus or Huda for becoming prostitutes. The events of their lives were beyond their control. On the other hand, Naguib Mahfouz’s world is not white and black. Although circumstances and male characters have their role in the exploitation of females, the responsibility of the events are equally shared by victims, too. In Naguib Mahfouz novels, prostitutes are not naïve or sincere. They are fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses.

It is important to mention that Naguib Mahfouz’s novels are divided into several time periods. In social writings, the characters are in deep poverty and sometimes are hit by some kind of disaster right at the beginning of the novel. As Egyptian society was getting better off economically, Mahfouz’s characters also changed their status. In later short novels, we do not witness deep poverty. On the contrary, most fictional characters are in a good financial situation and search for the meaning of life or justice. As Somekh
notices, the image of the prostitute also changes in the social novel where they came from Cairo but in later novels they came from the countryside.18

In the social novels of Mahfouz, we have the full picture of a prostitutes’ development. Step by step the author introduces us to the circumstances and inner thoughts of the characters. In three social novels, the path of fallen women is very well analyzed. First, unfortunate circumstances like the death or absence of the father put a girl into a dangerous situation. The downfall of the feminine character is very convincing. In later novels, we encounter established prostitutes. In these novels, the author lays out the conditions and circumstances that lead a woman to her destruction. There is a genuine interest in deciphering and showing us the reasons of human suffering.

The very first novel of Naguib Mahfouz where we see the image of prostitute is Midaq Alley. As mentioned earlier, the heroine Hamida, forced by poverty and her desire to leave the alley, was lured into prostitution. She forgot about her fiancé Abbas, who was the best match for her but who would not be able to give her the high standard of living that she desires. When Abbas returns to Cairo, he finds out what happened to Hamida. He blames Faraj and with his naivety wants to save his beloved. Hamida does not want to return to the alley or to quit her job. The only thing she wants is revenge on Faraj. For that she is even ready to sacrifice Abbas. Eventually, Abbas dies at the hands of British soldiers because of Hamida. Even before that we see an instance which shows that Hamida is very well aware of her seductive power. She wraps her cloak around her limbs in order to emphasize the beauty of her body and to attract attention.

In *The Beginning and the End*, Nafisa does not resist Suleyman because she wants to use her seductive power to find her a husband. She knows that she is not attractive and her family is not rich, so the prospect of marriage is very vague for her. Although Ibrahim El-Sheikh argues that Nafisa became a prostitute under social and economic forces which were beyond her control, 19 I think that the author portrays her as also sharing the responsibility for her downfall. Although Mahfouz shows the unfortunate circumstances which forced her to work and the desire for marriage as prompting her to have sexual intercourse with Jabir Suleyman, it was ultimately her sexual appetite that threw her into prostitution. She is portrayed as thinking that earning money is a good pretext for her immoral actions. 20 Despite all these she remained loyal, proud, and anxious about her family and its honor.

These two prostitutes are also described as people with agency, who can resist and argue. Hamida has always been aggressive. 21 She also resists and shows her character to Faraj. 22 Nafisa is calmer, but she also can be very aggressive. For example, when she discovers that Suleyman is getting married to another girl, she does not hesitate to get into an argument with him. 23

In some instances prostitutes can be even depicted as cunning, treacherous, and untrustworthy. (This theme will be analyzed in chapter 3)

In Mahfouz’s late novels, male characters first find refuge from everyday life with a prostitute. After some time they come to realize that these prostitutes are human beings and they can offer much more than just pleasure. At the end of The Thief and the Dogs novel, when Said was about to give up his life, he was thinking about Nur and assuming that she will be a very good mother for his children. It is very interesting that the protagonist is ready to trust raising his children to a prostitute. For Said, there are two women – one is his wife and the other one is the prostitute, Nur. Their comparison in the novel does not leave us with any doubt with whom the protagonist is ready to continue his life and who is a more positive character for him.

Respected Sir is a short novel about Isa whose only goal in the life is to climb the ladder of civil service. He is also from poor background. Through his life he avoids marriage fearing that it would hamper his career advancement. At the same time he thinks about marriage as a tool for gaining a new position which is why he waits for the right girl, maybe the daughter of one of his bosses. The only joy for him is his visits to prostitutes’ neighborhoods where he regularly meets Qaderiya, a half black prostitute. She served as a refuge from everyday life. Mahfouz gives us an unexpected turn in the novel when the protagonist marries Qaderiya. The marriage makes both of them miserable. Eventually the prostitute goes back to her old profession.

In the novels the attitude of males toward females is also disclosed by the authors and it is not only towards the prostitutes but also towards womankind in general. When in The Beginning and The End Suleyman lured Nafisa to his apartment, she was not a prostitute, but the only thing he wanted was a sexual affair.
We also have to note that when Naguib Mahfouz was writing his social novels, Egypt and Cairo were undergoing a rapid change. Society was not sure about the new role of women in it. Contradictory viewpoints can be noted in the novels, too. In *New Cairo*, specifically at the beginning of the novel, there is a discussion between two friends about the role of females and their place in the university.\(^{24}\) The argument about the greater role of women in society reaches its climax in the view of prostitutes. The most vivid example is the argument between Abbas and his friend Husain about Hamida and Faraj. When angry Abbas blames the pimp for Hamida’s tragedy, Husain says:

> “Hamida is real culprit. Did not she run off with him? Didn’t she yield to him? How can you criticize him? A girl attracted him and he seduced her: he found her easy and got what he wanted. He wanted to exploit her talents so he let her loose in the taverns. Why, he is a clever fellow. I only wish I could do the same to get out of my financial problems. Hamida is a real criminal, my friend.”\(^{25}\)

While we see these two contradictory attitudes in Mahfouz’s writings, we do not see a sharp criticism of any of them. In his novels, the female characters are equally responsible for the tragedy with the male characters, but in El Saadawi’s novel there is only one guilty person – the “male gender.”

So in novels by male authors, prostitutes are capable of protecting themselves and their interests. They are victims of the poverty and unfortunate circumstances as much as the male characters of the novels. They are very well aware of their seductive power and


try to use it for their benefits. However, in the novels of female authors, women in general and prostitutes in particular are portrayed as very weak creatures who can be easily exploited. In the male dominated world of El Saadawi and Salwa Bakr, women not only struggle with poverty, but also with men. The ways that society constructs gender relations is the cause of their prostitution.

