

## ROLE OF ECONOMIC DISPARITY IN FEMALE VICTIMIZATION IN NAGUIB MAHFOUZ'S NOVEL 'THE BEGINNING AND THE END'

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### ABSTRACT

*The objective of the study is to examine the impact of economic disparity in female victimization in Naguib Mahfouz's novel "The Beginning and the End". Economic inequality has played a key role in maintaining the secondary role given to women. A female is affected in many ways by socio-economic and socio-political structures depending on their class, race, nationality, religion, language, disability, sexual preferences and education (Liu, 2022). The theoretical framework of Socialist Feminism (Armstrong, 2020) was used to understand the concept of inferiority of women in society; the female has been given a secondary position in society on the basis of economic factors throughout the ages. The textual analysis of Naguib Mahfouz's novel 'The Beginning and the End' unfolded the role of economic disparity for female victimization particularly in Egyptian culture. The current study helped not only to explore the reasons of economic disparity in gender roles but also provided a door for further study in same context.*

**Key Words:** Economic Disparity, Female victimization, Gender roles, socio-political structures, Egyptian culture and Textual analysis.

### INTRODUCTION

The current study tried to deconstruct the ideologies of the characters of the novel to understand the differences of gender regarding socio-economic status in society. Egyptian society, when the novel *The Beginning and the End* was written, was very much vindictive against women. So many changes have been occurred since the publication of the novel but still so many things are present in the society. The need is to change those things altogether. The reason to carry research on Egyptian novel is its relevance to the Pakistani society in terms of religion, position of gender, cultural customs and economical status of middle class families. The writer Mahfouz was Nobel Prize winner in literature and the mentioned novel is one of his the best works. The text of the novel was deconstructed to explore the role of economic disparity in females' victimization; Marxism, socialism and feminism represent females' exploitation clearly.

Karl Marx is of the opinion that modes of production determine the value of people in the social setup. He has categorized the society into two classes of people: the upper class (The bourgeois) and the lower class (The proletariat). The upper class exploits the lower class extensively. The social structure of the society does favor this exploitation. Therefore Marxism's aim is to change the power structure so to avoid this exploitation. Socialist Feminism is a theory developed during the women rights movement (1960 onwards). Socialist Feminism (2020) focuses on the economic oppression of women in a patriarchal society. Like Marxism, Socialist Feminists consider male gender a class of people (the oppressor) and female gender another class of people (the oppressed). The women are less paid in the society; their work is not even

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valued inside their homes. The novel *The Beginning and the End* by Naguib Mahfouz has voiced against this economic oppression against the women vehemently. There are two main female characters of a lower middle class family along with other minor female characters who are trying to earn a respectable livelihood for the family but facing a lot of hurdles in that patriarchal society. The text of the novel was analyzed through the lens of Socialist Feminism. Samera and Nafesa are the main characters who, after the death of sole breadwinner, try to fulfill the needs of the family but in this process they face a lot of difficulties. In '*The Beginning and the End*' there are some minor female characters: submissive wives, prostitutes, surrendering daughters and speechless mothers are represented along with very assertive and haughty wives and daughters. Two women with different economic status carry different fate to meet; the difference is just because of economic inequality. The findings of the present study helped to raise the voices of the helpless characters of the society especially the novel for economic injustice. The current research can be a bridge to bring further research for Pakistani and Egyptian English literature.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Literature is about the society. If someone wants to know about the society, he/she may read the literature of that society. Literature has more reality than the actual life. Everywhere we find certain characters that are presented by the writers positively or negatively. This projection is found in the society as it is the collective consciousness of the society. The society behaves stereotypically in the light of previous experiences. Naguib Mahfouz has tried to make us listen to the moans of the oppressed class of people throughout his life. He found the Egyptian society infected with all social evils: oppression, cruelty, perversions and sexuality. Violence against women is a major theme in his novels. Lois Tyson in her famous book "*Critical Theory Today*" says that Marxist Feminists are concerned with how traditions and institutions work against the 'material' oppression of the women (Tyson, 2006). Simone de Beauvoir outlines the base of Marxist or Material Feminism very clearly. She is of the opinion that in a patriarchal society man and woman, though connected to each other, are not considered alike. A male is considered indispensable in a patriarchal set-up while a female is not (Beauvoir, 1949). She says even St. Thomas regards women a minor creature. A man is independent in his actions while a female is dependent on the institutions of the society. A man has identity while a female has no identity. This is because of one reason: the institutions of the society support male dominance.

