



The Multifaceted Role of the Mother in Naguib Mahfouz's Novel, "The Beginning and the End"

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Abstract

Naguib Mahfouz was the first Arabic novelist who tried successfully the most important aspect of literature i.e. realism and social realism. The novel "The Beginning and the End" is one of the earliest realistic novels of him. It explores the intricacies of an Egyptian family and their relationships. The story begins with the death of father and the mother comes to the centre stage who tries to rebuild the family. She is a strict, well disciplined and strong lady whose resilient efforts were narrated vividly as a savior of the family. She plays multifaceted role of a nurturer, protector, teacher, guide and philosopher and she tries to solve the financial issues after the death of Kamel Effendi Ali, the only bread winner. She navigates the family in all ups and down and her resolve to tackle the crisis is well appreciated and tells the story of positive mindset. Here in this story Naguib presented a strong woman who fights against all the odds and tries to stabilize her family after the untimely demise of the breadwinner.

Keywords: Multifaceted, Egyptian Society, Patriarchy, Nurturer, Intricacy, Breadwinner, Protective,

Introduction:

In "The Beginning and the End," Naguib Mahfouz weaves a complex narrative that explores the intricacies of an Egyptian family and their relationships and this the earliest novel in which he explored realism and that is social realism which dealt with the prevalent patriarchy as well. At the centre of this web of connections is the mother, who emerges as a profound symbol of love, sacrifice, and resilience. This article delves deeper into the multifaceted portrayal of the mother, "Samira" who at the beginning of the story becomes widow by her fate and whose husband has died due to cardiac arrest. And she found in the dead man's wallet only two pounds and seventy piaster's and that was all the money she had until matters could be straightened out. This was the family for whom she had now become responsible and she came in a situation where there was no one to help her. Drawing upon specific instances from the

novel I intended to highlight her indispensable influence in shaping the lives of her children and navigating the challenges of society.

The Mother as a Nurturer.

Throughout the novel, Mahfouz portrays the mother as a devoted and nurturing figure, whose unwavering dedication to her children's well-being is evident in numerous instances. Naguib depicts her strong character through the circumstances she were

“Life has taught her to struggle, but also be patient and stoical. She was the main pillar of the home. Her attitude towards her children was probably more fatherly than motherly.”

Here strictness and discipline has been narrated and in the same stanza. The author narrates her resolve of being strong in this situation for the sake of her children. (Mahfouz, Naguib;” The beginning and the End”, Anchor Books, Doubleday, London,1985,p.30)

“Certainly she told herself she would be strong as a widow, too” (Ibid,p.30)

One such example is when she sacrifices her own needs to ensure her children are well-cared for, even when faced with personal struggles and hardships. She tirelessly devotes herself to creating a warm and nurturing home environment, providing a sanctuary where her children feel secure and loved and for this she needed the pension of her deceased husband

“The next morning Hassan, the elder son, accompanied Samira to the ministry of Education”

But soon it became clear to them that it will take time to get it credited, so she decided to meet Ahmad BeyYousri, a great influential inspector.

The desperation with which Samira was striving for the pension and due salary of her deceased husband shows the nature of a mother who is desperate for the bread of her children in absence of her husband.

“When the situation is out of control, she orders Nefisa to turn her hobby of dress making to a profession and on the other hand she sacrifices the servant to economize the daily expenses. Furthermore, the sofa, the dressing table and few more house hold things she sold to meet the end”.(Ibid.p.63)

Mahfouz highlights the mother's role as teacher, instilling moral values, education, and a sense of responsibility in her children. She encourages her children to strive for excellence and take pride in their accomplishments.

“Our calamity is great” she said, We have no one to resort but God, who never forgets his creatures.(Ibid, P.31)

She further states the same situation in words.

“There is not a soul in the world to whom she could appeal for help and share her worries with” (Ibid.p.31)

This was the sprit with which she has to face the situation and make her children ready to face it. So, she makes a roadmap for it and assigns the duty to Hassan, his eldest son and Nefisa, the dressmaker.