A striking difference between the prostitutes of male authors and prostitutes in *The Golden Chariot* and in *Woman at Point Zero*, is the fact that the women are very naïve and sincere. For example, Firdaus tries to find an honorable job with her secondary school diploma. She shows that diploma to all the people she meets without understanding that they only want to use her. Huda and her mother in *The Golden Chariot* are also very naïve and they believe that a relationship with the policeman would bring them high status in the society and high level of life. So Huda’s mother agrees to marry her daughter to him.

My research shows that the prostitute signifies completely different things for male and female authors. In the case of male authors, the prostitute is more of a victim of unfortunate circumstances, poverty, and her own greed. So the female character is equally responsible for her downfall. If in Naguib Mahfouz novels prostitutes choose their destiny or at least they share part of their faith in women’s fiction the prostitutes are clearly victims of men. Mahfouz’s prostitutes are not forced to have sexual affairs. The above discussed circumstances brought them to the point of prostitution, but they eventually decided to cross the line of prostitution. Even Faraj did not force Hamida into prostitution, he just “offered” it. On the other hand, women are brutally and physically
forced into prostitution in women’s writings. In her novel *Woman at Point Zero*, Nawal El Saadawi portrays a prostitute who is about to be executed. According to El Saadawi’s own introduction it is based on a true story.\(^{26}\) She met this inmate while she was doing her research as a doctor in prison. Although Georges Tarabishi states that the novel is autobiographical, because the doctor wants to be identified with the inmate, the prostitute, Nawal El Saadawi completely rejects this idea.\(^ {27}\) In her reply to Tarabishi’s *Woman against her Sex*, she claims that her own father was completely different person and her family has no similarities with Firdaus’s family.

The novel has an intriguing introduction because the personality of the prostitute Firdaus is surrounded by mystery; she does not eat and thinks a lot, she prefers death on living, she does not want to see anybody, she is imprisoned for murder but others do not believe that she is capable of it, and she will be dead in a couple of days.\(^ {28}\) Her refusal to talk to anybody or appeal to the president ignites a question: Is she better than others? Is she above all other people? And how is it possible that a prostitute thinks of herself in such a way?

We receive a full answer to these questions only at the end of the novel. The novel is told from the first person perspective. Firdaus narrates her life story. It is a very emotionally charged work which cannot leave a reader without questioning gender roles in our world. Contrary to Mahfouz’s prostitutes, who are victims of circumstances and their own actions, Firdaus is directly a victim of the male dominated world, the victim of

\(^{28}\)El Saadawi, 4.
gender inequality and injustice. She hates all the men, which is not surprising because they made her a prostitute. Firdaus saw inequality and injustice directed toward women when she was a child. This inequality and injustice grew into a bigger problem and eventually led her into prostitution. Without going into the discussion of gender roles in this novel, I want to bring up the fact that the first sexual harassment she suffered was from her own uncle. After suffering from her husband, Sheikh Mahmoud’s brutality and sexual abuse, she decides to run away. Firdaus meets Bayumi and thinks of him as a father. When Bayumi asked her if she likes tangerines or oranges, she was astonished: nobody before cared what she liked and in reality she didn’t even know which fruit was her favorite. We do not see this kind of sentimental treatment of the subject in the works of male writers. However Bayumi’s good treatment of Firdaus is deceiving and after some time he locks her in the apartment and forces her to have sexual intercourse with his friends. He starts to beat her and force her into sexual intercourse whenever he wants. The last person who sealed her downfall into prostitution was Sharif Salah el Din. From their conversation, it is clear that sexual harassment and rape were not rare acts. Sharifa says, “What did the son of a dog do to you? They are all sons of dogs, running under various names, Mahmoud, Hassanein, Fawzy, Sabri, Ibrahim, Awadain, Bayoumi. I know them all. Which one of them started it? Your father, your brother…, one of your

\footnotesize

29Ibid., 11.
30Ibid., 14.
31Ibid., 50.
uncles?” Sharifa taught her to value her body and herself because before that Firdaus did not have self-confidence. She always thought of herself as an unworthy and ugly person.

Looking at the women and especially at the prostitutes as objects is a common trend in many male characters in these novels. This is especially true for the later novels of Naguib Mahfouz. In these novels (Respected Sir, Autumn Quail, The Thief and the Dogs, The Beggar), the story is narrated from the male protagonist’s point of view. At first he does not take the prostitute as a human being, but at the end of each novel he is compelled to see human nature in her, albeit too late. On the contrary, works by contemporary Arab women writers especially Nawal El-Saadawi and Salwa Bakr depict gender inequality from the women’s point of view. This inequality reaches its culmination with the prostitutes. Their life stories are emotionally charged. The description of the events and the people are very detailed. We see their suffering and injustice. As a result, we look at the world from a different angle. These writers compel the reader to look at prostitutes as human beings. And this is exactly what happens to protagonists in the discussed novels, too. The only difference between El Saadawi and Naguib Mahfouz is that at the end of Woman at point zero the prostitute is not miserable as probably she was throughout her life to that point. Though she is waiting for her death penalty, Firdaus in Woman at point zero, feels that for the first time she has claimed her rights back from the society.

In Mahfouz’s novels, the male protagonists first look at the prostitutes solely as objects of their pleasure and desire, but after some time their attitude towards them

---

32 Ibid., 52.
changes radically and after this happens they are doomed to failure and misery. It happened to Rifa (Children of Gebelawi), Uthman Bayumi and Qadriyya (Respected Sir), Nur and Said(The thief and the dogs), Isa and Riri (Autumn quail). This point of view is also analyzed and supported by Miriam Cooke.\textsuperscript{33}

The objectification of women is a trend in male characters. As Pamela Allegretto-Diiulio notes, objectifying the female provides authority and dominating power to the male who is a guide of morality.\textsuperscript{34} By objectifying women, male characters quench their thirst for sexual pleasure without bearing any responsibility for the females and in some instances they also are able to receive some financial gains as it is the case with Faraj. While it seems that the male writers are not fully ready to reconsider their attitudes toward feminine gender in general and toward prostitutes in particular, the female writers are more inclined toward radical changes. Firdaus states: “I am not a prostitute. But right from my early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them, taught me to grow as a prostitute”.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{33} Cooke, 32.
\textsuperscript{34} Pamela Allegretto-Diiulio, \textit{Naguib Mahfouz : A Western and Eastern Cage of Female Entrapment} (New York: Cambria Press, 2007), 36.
Chapter 2: Politics and prostitution

In the Middle East, politics have always played a great role on the literary scene. Taking into account the existence of oppressive regimes in many countries of the region, it is not surprising that writers are compelled to express their concerns about the government by hiding them under the cloak of fiction. As many scholars have pointed out, a narrative is an alternative form to official history. Many governments use their glorify their actions and policies through it. At the same time, ruling regimes try to silence writers and intellectuals who criticize the official state of affairs and raise their voice to express this discontent. One scholar who surveyed this situation very well is Menahem Milson. In his work, he writes: “Narrative fiction as a description and criticism of current events assumes a special significance when other forms of public comment are stifled”.  