Christine Delphy in one of her articles considers that a family is an economic unit. In the society under-hand is always oppressed and subjugated by the upper-hand. Same is the case with the women who are considered under-hand and are always exploited by the men (Delphy, 2015). She opines that a woman's work is not considered at all so it is not valued. A woman is always expected not to expect any reward for her domestic toil at all. Diane Perrons in *Gendering the inequality debate* says that economic inequality has become gendered and racialized (Perrons, 2015). Christine Lagarde (2014) in *Empowerment – the Amartya Sen Lecture 2014* says that the women are often "underutilized, underpaid, underappreciated and over-exploited" (Lagarde, 2014:3). Patriarchy is an organization of ideas in which the men and the women are not considered equal and patriarchy is extremely rooted in our financial organization. Mohammad Khosravi Shakib (2010) in *Marxist feminism and post-modernism* opines that patriarchy is power structure which allows the male to govern the female (Shakib, 2010). Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One's Own* has stressed the importance of education and equal distribution of wealth regarding woman (Woolf, 1929). The basic focus of *A Room of One's Own* is to liberate the female financially. Free thinking and financial independence have a direct linkage. Brigitte Bechtold says that Woolf discusses the issues like how socio-economic conditions affect the status of the women in the man-made society to a great extent (Bechtold, 2000). The first chapter of *A Room of One's Own* talks about the poor food of the female. She says that there are two types of food: food for male and food for female (Woolf, 1929). A Male enjoys delicious food while a female gets drab food. Both men and women work for existence but women are forced to work less privileged or menial work. *Three Guineas* by Virginia Woolf has three chapters. Of which the first chapter concentrates on the education and financial independence of the women (Woolf, 1938). Fredrick Engels clearly talks about that sexual coercion against the female which is often exercised in the capitalistic society

(Engels, 1972). *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir talks that financial position, in fact, decides the true nature of relationship between the two genders. She opines that that present structure of economy is exploitive regarding women (Beauvoir, 1989). Moreover she says that a wife’s labor is not regarded useful as she works in the four walls of the home that is not useful for the community directly. The men have good opportunities in the society and have good wages ultimately while the women have fewer opportunities and in return get low wages. Men have much more material assets than the women. That’s why they consider themselves the custodian of the women. On these reasons the male considers the female another being inferior as a whole. The said concept constructs disproportion everywhere in the society.

A huge literature review on the said topic incited researcher to explore cross cultural English literature. Therefore, the recent theoretical features of Marxist and Socialist Feminism by Armstrong, 2020 have been applied on the text of the selected novel. Majorly, Marxism was limited to the political and economical contexts but the current theory identified patriarchy to rule over women in terms of social injustice which is linked with economical situations. The theory emphasized over the inequality in gender and socio-economical growth in society.

**METHODOLOGY**

Socialist Feminism is the theoretical ground of this research. Socialist Feminist Theorists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Charles Fourier are of the opinion that the main reason of female oppression in the society is the economic oppression. Qualitative method is employed to get analyzed the novel, *The Beginning and the End*. Related examples from the text are evaluated in the light of opinions presented by the critics, the theorists and the reviewers. The textual analysis guided to explore the role of economic disparity in different social institutions.

*Table 1: Representing Economic Disparity in Social Institutions of the Novel*

Economic Disparity	Institution of Marriage
	Institution of Profession
	Institution of Education
	Institution of Family

