

The theme of justice  
in naguib mahfouz's  
novel, arabian nights  
and days



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The Arabian Nights, a classic collection of medieval tales, has influenced countless writers in literature creations. There are an ocean of novels, fictions and poetry that either borrow elements or derive inspiration from the stories in The Arabian Nights. The novel The Arabian Nights and Days, written by the Nobel-winning Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, is one successful example of the works under the influence of The Arabian Nights. This novel continues the frame story in The Arabian Nights and narrates what has happened after the one thousand and one nights of storytelling by Shahrazad to the bloodthirsty sultan Shahryar. In this novel, familiar characters such as Aladdin, Sinbad, and Nur al-Din come on stage again. However, instead of mimicking the plots and styles of The Arabian Nights as in other parodies, Naguib Mahfouz gives new lives to those old characters, motifs and events, and effectively manipulates them to reflect social realities. Disguised in the ancient fantasy, The Arabian Nights and Days exposes and contemplates on the theme of justice in the Egyptian and Middle Eastern society under the dark age of colonization and corruption. Such manipulation of old stories and discussion of justice under modern context can be aptly demonstrated by Naguib Mahfouz's depiction of the character Gamasa al-Builti and his transformations. Therefore, in this paper, I will focus on the character Gamasa and his three transformations, examine the influence of The Arabian Nights on the new story, and analyze how Naguib Mahfouz convey his observations of social justice through different representations of a character.

Gamasa is originally a chief of police subjected to a corrupt system. After being seduced by a genie called Sigam, Gamasa murders the governor of the

quarter and therefore is beheaded but saved by the same genie. Then, he transforms into another man called Abdullah and works as a porter. He develops religious faith and becomes friends with the son of Sanaan, the good merchant also seduced by a genie to commit crimes. They express dissatisfaction towards government and plot a series of political assassinations in the name of a Holy War. After confessing his crimes, Gamasa the chief of police or Abdullah the porter reincarnates again into a state of nonhuman, which is called as the madman. The madman continues as a religious fanatic, killing the governor of the quarter after they are replaced one after the other. The character of the madman also reoccurs in most of the following stories as a resolution of troubles through killing. Finally, the madman is reappointed as the chief of police and renamed as Abdullah the Sane.

The episodes involving with this character, Gamasa Al-Bulti and The Porter, receive a certain degree of influence from The Arabian Nights and borrow important elements from some of the original tales. For example, the main character Gamasa makes his first appearance at a scene of fishing. Just like the fisherman in The Story of the Fisherman and the Demon, Gamasa catches nothing but a heavy bottle and accidentally releases a genie sealed in it. The image of "genie in the bottle" and the motif of magical force in the novel are classic elements in the original stories of The Arabian Nights. However, Naguib Mahfouz develops a different plot involving with the genie. In the novel, the role of man and genie is completely reversed. In the original story of The Story of the Fisherman and the Demon, the fisherman is a manipulator of the evil genie. By using his logic and wit, the fisherman traps

the genie who threatens to kill him into the bottle, and he eventually reconciles with the genie, gains wealth and lives happily ever after. The novel, on the contrary, presents the genie as a manipulator of men. It narrates how Gamasa the chief of police is seduced by the genie to trap himself into delinquency, crimes and a tragic state of nonhuman.

Another example of elements in these episodes whose precedent can be found in *The Arabian Nights* is the topic of crime. The motifs of theft, murder, and bloodshed appear in many *Arabian Nights* stories such as *The Story of the Three Apples* and *The Story of the Hunchback*. In shaping the complicated character of Gamasa as both the chief of police and the criminal, Naguib Mahfouz derives inspiration from *The Story of the Three Apples*. For instance, Gamasa as the chief of police faces the same predicament as J'far, the vizier of caliph who is responsible for investigating a murder. As the caliph threatens to hang J'far if he could not find the murderer, the governor also threatens to dismiss and behead Gamasa if he fails to check the crimes happening in the quarter. Although the events are similar, the trajectories and outcomes of J'far and Gamasa head in opposite directions. Through a series of coincidences, J'far finds out the one to blame and saves himself from hanging. However, facing the pressure from the governor and the temptation from the genie, Gamasa loses himself and ends up killing the governor. If J'far in *The Arabian Nights* receives redemption, Gamasa in the novel falls into self-destruction. Also, upon the topic of crime, the novel changes the background of the story from a fair government under Harun al-Rashid into a corrupt system under the bloodthirsty sultan Shahryar, deleting

the plot of life-saving storytelling but highlighting the absolute powers in the judgments of crimes.