This was especially true in Egypt where, in one night, hundreds of intellectuals could be imprisoned. Literature and fiction become a dangerous art for those who practice it in order to point to some pitfalls of the social and political situation of the country.

At the beginning of his career, Naguib Mahfouz intended to write the whole history of Egypt in the form of literary fiction. After producing four historical novels, he abandoned his plan and turned to realism. Throughout his seventy year career, he experimented with different forms of writing and his genius produced about fifty novels, more than three hundred short stories, five plays and dozens of movie scripts.37 One of the reasons why I started to extensively read Mahfouz’s writings is because his novels can serve as a history textbook of Egypt. In his novels, we witness historical events that had an impact on the people and the nation as whole. In this sense, Mahfouz accomplished his initial plan of writing the history of Egypt in the twentieth century.

It is also important to mention significant historical events of the twentieth century that occurred in Egypt. As it was discussed in the interviews with Naguib Mafouz, the first event that shook his childhood was the revolution of 1919 carried by Saad Zaghlul and the Wafd party. Britain had occupied Egypt since 1882. This revolution eventually led to the recognition of Egypt’s independence in 1922. After going through two world wars, another revolution took place in Egypt. In 1952, Free Officers took power and abolished the monarchy. Many historians still argue that this was not a revolution but a coup d’état. However, promised reforms in the spheres of economy and politics largely remained unfulfilled. Political parties were banned under the pretext of national interest, embezzlement, corruption and patronage were widespread. It is nevertheless safe to say that social justice remained a dream for most of the Egyptian population. At the same time, Egypt went through several wars with Israel. The greatest impact on the political,

37 See Rasheed El-Enany, Naguib Mahfouz: His Life and Times (Cairo: The American University Press, 2007).
social, and intellectual life of the country was 1967’s six day war. This defeat had a devastating effect not only on politicians but also intellectuals of the Arab world and especially on Egyptian writers. Egypt received another major blow with the assassination of the president of Egypt Anwar Sadat in 1981. The Islamic Brotherhood took responsibility for this assassination. This was a culmination of a collision course of two completely different ideologies which were dominant during the discussed time period in Egypt. When the nation was in search to find its place and identity in the modern world, religious, capitalistic, and socialist worldviews were competing for dominance.\textsuperscript{38}

Mahfouz had never been actively involved in the political scene of the country; he was never been a member of any party. He could not directly criticize the government unless he was ready to be fired his job. It is worth mentioning that he was never imprisoned, as were many Egyptian intellectuals and writers. Because of this fact some scholars accuse Mahfouz of not criticizing Nasser’s regime during the period of his presidency; they point that not a single line was crossed out of his works, and that only after Nasser’s death did Mahfouz start to criticize him. In his book, Milson rebuts this argument by analyzing some novels and showing that Mahfouz used allegory and symbols in order to hide his criticism. He also points out that Mahfouz also criticized the regime of Saadat in his novels.\textsuperscript{39} While Milson limits the scope of his study to the works that contain criticism directed toward Nasser’s regime, I also see Naguib Mahfouz’s criticism in his early


\textsuperscript{39} Milson, 132-142.
noveis, which correspond to a prerevolutionary period and were directed towards the government officials of the period.

In this chapter, I will discuss the political criticism of Mahfouz and two female writers: Salwa Bakr and Nawal El Saadawi as it appears in their fictional writings. The interesting point is that these writers employed the character of the prostitute in order to reveal the true nature of government officials and to express their discontent with the social and political situation in the country. It also appears that not only the overall sociopolitical situation, but also Arab writers’ backgrounds which plays a huge role in their creative writing. Naguib Mahfouz is not an exception.

At the very beginning of his career, Naguib Mahfouz was criticized by religious and political authorities. It started with his first historical novel *Absurdity of Faith* and reached its culmination with an assassination attempt on his life, which was a reaction to one of his great novels *Children of Gebelawi*. The argument of religious authorities against *Absurdity of Faith* was that faith is a creation of God and it cannot be absurd. In the allegorical novel *Children of Gebelawi*, the history of mankind is retold from a symbolic perspective. It was banned in Egypt because of protests and complaints from Al-Azhar.

Naguib Mahfouz’s social class and long years of employment in the government as a civil servant determined the social class and occupation of his fictional characters. Almost all of them are middle class and most of them are civil servants. Many prostitute characters also inhabit Mahfouz’s fiction. A prostitute’s image gives an opportunity for
other characters to open up and fully develop. These characters’ interactions with prostitutes take very different forms.

In the first chapter, I discussed the social conditions that paved the way for a woman to become a prostitute, but there is also another perspective that needs to be discussed. Many male characters who play significant roles in the downfall of female images were politicians or representatives of the government branches.

Traditionally, male members of the family have been responsible for female members. As we see in these novels, one of the preconditions for a female character to become a prostitute is the absence of the father in the family. Hamida has never known her father while Nafisa’s father died at the beginning of the story. In Ihsan’s case, the father is a morally corrupt person. Firdaus, Huda, and Riri do not have fathers either. So the father’s absence combined with poverty becomes the primary reasons for women’s downfall. It is not a coincidence that Bayumi, asks Firdaus about her father and brothers before his sexual advances (46). A female without a male protector is an easy target for rape and sexual assault. Mahrousa was raped because she did not have a husband, Jamalat’s sister was sexually targeted by the neighbor because there was no male person in their house. So the unfortunate circumstances put our heroines outside traditional protection. At the same time, we do not see extended families in these novels. There are no cousins or uncles involved. The family size is pretty small and therefore, we are dealing with modern families. Driven by poverty and absence of a father, female characters are forced to work and they are outside of the traditional protection. In these circumstances, they become an easy prey for sexual harassment or choose prostitution as means of survival.
One of the main functions of a government is providing protection for members of the society, but in these novels we see that the government not only eschews protection, but also most of the characters we encounter are immoral and materially or sexually exploit the prostitutes.

