

**Marginalized Heroes in Selected Novels by Najīb Mahfūz
and Nadine Gordimer**

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Table of the system of transliteration of Arabic words and names used by
the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University.

b	=	ب	z	=	ز	f	=	ف
t	=	ت	s	=	س	q	=	ق
th	=	ث	sh	=	ش	k	=	ك
j	=	ج	ṣ	=	ص	l	=	ل
ḥ	=	ح	ḍ	=	ض	m	=	م
kh	=	خ	t	=	ط	n	=	ن
d	=	د	ẓ	=	ظ	h	=	هـ
dh	=	ذ	‘	=	ع	w	=	و
r	=	ر	gh	=	غ	y	=	ي

Short: a = ا ; i = إ ; u = أُ

Long: ā = آ ; ī = إِي ; ū = أُو

Diphthong: ay = اِي ; aw = اُو

أبطال مهمشون في روايات مختارة لنجيب محفوظ ونادين جورديمير

رسالة مقدمة للحصول على درجة الدكتوراه من

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها

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Chapter I
Heroes: From Glory to Marginalization
A Study of the Reversal of Roles

Marginalized heroes are those complex characters that emerge in particular periods of history, so-called “transition” periods, being characterized by social, moral and political turmoil. These heroes, incapable of coping with such plight, still serve as their creators’ mouthpieces that express the formers’ views of these dilemmas and the way they find reality could be shaped. As such, a marginalized hero is neither a brave warrior, nor a villainous coward. He understands quite well the plight of his society but he is unable to get over it. He is in many ways similar to the outsider who contemplates his society’s troubles, makes up theories about their solutions. Yet ironically enough, he cannot put those theories into application.

The theorist hero is, therefore, the subject of study in this chapter. However, it is worthy to point out that the chapter in particular, or the thesis in general, is not a character study, but an analysis of situations in which these characters serve as samples of a bigger fragmentation idea, a malady that attacks their societies at large, and afflicts their will to act. However, before dealing with all these protagonists, it is worthy to relate the “marginalized hero” to his roots: ones that date back to Bonaparte’s defeat and its impact on the political, social, moral and – especially – the

literary history of Europe, and – in turn – of the whole world. This fact is clearly stated in Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*.

In his *The Story of Philosophy* (1926), Will Durant indicates how Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat in Waterloo marks the downfall of Europe's most celebrated "hero" (Durant 389), for the "despair" which accompanied his exile to Saint Helena and his "dark death," after being "the only victor of all wars," overturned history, gave rise to a "thoroughly finished world," where life seemed "so meaningless ... [and] so mean." (390) Durant writes:

Yes, the [French] Revolution was dead; ... that new glamour heavens called Utopia, whose had relieved the twilight of the gods had receded into a dim future where only young eyes could see it; the older ones had followed the lure long enough, and turned away from it now as a mockery of men's hopes ... until Beethoven tore into shreds the dedication of his Heroic Symphony to the man who had ceased to be the son of the Revolution and had become the son-in-law of reaction. How many had fought even then for the great hope, and had believed, with passionate uncertainty, to the very end? (390-1)

Durant's words clearly echo how those who fought with Bonaparte were not as keen on disseminating the supreme principles of freedom and equality throughout Europe as much as they were driven by hero – worship. As such, the aforementioned defeat banished human will, giving way to “willessness.” (Durant, 443)

Parallel to this political deterioration came the social degeneracy seen in the rise of the working class – the bourgeoisie – with its culture which glorified “the proletarians, who must compete with each other for each day's insufficient pay ... [who] are legally forbidden to organize for their economic advantage and, voteless, cannot elect a parliament that would grant them the right to do so," as Raymond Giraud puts it in his *The Unheroic Hero* (24). Giraud places the bourgeoisie somewhere in “the middle which is equally distant from the wealth of high finance and the misery of the common people” (24). This view is supported by Durant's maintaining that from then onwards, “history [began] to study the people at work, rather than kings at war; it [has ceased] to be a record of personalities, and became [one] of inventions and new ideas ...” (Durant, 496).