In addition to these two major elements, some intricate details correlated to The Arabian Nights are also incorporated into the characterization of Gamasa to add more interesting intertextuality. For example, the character of Abdullah the porter can easily remind readers of Sinbad the porter or the porter in The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies. The name "Abdullah" is also derived from The Story of Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman. The appearance of Abdullah the porter as an Ethiopian resembles that of the African Magician in The Story of 'Ala al-Din and the Magic Lamp. Also, the "three spectral figures", [1] who claim to be strangers and ask for entrance to a party during the wedding of Fadil and Arkraman, clearly have the three dervishes in The Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies as their prototypes.

In the novel The Arabian Nights and Days, Naguib Mahfouz manipulates those familiar motifs and events in the original stories of The Arabian Nights into a new setting of a corrupt government to highlight theme of justice. The quarter in which Gamasa originally serves as the chief of police is under the governing of Shahryar, who is portrayed as a bloodthirsty tyrant. In Naguib Mahfouz's representation, Shahryar acts as a bad example for the practice of justice. For instance, when Gamasa is fishing and lamenting his old friend Sanaan, he attributes the tragedy of Sanaan to the unjust governance of sultan: "What would become of us if a just governor were to take over our affairs? Had not the sultan himself killed hundreds of virgins and many pious men?" [2] Even the seduction by genie seems to be caused by the unjust <https://assignbuster.com/the-theme-of-justice-in-naguib-mahfouz-s-novel-arabian-nights-and-days/>

ruler: " it is for the ruler to dispense justice from the beginning so that genies don't intrude on our lives".[3]Here, Mahfouz highlights that the single act of injustice by the ruler can lead to the perversion of justice in the entire social system.

In such social setting of unjust governance and corrupt system, the character Gamasa has suffered from a series of struggles, soul-searching, and falls. In the four representations, Gamasa the chief of police, Abdullah the porter, the madman, and Abdullah the Sane, Naguib Mahfouz delineates the influence of a corrupt system and different perspectives involving with the theme of justice. At first, Gamasa is presented as the chief of police, a part of the corrupt system and a machine that serves it. In Mahfouz's depiction, Gamasa lingers between good and evil, and struggles between his morality and desire for power and authority. For example, in the event of Sanaan's execution and confiscation of property, Gamasa takes his share and refuses to return the property to help Sanaan's family. Mahfouz employs metaphorical language to vividly portray the internal conflicts Gamasa faces under the temptation of power and subjection to authorities: Gamasa had taken his share despite his sadness at his friend fate, giving himself the excuse that to refuse would mean a challenge to the new governor: in his heart there was a place for emotions and another place for avidity and hardness.[4]Mahfouz further magnifies this internal struggle and shows the influence of a corrupt system on Gamasa's moral judgment: " He was not always devoid of good sentiments and religious remembrances, but he found no objection to practicing corruption in a corrupt world".[5]As the trajectory of Gamasa proceeds, " his tendency towards good became submerged and

disappeared to faraway depths”.[6]Entangled in hypocrites and absorbed by power, Gamasa gradually becomes a machine in the evil system of injustice and corruption. He interprets his position not as an upholder of social justice but as a subjection to authorities, as Gamasa confesses: “ My duty is to carry out orders”.[7]He has degraded into a machine in the corrupt system, depriving of moral judgement and responsibility. Under the pressure of the governor, he judges wrongly and kills the innocent. As Sigam the genie describes, Gamasa’s indulgence to his duty is merely “ an excuse that tends to nullify the humanity of a human”.[8]Swallowed by power and corruption, Gamasa has gradually lost his conscience and humanity. In his representation of Gamasa as the chief of police who struggles between good and evil but eventually falls into the abyss of corruption, Naguib Mahfouz demonstrates that an unjust governance can influence an individual’s moral judgement and homogenize him to become a machine of the system.