“Nefisa is good at sewing”. She said.” Out of friendship and courtesy, she often makes dresses for our neighbor; I see no harm in her asking for some compensation.”(Ibid.p.36)

One illustrative scene reveals her commitment to their upbringing as she imparts valuable life lessons during a heartfelt conversation, discussing the importance of hard work, honesty, and compassion which she herself has proved through example as after the death of Kamel Effendi Ali, she went pillar to post to get the pension started and in pursuit she went to Ahmad Bey Yaseen(a good friend of Kamel E.Ali), a great influential inspector in the Ministry of Finance to speed up the government formalities.

One can understand that a mother has to play multifaceted role in the family and she is the only one who keeps her home united at whatever cost. In the novel, "The Beginning and the End", Naguib depicts a family who had three sons, one elder the two minors and a daughter. The eldest one "Hassan" who leads reckless, irresponsible life style and there is fight over the pagan life style of Hassan and the relation between the father and the son was strained to such an extent that his father "Kamel Effendi Ali" once said

"I can't support a failure like you forever" (Mahfouz, Naguib, "The beginning and the End", Anchor Books, Doubleday, London, 1985, P.21)

But this strained relationship didn't reach to a situation where the door was closed for Hassan and between the father and the son the mother "Samira" was always there as a shield for her children

"Above all, thanks especially to their mother, the Kamels' family ties had always been very strong".(Ibid.P.21)

The Mother as a Protector:

Mahfouz expertly highlights the mother's role as a protector, acting as a shield against the harsh realities of the outside world. She is depicted as the family's guardian, safeguarding her children's innocence and shielding them from external influences that may trouble them.

What about you Hassan? (Ibid.P.34)

This was a question; Samira posed to her eldest son and in response to her question, Hassan candidly replied, "I understand everything"

What is the use of mere understanding, Samira replied irritably.

"Something has to be done"

"This is what we hear often from you" She was vexed.

"Everything is changed now. (Ibid.P.34)

The Conversation between the son and the mother indicates the concern of the mother for the family and its day today affair. On the other hand, the mother's concern is shown here who takes the responsibility to bring back his reckless, irresponsible son to normalcy and tries to impart him the lesson of the life.

One vivid moment in the novel showcases her unwavering protectiveness when she intervenes to shield her children from the negative impact of their father's irresponsible behavior.

The mother's unconditional love and fierce dedication create a sense of security within the family unit. Her actions and words exemplify a deep-rooted belief in preserving her children's innocence and shielding them from harm. Through her nurturing and protective nature, she cultivates an environment where her children can flourish and develop into responsible individuals.

The Mother as a Moral Compass:

The mother, Samira in the novel "The Beginning and the End" is a widow upon whom the whole responsibility of family management fell after the sudden death of her husband. She is respected wise and controlling woman who makes sacrifices for her children and expects them to follow the same for each other. She is a moral compass for her family, as she tries to uphold the values of religion, honor and dignity in the face of material, moral and spiritual problem during World War II. One such example of her religious teaching is

"His mother had once forced him to perform the commandments of God, and he did them automatically"(Ibid.P.22)

It was she who taught her children to rely on God and in the situation of death of his father when in distress Hassanein frowned and wondered" who can we appeal to now?, the Hussein replied , " Only to God"(Ibid.p.43)

She disapproves of her eldest so Hassan's involvement with a prostitute and his work as a local goon. She also detested Hassanein's selfishness and greed

It was only her teachings that her second son Hussein sacrificed his education to support the family and especially to support his younger brother Hassanein. Samira is a complex and realistic character who represents the struggles and dilemmas of many Egyptian women in that era.

She encourages Hussein to study hard and pursue his dreams of becoming a lawyer, even though she knows he will have to work as a clerk to support the family.