One of the most striking new ideas of that age – the post – Napoleonic downfall era – is Darwinism whose followers “had removed the theological basis of modern morals, ... hanging miraculously to the air,” whereby:

A little biology was all that was needed to clear away this remnant of imposture. Men

who could think clearly soon perceived what the profoundest minds of every age had known: that in this battle we call life, what we need is not goodness, but strength, not humility, pride, not altruism, but resolute intelligence (523).

In his “The Fate of Man in the Modern World”, Nicolas Berdayaev comments on this very concept of “biology” being the ultimate basis of creation, saying that Darwinism shook “the image of Man” which “began to “disintegrate;” and that Man, in deifying himself, has – in effect – unnamed himself! Man has lost his humanity and, therefore, “the will to justice was overcome by the will to power,” whereby humanity disappears to give way to “the forces of Nature or of the machine” (16-17). Man’s dehumanization is also shed light upon in John C. Greene’s “Darwin and the Modern World View”, in which he argues that Darwin’s mistake was that he ignored the spiritual dimension of Man. He maintains that:

in the efforts to deal with Man by the methods of modern science, we must perforce overlook those other aspects of human nature and culture that do not really lend themselves to formulation of scientific terms ... Culture becomes simply a mode of adaptation to the environment, morality simply a means of preserving social solidarity,

religion nothing but a way of discharging
individual and social tensions (Greene, 66- 67).

Ignoring the spiritual dimension of Man, denouncing Christian principles as well as showing deep bitterness against the working class are clearly reflected in Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Twilight of Idols* (1888). The reason for referring to this work in the context of the marginalized hero's background is that it delineates all the elements which gave birth to this troubled hero's figure. Durant shows how Nietzsche criticizes, in this very book, democracy as being "drift ... it means the lapse of coherence and interdependence, the enthronement of liberty and chaos" (Durant, 551). He also expresses deep contempt for Christian virtues which are based on love, humility and sacrifice, whereby a saint's life ends where God's kingdom begins (*The Twilight of Idols*, 40).

Nietzsche seems to value severity, violence and war as the virtues of the "strong", who are nourished by "greed, envy and hatred", which protect leaders from "[breaking] into common clay" (Durant, 551)! Moreover, Nietzsche claims that rejecting war and embracing peace are simply forms of rejecting "the greatness of life" (Nietzsche, 38). In fact, Durant is right to comment on Nietzsche's fate by saying that he died "blind in sight and soul; [for] he had abandoned hope ... he lacked the balance and strength that made [his predecessors] strong" (Durant, 576). Nietzsche's fault is that he glorifies power, which is, according to Durant, "the idol of some of us; but most of us long rather for security and peace" (578).

This 'longing for security and peace' is reflected in literature – in fiction to be specific through the figure of the marginalized hero. In his *The Byronic Hero*, Peter L. Thorslev, Jr. asserts that, "... the hero is useful in understanding the culture of any era. The hero, as he appears in literature, bears with him the ethos of the age, the unspoken assumptions, the philosophical presuppositions in the context of which his existence becomes meaningful" (19). Marginalized heroes, influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy, are maladjusted, non-conformist individuals of the modern age who – according to Raymond Giraud – "have the common feelings of superiority and isolation in society as well as the common inability to produce [acts of greatness] ..." (10). Giraud calls them "unheroic heroes" as they combine rebelliousness with passivity, bestialism with sensitivity and therefore, introduces them in the following way:

These heroes, in whom some of the actual moral problems of our own time are prefigured, are not romantic villains or anti-heroes but complex, sensitive individuals, adrift in an expanding vulgarized society. They are the product of a mixture of the novelist's sympathy and self-expression, on the one hand, and his response to the demands of realism on the other (n. page).

Readings in the first two parts of Najīb Mahfūz's *Cairo Trilogy* (delineating the pre 1952 Revolution era), namely *Palace Walk* and

Palace of Desire, and *The Search* (written under Naṣir's regime), as well Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (before the revolution against the English colonialism in South Africa) and *July's People* (after the South African revolution) reveal examples of marginalized heroes living in such turbulent eras that this chapter will deal with. A remarkable shift from nobility and bravery to fear and neurosis replaces the hero with the outsider; that is, a remarkable reversal of roles takes place.