**Textual Analysis & Discussion of *The Beginning and the End***

*The Beginning and the End* by Naguib Mahfouz is a master piece talking about the true nature of Egyptian society. *Bidayawa Nihaya* (original name in Arabic) is written in 1949 and later it is translated in English (Mahfouz, 1949). According Mahfouz, this is a true story. Story’s setting is Cairo in late 1930s. The novel is about a middle-class family that is collapsed after the death of the father who is the family’s sole breadwinner. All the members of the family suffer individually after the death of their guardian. There are two female characters i.e. Samira (the mother) and Nafesa (the daughter) who suffer the most among the family. Nafesa was born in a humble, lower middle class society family in Cairo. From an early age, she was expected to perform the role and duties of a society daughter: to work and help the family and sustain a genteel image. The family has also three male heirs i.e. Hassan (the eldest brother) who does nothing and wanders all the time and is casual about the family matters. Hussein’s number is second last who after the death of the father leaves school and does a job in a school as a clerk and supports the family financially. The last and the younger member of the family is Hussnein who is very much ambitious character in the story and becomes the cause of the death his sister who works as a maid and supports her family. The novel has so many examples of gender based economic disparity. After the death of Mr. Kamel Effendi, Samira is very much apprehensive about the future of her daughter: “*She sighed deeply. Then she turned her eyes to Nafesa, agonizing over her condition; a girl of twenty-three, without beauty, money, or father*” (p.29). Samira is very much worried about the future of her daughter as the family does not belong to the upper strata of the family. She is not thinking about her three sons. She thinks her daughter will have to face much more problems in future unlike her sons. Samira is the mouth piece of Naguib who sees the plights of the women in the Egyptian patriarchal set-up where money in the form of dowry does matter. Moreover Nafesa is neither a beautiful nor a rich girl. So, she is at stake all the time. The apprehensions expressed by the mother are for her daughter not for her sons. Rawan Alimam in a literary piece says that economic liberation

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is indispensable for women's freedom. Women are often forced to do inferior or low jobs in the society as they don't get equal opportunities to excel in the society. Nafesa faces the same situation after the death of her father. Samira tells Nafesa: "*Nafesa is good at sewing. Out of friendship and courtesy, she often makes dresses for our neighbors. I see no harm in asking for some compensation*" (p.36). Diane Perrons (2015) in Gendering the inequality debate said that International Labor Organization (2015) has put in that women are given often ordinary and less-earning jobs with unsuitable working environments (Perrons, 2015:1).

They don't have equal chances to get education, training, recruitment and have inadequate decision-making opportunities. Tailoring is not considered to be a respectable occupation for a young lady in Egyptian society. Her position is extremely precarious after the death of her beloved father.

Samira encourages her daughter to do the sewing to earn and support the family financially. Nafesa is expected to do the job of tailoring to support the family. On the other hand, her father was not in the favor of this job at all. He was also not willing to spend money on the education of her daughter as she was a female. Mr. Kamel Effendi spent nothing on the education of his daughter as it would not compensate him financially in future. Nafesa was well liked and admired by her father but did not have a chance to get education for certain reasons. Hasan opines: "*...it's a real pity that my late father forbade Nafesa to continue her school education. Imagine how things would be now if our sister had become a teacher*" (p.37).

Education of a female can change the fate of the women. But the tragedy is that a female does not get equal chance to get education and make excel in the society. Marthae Gimenez says that gender disparity between the women and the men in a capitalistic set-up may be witnessed in various ways: not equal education, not equal pay, and prospects (Gimenez, 2005). People are unwilling to spend on the education of female as they have to leave their parents after the marriage. That's why a little money is spent on the female education. Erik Thorbecke and Chutatong Charumilind in the article *Economic Inequality and Its Socioeconomic Impact* say that lack of education is directly related with lower income. Education is responsible to promote higher incomes and economic growth (Thorbecke & Charumilind, 2002). Kate Sutherland expresses her opinion regarding the choice of profession. Kate Sutherland tells that MacKinnon opines a female has no option to select her vocation freely (Sutherland, 2005).

Therefore, our central character Nafesa is forced to adopt less paying profession: *sewing*. Dress making is not viewed a good vocation in that society as it is less paying. This vocation also designates the economic condition of the skilled. Samira is regretful on the economic state of her family. "*Most of their conversation revolved about the troubles of life. Since poverty was still their major pre-occupation; the older woman was fear-stricken*" (p.66).

Nafesa and her mother are shown depressed by the economic circumstances they are facing. Both are working but are earning not so much to meet the very needs of the family. They feel insecure about their future. Economic discrimination has created disruption in the minds of two women. As the story progresses, we find a male character Soliman Gabar who shows some interest in Nafesa. He shows his love for her. But Nafesa is not satisfied by these words of love at all. "*However, words of love were not enough for her... She kept urging him until he promised to marry her*" (p.115).