The story of Gamasa does not cease here. He is transformed into a different figure called Abdullah the porter, through which Mahfouz discusses the justification of protesting against unjust government through religious fanaticism and the Holy War. No longer wanting to serve as a machine in the world of corruption and injustice, Gamasa chooses to destroy himself by killing the governor of the quarter. However, his wish for death is not granted by the genie. He is resurrected and carries a new identity as Abdullah the porter. In his new body and identity, Abdullah intends to lead a new form of life filled by religion. He devotes himself to the worship of God and the practice of religion: “ He resolved to walk along the path of godliness till the end”.[9]He also makes effort to amend his past mistakes by caring for the

family of Sanaan and becoming a friend of Fadil, Sanaan's son. However, his commitment of religious belief goes towards an extreme, which resembles the mindset of a religious fanatic or even a fundamentalist. Positioning himself as an enemy to the evildoers, Abdullah the porter plots the Holy War and political assassinations of the governor, the secretary and the chief of police. However, instead of portraying Abdullah as a superhero who punishes the evil and upholds justice, Naguib Mahfouz expresses his concern and doubt towards the idea of political assassinations and the Holy War in his narration. After some successful assassinations of the corruptive forces, Abdullah murders Ibrahim al-Attar the druggist in the name of the Holy War. However, it is dubious whether this murder is a corrective movement to corruption in the name of God or out of personal revenge. As it is expressed in Abdullah's psychological struggles, "How much was genuine holy war and how much anger and a desire for revenge"[10]. Upon this intense struggle, Abdullah eventually confesses to judgement and turns into a madman. In showing the deviation of Abdullah from a believer of God and claimed upholder of social justice to a possible criminal and evildoer, Mahfouz casts doubt on the justifiability of the atrocities committed by religious fanatics and fundamentalists in the name of God. He also implies that killing and murders would eventually deteriorate humanity and turn a believer into a real criminal. Not only the moral justification of this approach is criticized, but also its effectiveness. In the episode of The Porter, Abdullah assassinates the corrupt officers. However, in the following episodes, the positions of those who are killed are taken over and over again by equally corrupt individuals like a vicious cycle. The killing of one corrupt individual does not make any difference to the corrupt system. By demonstrating the impotence

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of Abdullah's political assassinations, Mahfouz points out that the social problems cannot be attributed to a certain individual but to the system as a whole, and the justice can be restored and sustained not by killing but a proper reform of the system.

Then, Gamasa or Abdullah the porter is transformed into the madman, who symbolizes a state of dehumanization caused by an unjust society. After confessing his crimes and claiming himself to be Gamasa whose head is still suspended at the gate, Abdullah is regarded as a madman and ostracized from the society. He loses his identity and humanity and turns into a wandering ghost-like character after a sequence of struggles with social justice. The dehumanization of this character reminds readers of *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka in which man is transformed into a bug to reflect how society distorts humanity and brings about meaninglessness and nonbeing. In the same fashion, Naguib Mahfouz manipulates the motif of dehumanization to highlight how a corrupt society would influence an individual's decisions and identities, and eventually deprives him of humanity.

