

The Concept of Beauty and its Impact on Individuals in Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy*

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Abstract

This article examines the various dimensions in which the concept of beauty is viewed in Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo trilogy*. Different societies have different perceptions of beauty. The way one presents themselves to society is more important to their position in society. An individual is often judged based on his physical appearance, and his power and influence in society are determined based on that. Perceptions about beauty are not static, and they keep changing. The changes that happened during the 20th century, because of the introduction of modern thoughts and ideas, changed the traditional perceptions of beauty. This article highlights the concept of beauty and its influence on individuals in light of Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo trilogy*.

Keywords: Naguib Mahfouz, Cultural traditions, beauty, conflict.

Naguib Mahfouz is an Egyptian author who has won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1988. His *Cairo Trilogy*, a collection of books that portray Egyptian culture in the early 20th century, is his most well-known work. Themes of existentialist, social and political difficulties, and the intricacies of interpersonal relationships are frequently explored in Mahfouz's writings.

Every living and non-living being that exists in the world has its own beauty. We fail to notice it because we perceive it with our judgmental eyes. The great philosopher Confucius says, "Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it." The Oxford dictionary defines beauty as a combination of qualities, such as shape, color, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight." The first impression of a person is formed based on his or her personal appearance. Which is often based on looking at how he is dressed and also based on their physical and facial attributes. By looking at this, we can easily make assumptions about their status, their character, and their individual personalities. These judgments can be partially correct, but many of the time they end up becoming unfair assumptions, leading us to discriminate against individuals in a social setting. The person who faces such discrimination because of unrealistic expectations challenges them in relationships as well as in social interactions.

As humans we are instinctively judgemental because we differentiate things based on attractive and non attractive physical features. People always focus on certain indicators of beauty which is acceptable all over the world to perceive others'. This social psychological phenomenon of biased judgement based on appearance is termed as 'halo effect'. Halo effect has its root in human psychology. By nature people believe that physically appealing individuals possess more positive qualities. They were taught to be more successful and intelligent compared to others, it's because our brain tends to use cognitive shortcuts to simplify complex information. Generalization and making decisions based on it will result in incorrect conclusions. A person's who has a good facial symmetry and youthful look is always considered attractive and intelligent. Even though the concept of beauty keeps changing, maintaining youthful look always remains in top priority. Beauty and the living environment is interconnected as the beauty standards alters based on people's adoptions. These standards differ between different racial and ethnic groups. Historical evidences indicate that the beauty, cosmetics and hygiene were considered essential components of daily life in ancient Egyptian civilization, which places a high emphasis on appearance. The value they placed on looks and

attractiveness continues till now. The customs of their ancestors were adopted throughout the generations and carried into the present.

The protagonist of mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* kamal is the youngest son of Ahmad Abdel Jawad who is depicted by the author as an introverted person whose personality and character is greatly influenced by the surrounding which he lives. The constant criticism faced by Kamal because of appearance bothered the Psyche of Kamal. As he grows his physical appearance has become a source for his anxiety and self doubt. The amount of criticism which Kamal faced from his family members and society explains how the social norms and its expectations were in the past Egyptian society. Kamal's physique and the way he dresses up is criticized and mocked by everyone. Through this the author mahfouz shows how the outward appearance is given importance by the social norms of Egyptian during that time. Kamal had a slender built physique. He looked thin and failed to satisfy the societal norms of beauty.

Kamal is unattractive based on the societal standards, his brother yasin is always complimented for his handsome features. He felt his identity getting overshadowed by his brother and feels an sense of insecurity while he is with his brother . He longed for his acceptance in the society which eventually forced him to change his personality. He closely resembled his sister Khadija as they both shared similar features. His small eyes and large nose has become an object of criticism. His oversized head with broad forehead made his eyes look smaller and sunken. Kamal is often upset because of his looks as his fellow mates from school constantly criticized him by calling him a two-headed boy. When Amina get to know about the incidents she consoles him saying that people with big head has a bigger brain. Kamal is convinced when she told him that the prophet himself had a bigger head.

He was not good looking like his brothers. He was perhaps the one in the family who most resembled his sister Khadija. Like her's his face combined his mother's small eyes and father's huge nose, but without the refinements of khadijas. He had a large head with a forehead that protruded noticeably, making his eyes seem even more sunken that they actually were. Unfortunately, he had first realized how strange he looks when a school mate teased him and called him a two-headed boy. (40)

Kamal's closest of relation which is his brother yasin comment's about his physique stating that " you are as thin as a reed ... no woman would even want you ". This shows the societal mentality where they emphasize the physical strength of man which is considered by them as a desirable trait to attract women. Yasin's strong physique is considered as masculine whereas kamal's thin body is perceived as a sign of weakness. Yasin's physical features are considered to be conventionally attractive. " a handsome face , strong body, and an assertive walk". Living along with yasin , Kamal has become an easy target for other's to criticize him for his appearance. Further more kamal's clothing choice were more traditional whereas the young Egyptian preferred Western clothing. The society has adopted for the change and has unfavorable attention towards kamal's traditional outfits. Kamal's attire is described as "old fashioned and incongruous ". The societal norms ingrained in the society highlights the beauty standards and with the expectations which it has pressurise individuals to make changes in appearance and clothing which affects individuals self esteem and sense of belonging.

Beauty plays a vital role in the lives of the female characters in the trilogy as the status of women in the family and society is determined by how they look . Ahmad's elder daughter Khadija is one such character in the trilogy who gets criticised for her outward appearance. Appearance has always been a point of criticism throughout her life. Khadija appeared short and plump, with strong physique. "Her face had acquired its features from her parents but in a combination lacking in harmony or charm "(31) Her big nose, is considered as an unattractive feature in her, despite the fact that her eyes were as beautiful as her mother's. "while this nose on her father's face, where it fit, lent his face a noticeable majesty, it added nothing to the girl's looks"(31). People with fair complexion and delicate features are or often admired by the society and those whose features don't fit the norms experience discrimination. The expectations in the society is so high that it's difficult for individuals to live up to society's high expectations. Aisha, Ahmad's younger daughter, is sixteen years old and is regarded by many as the epitome of beauty. Aisha appeared slender; in their family group, being thin is viewed as a defect, however in Aisha's case it is not taken into account.

Her face was as beautiful as the moon. She had a white complexion suffused with rosy highlights and her father's blue eyes, which went well with her mother's small nose. Unlike all the other, she had golden hair, inherited from her paternal grandmother,(31)

Societal judgements based on beauty standards created a feeling of jealousy in the mind of Khadija towards her sister Aisha. She often makes remarks against Aisha that upset her. Although siblings jealousy is normal, on the inside, it is a mirror of her sentiments of disability due to her inferiority. She is compassionate and affectionate towards her family members, but because of her insecurity, she frequently concentrates on people's imperfections rather than looking at their positive traits. " Her eyes, like the needle of a compass always attracted to the magnetic pole, lit first on people's imperfections if their shortcomings were cloaked, she contrived to uncover and enlarge them"(32). She is intolerant against any criticism towards her or other family members, and if she finds it, she would react violently against them without showing any mercy.

The article illustrates how Egyptian society has traditionally valued external appearance over internal values. Mahfuz illustrates that people can only escape criticism if they are able to live up to society's standards of beauty. It is expected of women to prioritize their appearance solely for the benefit of their spouse and family. Women are expected to take care of themselves so that they appear attractive to their husbands, as beauty is seen as a reflection of their family prestige. Those who don't live up to the expectations are marginalized by society, which undermines their self-esteem. The author describes the toxic nature of Egyptian society, which saw people as objects of judgment.

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