One of Naguib Mahfouz’s first social novels is New Cairo (1945). In this novel, the protagonist Mahjub comes from a very poor family and he is ready to sacrifice his honor in order to climb the social ladder. The story involves three main characters; in addition to Mahjub, there are also Qasim bey, a high rank official, and beautiful Ihsan, his concubine. Ihsan was ready to marry her beloved, but when pressurized by her family and the advances of Qasim bey, she became Qasim bey’s mistress. Because the family of Ihsan is amoral, the girl is trapped in the role of a high level official’s concubine. As Somekh rightly notices, Ihsan is a flat character; she has a marginal role, but she is very important for development of the protagonist Mahjub’s character.40

In this novel, the protagonist Mahjub agrees to marry Ihsan. Qasim Bey promises Mahjub a civil secretary position and a paid apartment if he would agree to marry her. As Ibrahim El-Sheikh points, a “cabinet minister represents on the one hand the corruption of the political system and on the other hand the injustice in the distribution of wealth in the country at time”.41 Mahjub and Ihsan are both victims of a sociopolitical system of the country. Their only way out of poverty is selling their honor. In this and other of Mahfouz’s novels, the downfall and degradation of the person has a twofold cause. One of them is circumstances; the second one is a corrupt politician. Ihsan’s family is

40 Somekh, 82.
41 Ibrahim El-Sheikh, 87.
completely sunk into poverty and degradation. Her father is a drug addict and forces her to earn money for his other six children. The elite of the country are ready to benefit from the circumstances she is in, and in this situation, she becomes a prey of a government official and her downfall is complete. Qasim, a high member of the minister cabinet, is responsible for corrupting Ihsan; he also eagerly offers a job position to Mahjub in return of the favor. So the prostitute’s character became a vehicle to unveil the degree of greed and injustice among the people who have high positions or are seeking them.

For this novel, Mahfouz was called for interrogation by the mufti of the *Waqf* ministry, Sheikh Ahmad Huseyn, who was sympathetic towards the author and advised him to stay away from writing about these dangerous things and write about love instead.\(^{42}\) Similarly, upon publishing *Midaq Alley*, Mahfouz was interrogated by Ibrahim al-Mazini and was advised not to write about social realities.\(^{43}\)

In *Midaq Alley*, the downfall of Hamida starts with the arrival of Faraj Ibrahim, a pimp who offers prostitutes to British soldiers. He comes to the alley with the political campaign of Ibrahim Farhat.\(^{44}\) The similarity of the names suggests that they are two sides of the same coin. Faraj immediately notices Hamida and lures her into prostitution. As in the previous novel, Hamida tries to find a way out of poverty. She likes to repeat that the world does not have value without nice clothes. In the old part of Cairo, there are two ways out of poverty – to find a rich husband or to work for the British. In the case of women working for the British means prostitution. The first option did not work for


\(^{43}\) Mehrez, 64.

Hamida; eventually, it was Faraj who paved the way to prostitution for her. Even though she found a way out of poverty, Hamida was not happy with Faraj’s treatment and she was ready for revenge.

In another novel, *The Beginning and the End*, prostitute Nafisa’s brother is responsible for her suicide. Throughout the story, she was the one who took care of her brother. At the time, when Hasanayn was about to become an officer, he learnt about immoral acts of Nafisa and ordered her arrest for prostitution. After he took her out of jail and on their way home, Nafisa committed suicide in order not to ruin her brother’s future and reputation. The reader is not convinced that she deserves the punishment and the officer Hasanayn is more likely to be blamed for this tragedy. It has been claimed that Anwar Saadat was angry about the end of the novel questioning how Mahfouz could allow Nafisa to commit suicide. He did not think that Hasan is one of us?

After the period of social novels, we do not fully get a developed image of the prostitute; rather the prostitute plays a secondary role. Nonetheless, I do not mean to imply that the prostitute occupied a marginal role. The image of the prostitute helps the reader better understand the worldview and internal character of protagonists.

After the Free Officers Revolution, Naguib Mahfouz stayed silent for more than seven years; his explanation for this silence is that he thought that the old social ills are gone with the old regime.

The first discontent with the 1952 revolution can be seen in the novel *Children of Gebelawi*.45 Mahfouz talks with words of one of the characters: “as long as there are

---

45 Milson, 134.
futuwats (gangs, authorities) there will be emigrants”.\textsuperscript{46} Somekh also points out that in Children of Gebelawimost of the people always live in poverty because of the greed of rulers.\textsuperscript{47}

One of the best novels that Mahfouz published in this period is The Thief and the Dogs. The novel takes place at some point after the revolution. The protagonist Said comes out of jail and is ready to avenge from the people who betrayed him. At first, he needs to find shelter, help, and refuge. He turned to Sufi Sheikh, old friend, and mentor Rauf Alwan. The Sheikh was like a father to him, but Said realized that religion’s solutions cannot satisfy him. For Rauf Alwan, the revolution proved to be very fruitful. He is living in a large villa and enjoyed a high position in society. At the same time, he does not want to be associated with criminals like Said and refuses to help him. The interesting point is that Rauf Alwan was a revolutionary and preached his ideology about oppressed classes and injustice to Said. Unfortunately, his high position changed his worldview and the oppressed person became an oppressor himself. After Said had killed two people by accident, the police was looking for him. Naguib Mahfouz reveals his sympathy towards the protagonist and shows that public opinion actually supports him. The outlaw protagonist has more support from the working class than the government who pledged to support the national cause. The only helpful people for Said were his friends Tarzan and the prostitute Nur. Naguib Mahfouz juxtaposes the image of a helpful prostitute with that of the government as represented by Rauf Alwan and the police.

\textsuperscript{47} Somekh, 102.  

31
In my opinion this work obviously shows an author’s discontent and disappointment with the new regime. The government changed and yesterday’s revolutionaries assumed power, but are they better than their predecessors? The fact that Said’s friend and mentor, Rauf Alwan, is ready to sacrifice him, shows discontent with the new system and people who are in power now. For Rauf Alwan a lot of things have changed in life. The revolution brought him a position of power and a high quality life style. On the other hand, nothing has changed for Tarzan and Nur. These two people are the most helpful for Said.