We shall begin with Najīb Mahfūz's protagonists' reaction to their plight, showing how this attitude reflects a reaction to the prevalent social, moral and political dilemmas of their time. *Cairo Trilogy* bears testimony to the aforementioned shift. As the frail Kamāl Abdul Jawwād attracts the readers' attention more than his brother Fahmy, the brave rebel, one is brought to recall how Giraud's heroes' passivity blocks their way towards rejecting a wrong situation. We are also reminded of the "chaos" Nietzsche mentions within the context of the reign of the working class: for both Kamāl and Fahmy belong to this bourgeoisie, a class that swings between the lofty aristocracy on the one hand, and the down – trodden beggars or outsiders on the other!

Colin Wilson defines this outsider in a book bearing the same title by saying that though such a category of people "[feels] physically satiated," it is unable to "forget [it is] being cheated..." and, above all, is "capable of becoming insane" (Wilson, 10–12). Dr. Ghaly Shukry's words in his *The Outsider's Foil (Al-Muntamy)* add to one's understanding of the marginalized hero as he maintains that this persona is a "troubled mind," that "tries – in vain – to capture the absurdity of the

universe.” He is part of the “troubled generation, who tries to unify his contradictory dispositions” (Shukry, 79). This does not mean that the “outsider” or the “marginalized hero” is a schizophrenic; put in simple terms, he “stands for truth” in world of “dangerous, unable impulses, ... pretence” where all people’s “respectability, their philosophy, their religion, are all attempts to gloss over, to make look civilized and rational something that is savage, unorganized, irrational” (Wilson, 23).

Kamāl Abdul Jawwād –seen in the light of the outsider’s definition –becomes the *Trilogy*’s most “rebellious”, yet “most fearful” character! In his father’s presence, he “eats cautiously, politely ... sneaking every now and then to the remnants of the food which quickly decreases, thereby increasing his worries, for his elder brothers would contend over the food and eventually leave an empty table” (*Palace Walk*, 23). Indeed, upon reading the first two parts of the *Trilogy*, two attributes continue to adhere to Kamāl’s character and actions, namely, “panic and worry” (166, 167). These two develop to further negative ones, “objection and peevishness” (204). Feelings of “fear”, “doubt”, “lack of fulfillment” and “timidity” (262) haunt Kamāl’s childhood, thus unfolding to a fragmented youth. The fact that Kamāl, in particular, closes *Palace Walk* is not just meant to show that loneliness and fear are to accompany Kamāl for the rest of his life, but are typical of the fate of the whole country, the future of which is to be shaped by marginalized heroes. We are invited to listen to Sayid Darwish’s famous song, “Zurūny kul sanah marrah” (O’ do visit me once a year):

O’ do visit me once a year,

Leave me not in agony and fear!

Kamāl's frailty is made clearer upon contemplating Fahmy's character, a foil, one that is remembered in a context of unacknowledged gallantry and heroism. At the beginning of *Palace of Desire*, Amīna, his mother mourns him saying, "O' my dearest son ... you were the apple of my eye, but, alas! No one remembers you except in feasts ... " (13). These words stress the notion that Fahmy's death marks the end of a heroic age. According to Rajaa'l Naqqāsh in his *Najīb Mahfūz's Fan* (Fy Ḥub Najīb Mahfūz), the fact that Fahmy dies in a unarmed demonstration against the British colonizer is an expression of "Man's inability to defeat the impersonal forces of fate, whereby the one witnesses how these forces create misery, when Man thinks he is at the peak of achievement" (77)! This very opinion invites one to recall the "dehumanization" of Man, and how his attempt to deify himself made him a machine, or a victim of Nature's odds. Indeed Fahmy, in joining that demonstration, does not try to escape his father's cruelty, as Samy Khashaba maintains, for-in fact- he has faced him with his intentions and made it clear that such an act is a proof of patriotism.

In her article "The Arab Laureate", Salma Khadra Jayyusi asserts that Najīb Mahfūz's characters constitute an epitome for the society at large which, suffering from poverty, suppression and distortion of identity, had to revolt against their oppressors. They had to fight in order to regain freedom and enfranchisement. Jayyusi believes that Fahmy, being a student of Law, stands for this impoverished, yet enlightened