In addition to dehumanization, the madman also represents a possible alternative of justice to the corrupt government, which is done by simple killing. Throughout the novel, the madman comes to the stage as a solution to conflicts in many of the stories. For example, in episode of Nur al-Din and Dunyazad, it is the madman who kills the monkey-faced millionaire so that Nur al-Din can live happily ever after with Dunyazad. In the episode of Anees al-Galees, it is also the madman who strangles the lady in the house so that the scandals of the quarter would not be disclosed. Through presenting <https://assignbuster.com/the-theme-of-justice-in-naguib-mahfouz-s-novel-arabian-nights-and-days/>

madman as a quick and easy solution to conflicts, Naguib Mahfouz portrays an alternative to the corrupt government, which is the judgement done by a single individual. In the story of Nur al-Din and Dunyazad, the suffering of the two lovers are released thanks to the killing done by the madman. It seems like a happy ending that the charming protagonists finally marry each other while the monkey-faced millionaire is gotten rid of. However, after contemplation, it is dubious whether the millionaire really deserves death. Also, in the story of Anees al-Galees, a similar easy solution is provided by the madman. However, is Anees al-Galees the one to blame instead of the sinners of scandal? Has justice really been done? Naguib Mahfouz gives readers some clues in the conversation between the madman and Abdullah the Sea. When questioned why to kill Anees al-Galees instead of the sinners, the madman replies as follows: "I was sorry that morning should come and the citizens should not find a sultan or a vizier or a governor or a private secretary or a chief of police".<sup>[11]</sup> In this sense, the madman employs a convenient act of "justice" that only satisfies efficiency and practicality. It is a form of "justice" under disguise. Is the death of monkey-faced millionaire and Anees al-Galees justifiable? Is the absolute judgment made by an individual out of convenience really upholds social justice? It is a question asked by Naguib Mahfouz for the society to ruminate.

Finally, the madman undergoes a final transformation of identity, which represents Mahfouz's vision of social justice in the future. At the end of the episode of Ma'rouf the Cobbler and the beginning of Sinbad, Shahryar, the sultan who is making progress in his rule, appoints Ma'rouf as the governor of the quarter, Nur al-Din as the private secretary and the madman as the

chief of police. It seems that the vicious cycle of corruption will finally come to an end. The madman retrieves his original identity as the chief of police, which suggests that things eventually return to original states after a series of struggles, conflicts and chaos. In presenting a character's trajectories like this, Naguib Mahfouz implies that life still goes on after a series of social crisis. Naguib Mahfouz gives Gamasa, Abdullah the porter or the madman a new name, Abdullah the Sane. Upon the leaving of Shahryar, Abdullah the Sane comes into the quarter. This signifies that the old rules of injustice are replaced with sanity, reasoning and fairness. However, the novel ends in a vague and obscure way. Is the coming of Abdullah the Sane really restores justice? Is it possible to restore justice after a prolonged period of corruption? Instead of a period, Naguib Mahfouz leaves the readers with a question mark.

Disguised in the fantastic characters and motifs from world classic *The Arabian Nights*, Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Arabian Nights and Days* reflect the issue of justice in real society. In the four representations of one character, Mahfouz discusses the influence of a corrupt government and some contentious topics involving with justice. He not only captures undesirable implications of an unjust government, such as the deprivation of morality and humanity, but also proposes some unsuccessful and dubious attempts to protest or replace the corrupt government, such as the Holy War and killing. At the end, he predicts hope but does not conclude with a definite answer, which implies an ongoing exploration of social justice and reform of the corrupt governance. In addition to his sensitivity to the social realities and issues in his age, Naguib Mahfouz also possesses incredible foresight in his

writing to predict recent events like the Arabian Spring. As Mahfouz portrays in the novel, a reform of sanity and reasoning is required to replace the old corrupt institution; however, how much time, suffering, and struggles will precede the completion of reform is unknown to a society. Like the vague ending in the novel, the path of Arabian society is also likely to be obscure. Nevertheless, just as the Gamasa returns to his starting point as the chief of police after struggles and multiple transformations, the people will also carry on with their normal lives, hoping everything will be beheading to a better future.

#### Footnote

[1]Naguib Mahfouz, *The Arabian Nights and Days* (New York: First Anchor Books Edition, 1995), 63

[2]ibid, 31-32

[3]ibid, 64

[4]ibid, 31

[5]ibid, 37

[6]ibid, 40

[7]ibid, 34

[8]ibid, 42

[9]ibid, 53

[10]ibid, 68

[11]ibid, 145

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