In Autumn Quail, we are in the time frame when the revolution is already a reality and the protagonist Uthman is dismissed from the government because of his corrupt past. He is in total despair and looking for ways to get his act together. He finds refuge in Alexandria where he meets a prostitute Riri. For him, the affair with the prostitute is the last degradation in his life. A corrupt politician who has been dismissed from his position and lost his power turns to a prostitute. She does not know anything about the politics so she is a good refuge from the outside world. For him, the prostitute is an object for possession and he gets rid of her once she becomes pregnant.

Our discussion of the role of the prostitute character in juxtaposition with government officials and its role in revealing their character is incomplete if we do not take a look at the novels by female writers of the twentieth century. Arab women entered the world of literature in the nineteenth century. The spread of education accelerated this process in the twentieth century.48 Hundreds of women writers left their mark on Arabic fiction.

writing. Through this medium, they raised their concerns and showed their suffering and injustices in their societies.

In this study, we find images of government officials in the works of two prominent women writers. Government figures’ interactions with prostitutes reveal the attitude of the author toward the government. In *The Golden Chariot*, the oppression does not come only from male characters but especially from representatives of different branches of the government. Many of them are responsible for the rape and torture of women and especially prostitutes. Rasheed el-Enany formulated the main theme in Salwa Bakr’s writings in a concise and correct manner. He states:

> “In the world of Salwa Bakr, both men and women are fellow victims of a repressive political regime and an unjust social order, but within their fellowship, women become additionally the victims of men. The norms of authoritarian government oppress them (and men) as citizens of diminished rights. In Bakr’s fictional world, however, it is the oppression of women that is at the center of attention: it is through female consciousness that narratives are told”.  

Another literary critic, Harlow, states: “Salwa Bakr has chosen the novel as the form and the prison as setting for reexamination of women’s location in the gender order and the various ways they resist this positioning.” It is not a coincidence that in SalwaBakr’s *The golden Chariot*, Huda’s husband is a policeman. He is not only corrupt, but also a drug addict. He brings confiscated hashish home every day and forces Huda to

---


use it, too. Eventually, he abandons her and their kids. In order to support her children, Huda becomes a prostitute. In another incident, Mahrousha, one of the characters of the same novel, was raped by three soldiers who are the same age as her son. In this way, representatives of two government structures who are supposed to protect the people are responsible for their abuse and humiliation.

Salwa Bakr had been very active in the domain of politics since her student years. However she had to stop her political activities because of the dangers connected with such activities in a country like Egypt. In her interview with Nadje Sadig al-Ali she states: “So I quit politics. But after some time I felt that I had a lot of things to say, a lot to express. Then I discovered writing, to write novels and short stories. And I realized that I could express myself well in writing.”

So Salwa Bakr uses the novel not only to express herself but also to criticize the social and political system of the country, Magda al-Nowaihi noticed that in the fiction of Salwa Bakr the “sense of an absence of justice in life” is in large part due to the failure of the three major institutions of any modern nation: the police, the army and the judiciary.

One of the writers who tries to challenge Egypt’s status quo socially, culturally, and politically is Nawal El Saadawi. She became the target for religious and political persecution for her direct criticism and political activities against the government. She suffered a lot. She was fired from her job, her books were censored in Egypt, she was even imprisoned, her name appeared on fundamentalist death lists and she had to leave

---

(51) Nadje Sadig Al-Ali, Gender Writing/Writing Gender (Cairo: The American University Press, 1993.)

34
her country.\textsuperscript{52} Indeed, she paid a heavy price for speaking up against injustice which is mainly directed towards women. El Saadawi’s fight against an oppressive regime and a male-dominated world is reflected in her writings.

In \textit{Woman at Point Zero}, Firdaus wants to spit on men. She learnt from history books about the caliphs and other people in the government who throughout the history were deceiving and using ordinary people for their interests.\textsuperscript{53} She also went to patriotic meetings and gatherings. There she understood that patriotism is for the poor as they have to protect the land which belongs to rich. When Firdaus escaped from the brothel and sought help, she met a policeman. Instead of helping her, he threatened her with arrest. The policeman explained that it is his duty to protect the honorable society from criminals like her. She was offered paid sex instead of an arrest. But after forced sexual intercourse in the car, the policeman refused to pay. This brief incident with the policeman does not add to the overall plot of the story but shows the corruption of the police and the harm that comes from that direction as well.

In another incident, Firdaus sought help from a pimp who only wanted to use her. After she went to the police department, she discovered that they turned a blind eye on pimp’s actions. The pimp, another oppressive authoritarian male, and the police are equally responsible for the exploitation of Firdaus. It becomes clear that the police do not offer any protection or help.

In this novel, criticism of the government is not limited to police. We can also see an indirect criticism of revolutionaries and the head of states. In a sarcastic episode, the

\textsuperscript{53} El Saadawi, \textit{Woman at Point Zero}, 27.
police try to force Firdaus to have sex with a foreign diplomat as her patriotic duty. She is told that if she refuses, relation, between the two nations will be jeopardized.54

Firdaus was also deceived by the revolutionary Ibrahim. He promised her love but the only thing he wanted was free sex. He was fighting for the rights of the working class but eventually got married to his director’s daughter in order to get a promotion. When Firdaus discovered his marriage, she left the company.

In the last incident, Saudi Sheikh is ready to spend as much as Firdaus demands for sex. In this case, it seems that Firdaus speaks in the name of fellow citizens when she accuses the Sheikh of spending his country’s money. At the end of the novel, she shows her bitterness towards the authorities by stating: “All my life I was looking for something that would fill me with pride, something that would make me hold my head high, higher than the heads of everyone else, especially kings, princes and rulers”.55 And the only time she is proud of herself is when she eventually is able hit a man. With that action she gains the freedom of which she was deprived by men just as the nation is deprived of its rights because of the state and government.