She prays to God for guidance and forgiveness, and tries to instill religious values in her children. She is especially worried about Hassan's lifestyle and at many stances tries to inculcate in him good values along with the scene of responsibility for the family and himself

"Samira kept staring through her fingers, making her resentment felt by remaining deliberately silent and ignoring his presence. However, she had given up her former habit of scolding him, settling accounts with him, or persuading him to search for a job; she had realized how futile it was. She felt the same sadness that usually overcome her whenever she thought of him or laid eyes on him. She knew his standard answers."(Ibid.p.163)

She confronts Hassanein when he neglects his studies and spends money recklessly. She scolds him for being selfish and ungrateful, and reminds him of his duty to his family and his country

The brother often quarrels with each other's and it is a common phenomenon in every household but it pained Samira very much.

"The quarrel distressed her and left a piercing and profound pain in her heart. To punish them she found no means better than beating, hoping that it would rectify the ill effects of their father's tendency to spoil his children. Nothing was more repulsive to her than seeing one of her sons trespass beyond the limits and show any sign of transgression against the sacred unity of the family. She saw in Hassan's life a bad example. She would rather die than see it repeated in the others."(Ibid.p.100)

It was she who taught her children to rely on God and in the situation of death of his father when in distress Hassanein frowned and wondered" who can we appeal to now?, the Hussein replied , " Only to God"(Ibid.p.43).

The Mother as a Source of Strength:

Amidst the trials and tribulations faced by the family, the mother emerges as a symbol of unwavering strength and resilience. She exemplifies unwavering determination and an indomitable spirit in the face of adversity. Mahfouz portrays her ability to withstand hardships as a testament to her deep love for her family and her unwavering commitment to their well-being. In a tough situation like this where the bread winner has gone to heavenly abode, Naguib describes her

"She was not the type of woman to resort to tears for relief" (Ibid.p.29)

In "The Beginning and the End," Mahfouz paints a vivid picture of the mother's strength and resilience in the face of various challenges. Despite financial struggles and the death of her husband, she remains steadfast and unwavering in her determination to provide food for her children. She through her positivity able to control the situation and at the same time Farid Effendi spoke to her about the love affair of Hassanein with Bahya, his daughter.

" I spoke to him about our furniture , which we are selling piece by piece to provide for basic needs, and about the misery of your sister, who must work as a dressmaker, spending her days moving from one house to another. Then I told him frankly that none of my sons would marry until he helped his collapsing family to get back on its feet." (Ibid. p.113)

Thus she clears her position and keeps no ambiguity in thought and action. She gives a clear message to her sons as well and in no circumstances they should forget the reality and the sacrifices of Nefisa, their sister who was at the centre of the mechanism through which Samira was able to provide meal to the family.

One striking scene showcases the mother's resilience as she takes on additional work to support her family, despite the physical and emotional toll it takes on her. Her relentless efforts to make ends meet serve as a source of inspiration for her children, who witness first hand her unwavering dedication and learn the value of hard work and perseverance.

Moreover, the mother's strength extends beyond her immediate family. She becomes a pillar of support for her younger sister, Amina, offering guidance and solace during her difficult times. Her selflessness and ability to offer strength and comfort to others demonstrate the depth of her character and the impact she has on those around her.

Conclusion:

Naguib Mahfouz's "The Beginning and the End" offers a poignant and multifaceted portrayal of the mother figure. Through her nurturing love, unwavering protection, moral guidance, and remarkable resilience, she becomes the heart and backbone of the family. Mahfouz's masterful storytelling provides a window into the complexities of the mother's role, drawing upon specific instances from the novel to illuminate her profound influence.

In this rich tapestry of family dynamics, the mother's unwavering dedication, sacrifices, and uncompromising moral compass shape the lives of her children and resonate with readers on a universal level. Her role as a nurturer, protector, moral compass, and source of strength reflects the essential and transformative power of mothers within families and societies at large.

"The Beginning and the End" serves as a reminder of the profound impact that mothers have on shaping individuals and communities. Through their love, sacrifices, and unwavering commitment, mothers become the guiding lights that navigate their children through the challenges of life. Naguib Mahfouz's masterful storytelling invites us to appreciate and celebrate the extraordinary role of mothers in our lives.

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