As a result of everything mentioned above, if a woman is outside the protection of the family, she becomes a target for sexual abuse. The government, which pledged to support people’s rights, does not protect them and in many cases, it even becomes the cause for their exploitation. By juxtaposing the positive image of the prostitute with the corrupt characters of politicians and different representatives of the government, Arab authors harshly criticize the widespread corruption, immoral behavior, and greed of the

54 El Saadawi, Woman at Point Zero, 90.
55 El Saadawi, Woman at Point Zero, 101.
authorities. They also link the downfall of female characters to the corruption of state representatives.
CHAPTER 3: Prostitute as a symbol

A symbol by definition is a substitute for the elements being signified. In literature, symbols fall into two categories: cultural or contextual. Cultural symbols are universally recognized and the reader with the same cultural and linguistic background can easily understand them. The second types of symbol are the objects and descriptions that gain symbolic meaning within a given context. It is universally recognized that the prostitute is a symbol of a fallen woman who lost her honor and trades her body for material gain.

In the first two chapters, I discussed novels where the prostitute is mostly portrayed as a positive character. Her fault is explained by external factors which are beyond her control. At the same time, we cannot forget that universally, the prostitute is a negative character and symbolizes immorality. In Arabic literature, we can see instances when writers actually use a prostitute’s image as a symbol of corruption and treachery. We can detect this type of image in Yusuf Idris’s novel New York 80. Naguib Mahfouz also shows in his works that once a woman transgresses the boundaries of immorality, there is no way back. In some cases, the prostitute can even be the cause of death of the protagonist. We see this image especially in his late novels.

Reading the image of the prostitute as a symbol is just one of the many possibilities to analyze it. Here the question arises: what does the image of the prostitute stand for? The answer to this question can also shed more light on why the discussed writers employ this image in their writings.

First, let us take a look at some novels where a prostitute is represented as a symbol of vice. In Idris’s *New York 80*, a prostitute symbolizes immorality, greed, and vice. On the other hand, the protagonist is a person of high morality who refuses to have sexual intercourse with a woman who sells her body. It is obvious that he represents the morally uncorrupt East. His name is not mentioned which can also mean that he stands for all men from the East. After a long dialogue, the prostitute eventually offers money for sex but the protagonist refuses it. This pattern implies that Eastern morality forces Western greed to “surrender.” It is also suggested by the fact that the prostitute leaves the bar where they were talking. At the beginning of the novel she asked the protagonist if he does not like the prostitutes why he does not change bars. Eventually, she instead was forced to move..

In *New York 80* the prostitute is portrayed in a unique way. At first she has a Ph.D. degree and practices sexual therapy and then she becomes a prostitute. This paradox can be explained by the fact that the author portrays a prostitute not from the lower strata of society but from the intelligent upper class; therefore, the protagonist can achieve his victory by intellectual and moral means. Her degree also gives the reader a sense of “otherness.” She is not just a prostitute but a person who is very advanced with knowledge and intellect, but very morally low at the same time.
in her article on *New York 80*, Michelle Hartman discusses how Yusuf Idris constructs the identity of the Eastern/Egyptian man by contrasting him with an American prostitute. In this novel, Idris uses the character of the prostitute to express the immorality of the West and this symbolic representation of the prostitute is similar to his other work *Miss Vienna* where we also have symbolic representation of a woman. However, in this novel, the female protagonist is not a prostitute but a frivolous European woman.

In his article, Rasheed El-Enany places these two stories within the theme of East-West encounter. As in the works of other Arab writers who deal with the same theme (Yahya Haqi, Tawfiq al-Hakim), Idris portrays the male character as a representative of the whole Eastern culture and the woman as a representative of the whole Western culture. In order to illustrate Yusuf Idris’s point of view about the West, El-Enany discusses many of Idris’s articles about the USA. In these articles, Idris heavily criticizes the West and The States in particular for their policy towards newly independent nations and considers the United States as a major hampering force against the advancement of human civilization. At the same time, he admires the US’s scientific and industrial achievements. This can also explain why the prostitute holds a Ph.D. degree. So the views articulated in these articles support the argument that the prostitute with intelligence and education also has vice, greed and immorality associated with her. Thus she can be seen as a symbol of the United States.

After a long pause in his carrier as a writer, Mahfouz produced his most controversial and allegorical novel: *Children of Gebelawi*. With the shift in his writing style, the image

---

of prostitute also changed. If in the social novels we see a full image of the prostitute and her step by step development as a character, in the later novels we have a glimpse of her past and she assumes secondary roles only.

In allegorical novel, *Children of Gebalawi*, we encounter Rifa who risked his reputation in order to save Jasmine’s life. Rifa is obviously the image of Jesus Christ. His only passion is helping people. He saves Jasmine’s life who is accused of being drunk and having an affair with the alley’s strongman. Despite later negative consequences, Rifa decides to marry Jasmine out of mercy and saves her life. Although she was supposed to be grateful, Jasmine continued to visit her lover. At the time when Rifa was on the run from the alley’s strongmen, Jasmine informed Boomer about her husband’s location. Rifa was killed and Jasmine was also killed later on by Rifa’s friends.

This shows that Mahfouz uses the image of the prostitute as a symbol of treachery and disloyalty in this novel. As it was discussed in the previous chapter, the world of Naguib Mahfouz is not white and black; where the prostitute is obviously a positive image, the author allows the reader to draw his own conclusions. Even in his masterpiece, *The Thief and the Dogs*, Mahfouz leaves us with the ending which is open for different interpretations. Mihran, the protagonist, is found and chased by the police and their dogs. Who informed the police about his location is unknown. The fact is that Nur disappeared before that incident. At the same time, we know that before this incident she was beaten and raped by some customers. It is a possibility that she might have had a similar fate this time or she might have betrayed Said for the reward that police promised.
As we see, the character of the prostitute is employed as a negative symbol in some novels by male authors. We can also state that the established and universally recognized image of the prostitute as criminal is reinforced in these novels.

However, many more images of the prostitute are portrayed as symbols of oppression and humiliation; this is mostly the case with women authors. In El Saadawi’s novel *Woman at Point Zero*, the protagonist Firdaus stands for the whole oppressed feminine gender. She has been sexually exploited as a daughter, wife, and employee. During the novel Firdaus realized that all women and prostitutes suffer in different manners. So probably the prostitute is even better off than others. At this point El Sadawi erases the difference between an honorable woman and a prostitute. She portrays them as slaves for male masters. Firdaus is a product of a male dominated world and the symbol of the climax of human slavery. Her name means Paradise and it is the very opposite of her hell like life. At the same time, in her novel *The Golden Chariot*, Salwa Bakr portrays inmates in a women’s prison. Almost all of them and especially the prostitute Huda suffered from a male dominated world. Their bodies were an object for sexual abuse and they were not in control of them. It is not a coincidence that the setting of both novels is the prison and the life itself is a prison for a woman. As in *Woman at Point Zero*, Salwa Bakr erases the difference between honorable woman and prostitute. Huda is described in the same way as other inmates; she is just another victim of the male egoism.

In this novel, Aziza, who is waiting for the golden chariot, decides to include in it only those who deserve to ascend to heaven. One of the women she wants to take along is Huda the prostitute. Here the prostitute is just one of the male victims. We do not feel
that she is more abused and exploited than the other characters. Many of the honorable women in this prison also suffered from their husbands. The common denominator for them is one thing; they all rebelled against male domination and injustice. Aziza, Hinna, and Aida have killed their husbands. Jamalat had to defend her sister from a neighbor’s sexual advances. Azima and Mahrousa have been used and abandoned. The only reason why Huda became a prostitute is because her husband abandoned her and she had to take care of their children. So here there is no conflict between a devoted mother and a prostitute. It is also very interesting because we do not see a prostitute as a mother in Bakr’s previous novels. Salwa Bakr’s novel *The Golden Chariot* is an emblem and symbol of mercy, forgiveness, acceptance and inclusion—a dream of merciful world.

By getting rid of the boundaries between honest woman and the prostitute and by contrasting her to other women, the prostitute’s universal symbology changes in Salwa Bakr and Nawal El Sadawi’s works. She does not symbolize dishonor anymore or maybe it is more precise to say that other women also do not possess honor.

What is the honor? In the discussed novels, we have many instances where the concept of honor is brought under scrutiny. Honor for the Arab family means first of all protecting its female members’ bodies and virginity before marriage. There have been and until now there are many instances of “honor killings.” when male member of the family kill their sister or cousin because they engaged in pre-marital sex. For example, the prostitute said that she did not have a brother or a father to come and kill her in the conversation with the protagonist in *Autumn Quail*. Prostitution is the worst disgrace for any family and it carries the very opposite meaning of honor. So how it is possible to erase boundaries
between honorable woman and the prostitute? The honor of women is linked to her body. Another sarcastic view of the honor is presented by the incident when Fridaus has been able to buy an honor from the court. After paying the judge, he gave a verdict that she is an honorable woman.  

El Saadawi and Salwa Bakr show that in a male-dominated world, women cannot be in possession of their bodies. Hinna and Aida were compelled to kill their husbands because they were sexually exploited. In other instances, women try to alienate themselves from it. Firdaus also tries to alienate herself from her body: “I kept my eyes closed and abandoned my body. It lay there under him without movement, emptied of all desire, or pleasure, or even pain, feeling nothing. A dead body with no life in it at all, like a piece of wood, or an empty sock, or a shoe” (50). The feminine body is the major cause of their struggle. Firdaus noticed that male authority of the company where she worked expected sexual favors from the female employees and as a matter of fact, they received them. Which is another instance of the demarcation between honorable and dishonorable behavior.

Naguib Mahfouz seems to also question widely accepted views about prostitutes and honorable women. In The Thief and the Dogs, he presents two images of women; one is Nabawii and the other is Nur. The representations of these two women are vehicles to deconstruct stereotypes of women. On one hand, we have noble woman and wife, mother of a girl, who was unfaithful to her husband when he was in jail and might have been responsible for his arrest. On the other hand, we have a prostitute who was the most loyal

---

58 El Saadwai, Woman at Point Zero, 91.
and helpful to the protagonist. A close reading of the text eventually leads to a collapse of the established stereotypes of these women (Hartman15). Nur not only helps Said but also acts as a model wife by cooking for him, bringing him the newspaper after her work and doing household chores. Said accepts her as she is. The naming of the characters also has symbolic meanings; for example Nur in The Thief and the Dogs means light and she is the only bright part in the protagonist’s life.

It is also interesting that social boundaries are erased. In The Golden Chariot there are many inmates from different social strata. It does not seem to create any kind of inequality between imprisoned women. Female solidarity is expressed in Woman at Point Zero too. First of all the physician identified herself with Firdaus than throughout the novel female characters helped her and Firdaus herself changed her social status, thus representing the women from different social strata. She was born in poor family but attained secondary school diploma and at some point of time worked as a middle class woman. She even could reach lifestyle of upper class women. However change in social status did not bring her happiness, because no matter from which class is a woman she still remains oppressed. The female doctor who is a transmitter of the story does not reveal her name, so it can be assumed that she stands for all female doctors. Here the background of El Saadawi comes to play. She has a medical degree and for many years worked as a physician.

Women in the discussed novels are also capable of rebellion. This is especially true with regard to the prostitutes. In many instances the difference between honorable woman and prostitute shows that the prostitute is the rebel woman. In the fiction of
Naguib Mahfouz, the prostitute rebels against poverty and socioeconomic conditions; in the fiction of female writers, she rebels against the male-dominated world. Both in Mahfouz and El Saadawi’s novels we see a portrait of the rebellious prostitute. As Peled points out, Naguib Mahfouz is very sympathetic towards rebels even though the rebels are doomed to be defeated. It might be the fear of the writer himself which is why he always has been careful in his writings. A vivid example of a female rebellious spirit is Hamida in *Midaq Alley*.

Miriam Cooke states that prostitutes in Mahfouz’s novels are rebels not so much against poverty but tradition. Choosing the path of prostitution, they gain independence. She argues:

“The men who choose to interact with prostitutes do so with understanding that they are quite simply prostitutes – women who sell their bodies and who in that transaction temporally lose possession of those same bodies. Mahfouz demonstrates again and again that this is not a case. The woman who sells her body retains control not only of that body but of its surplus value. She is doubly empowered: she is in control of the man’s desire and burgeoning need for her body and not that of any other woman”.

The fact that choosing the path of prostitution gives a female her freedom can also be partially supported by Basima in *Search*. She left her wealthy husband for another man and eventually became a successful prostitute.

---

60 Cooke, 114.
As El-Enany’s calls for resistance and Bakr’s women attest, prostitutes are first class resisters with varied means to fight back.⁶¹ Although most of Bakr’s rebellious heroines tend to crack after a heroic struggle under some form of external pressure or another – personal, social, political, biological, or a combination thereof, and end up either in prison, or mental asylum, according to how society judges their deterioration.⁶² Indeed, all these examples show that the prostitute both in male and female writers’ fiction also becomes a symbol of rebellion.

There are also critics who identify the prostitute with Egypt itself. After a brief discussion of the socioeconomic conditions which caused the downfall of Nafisa in The Beginning and the End, Ibrahim El-Sheikh points that “Nafisa becomes thus no individual, but a symbol of a whole humiliated nation”.⁶³

It is worth mentioning that at the beginning of the century Egyptian nationalists portrayed Egypt as a woman who needs protection. This protection was expected to be a collective affair and was a call to mobilize the nation against foreign occupation. In many instances, news was circulated that some women were raped by British soldiers. This kind of news triggered anger in the Egyptian society because it was a matter of national pride. The body of a woman becomes a symbol of national honor. So if we think about the nation as a family with honor, it should protect its female members from insult,

---

⁶¹El-Enany, 377.
⁶²Ibid., 397.
⁶³Le Gassick, 89.
humiliation, and rape. During the British occupation prostitution was legalized, which was also an insult to Islamic community. \(^{64}\)

In the novel *Midaq Alley* we can see another interesting interpretation of the prostitute which is brought by al-Naqash. \(^{65}\) He actually compares Hamida with Egypt itself and claims that she is a representation of Egypt. His first argument is based on the fact that the novel is written during World War Two when the country was occupied by a great number of British soldiers. Hamida is beautiful and attractive, but she is poor and unfortunately does not know the correct path to happiness. In the case of Abbas Halu, a poor and a very humble man, who in order to make better future for him and Hamida, he has to serve British soldiers. Here al-Naqash interprets the character of Ibrahim Faraj as a symbol of political power and corruption. He came to the alley with a political campaign and was the one who gave bribes to people to gain their votes during the coming elections. He is also the one who lured Hamida into prostitution. By saying this we have to remember that Hamida’s clientele were British soldiers, so the drawn parallels are clear. Because of corrupt politicians, Egypt served British interests.

If we look at the Egyptian society as a family, than it is the duty of this society to protect its female members from humiliation and disgrace; unfortunately, we do not see any signs of that in the novels. Humiliation, sexual abuse, and exploitation come from all directions: family (Firdaus), police (Firdaus, Huda), government officials (*Autumn Quail*, Hamida, Ihsan). These people are responsible for the downfall of female characters. In

\(^{64}\) Baron Beth, *Egypt as a Woman* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

the final analysis, society is responsible for the honor of the female characters. But it is
the same society which deprives them from the honor and then rejects them full
membership of it. They become alien to mainstream society and this makes them
outlaws. Therefore, if we look at women as the honor of the nation, then all the people in
power use and exploit women/their country’s honor for their own interests.
Conclusion

This paper has shown how the image of the prostitute is very rich for analysis from different points of view. In Arabic literature, the image of the prostitute is not a flat character. In many respects, these images are so different that placing them under one category would not be appropriate. Even the same author might have two prostitutes in different novels representing two completely different things. Unfortunately, there are not many scholarly works written about this character in Arabic literature. The reason is probably the same as why there are not many fictional writings about prostitutes. Many writers consider this topic taboo; women writers especially try to stay away from writing about prostitutes. This paper analyzed the prostitute’s character as it appears in the works of Nawal El Saadawi, Salwa Bakr, Naguib Mahfuz and Yusuf Idris. It does not claim to be all comprehensive and more research and study needs to be done on this topic.

Existing literature mostly explains the phenomenon of prostitution as an outcome of socioeconomic circumstances and unfortunate circumstances. On the other hand, the character of the prostitute as a victim of a male-dominated world starts to gain its place among other fictional characters. Female writers present us the world from a distinctively different angle. In this world, the character of the prostitute has also different image.

One thing is certain that there is an obvious difference between how male and female writers portray the image of the prostitute. In men’s fiction, the character is portrayed as a rational creature who knows what she wants, but under socioeconomic circumstances and
because of her own wrong calculations she becomes a prostitute; in women’s fiction, she is a weak person who depends on male characters. Unfortunately, the people who are supposed to be responsible for her only are interested in her sexual exploitation. Firdaus hoped to find a male protector like a father (Bayumi) or husband (Ibrahim), but these men were only interested in her body. This fact is also unconsciously realized by Firdaus and it is the reason why she tries to alienate herself from her body.

In Mahfouz’s and Idris’s writings, the prostitute is more interested in improving her financial situation than finding a soul mate. The prostitute in the writings of Salwa Bakr and El Saadawi is very naïve which quite contrary to the images of prostitutes in the writings of male authors. If we compare Huda, and Firdaus to Hamida, Nafisa, Riri, Qaderiya, Jasmine and others from Mahfouz's world, the difference becomes obvious. If Firdaus is not interested in her looks and Huda was married when she was only thirteen years old, Hamida and Nafisa care about themselves a lot. Their main goal is to find suitable husbands. If for Huda survival means feeding herself and her children, for Hamida, her ultimate desire is a life of luxury.

In the social novels of Naguib Mahfouz (New Cairo, The Beginning and the End, Midaq Alley), we see prostitutes as full characters; in later novels, we have they play secondary roles. However, the main reason for the employment of these characters is the fact that they play a crucial role in the development of the protagonist. The interaction of the protagonist with them helps us better understand the main characters.

Also, when we talk about Arabic literature, we cannot ignore the role of the politics. The second chapter analyzed the historical and political background of Egypt at the time.
It seems that the personal life of the authors played a huge role in their creative writings. Another interesting point is that the image of a prostitute is used to criticize the political regime of the country at the time. Writers were compelled to use allegorical and symbolic language to express their discontent with the ruling regime.

Another way to look at the image of the prostitute is to read it as a symbol. As a symbol it also differs from male to female writers’ points of view. In many instances, male authors do not hesitate to portray prostitutes in negative way, hence reinforcing her stereotype as a criminal. Meanwhile, women writers are more inclined to break the established pattern and reconstruct our ideas about morality and honor. Contrasting prostitutes to other characters allows readers to reconsider and reexamine his/her views about the subject.

While doing research for this project I came across many new literary works which contain images of prostitute, so my interest in this character kept growing and therefore, I will need to understand more why and how authors use a prostitute’s character in their works. However, this figure remains marginal and neglected in the studies of literary critics.
Bibliography