In a man-made society, marriage guarantees material prosperity for a woman. Nafesa wants to get married to a stupid character to ensure a secured life. Economic inequality exploits her once again. Nafesa assumes that marriage would set her free from financial subjugation. Fredrik Engels expresses his views that harassment concerning sex is a trait of capitalistic social order (Engels, 1972). A woman is to be dishonored in a gendered society on the ground of financial opportunities provided to her. Soliman declines her marriage proposal on the pretext that his father is unwilling for this proposal. He and his father calculate the financial prospects of the marriage. So Soliman gets married to a wealthy girl for financial reasons. De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* views that economic situations determine the relations between two genders (De Beauvoir, 1989). After the refusal from Soliman, another predator of women gets a chance to fish in the troubled water. His name is Mohamad al-Ful, a garage and a car owner. He comes forward and violates her heartlessly without knowing the mental state of a penniless girl who does not have anything. She is not willing to indulge in the wicked act but compromises in the end for sake of money as she is to support her

family. She is worried for coming late with Mohamad al-Ful and says what the family will ask about her coming: *“My family”*. *“Your family! Don’t they know?”* .....*His painful words stabbed her in the heart*..... (p.189)

Rejoinder of Mohammad al-Ful gouges her heart as he misjudges her feelings. She is not a whore as he considers but a victim of circumstances. A woman is not respected outside her home. This is archetypal belief prevailing in the gendered society that a female goes outdoor just to fulfill her carnal desires. This propagation is damaging the image of a female who is to come out to earn a decent earning. Sometimes this propaganda claims the lives of the female. A woman is considered second-rate to a man in a gendered society. A female is always under suspicion in market economy. A female is expected to stay in the fore walls of her home permanently because if a woman comes out of her home assuredly she will demand her portion in the market economy. Nafesa is not a strong-willed and opinionated girl who could have claimed her ideals openly so that’s why she was a exploited even by this old man. Muhammad Khosravi Shakib states that if change is desired in the status of the women then first of all methods of production should be changed otherwise status quo would continue (p.29). Nafesa is forced to work as a sex worker as she does not have any preference in the society. She even sleeps with sixty year old man just for a few pennies. Women, in a gendered society, are compelled to take on prostitution as an occupation to earn even a meager living as they don’t have any alternatives except this (Van Der Veen, 2001: 32). It is Samira’s utmost wish to get Nafesa married as soon as possible. She expresses her concerns clearly: *“I wish to see her married. But how? We don’t possess a single mil lime for her trousseau....You are men, but she is a helpless woman with no support”* (p.249). Trousseau is the synonym of dowry. Nafesa is a poor girl who does not have anything for her dowry. So no one is ready to be attached with the family. Economic discrimination becomes the cause of ruin for the family as they don’t have anything to come out the situation. Virginia Woolf says that a female must have her own property. Financial autonomy leads towards mental and social deliverance of women.

Hassanein (brother of Nafesa) is engaged with Bahia but this engagement is broken up as Bahia is also scrutinized with the lens of capitalism. As she is not very much rich, so Hassanein, who was once very much eager to get engaged with Bahia, does not bear to carry on with Bahia. He muses: *“But she does not deserve to be the wife of an officer like”* (p.329). So once again a girl is analyzed by the worldly assets. Now Hassanein is interested in a girl who belongs to an upper class. He says: *“I want a wife from a higher class, cultured and reasonably wealthy”* (p.357). Beauvoir is of the opinion that *“economic condition defines the destiny of a female in our social set-up”* (De Beauvoir, 1989: 170). She says that respect and disrespect of a woman depends on her economic conditions. Hassanein himself belongs to a poor family but wishes for a wealthy wife. His response clearly supports the idea given by Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*. He clarifies his attitude regarding marriage. As Bahia belongs to a poor family so is declined by Hassanein without any reluctance.

Another female character is Lady Sana’a who invites the elder member of Kamel Effendi’s family, Hassan. It is true that she runs a brothel house that is contemptible. She is very much large-hearted woman. She helps Hussnein to pay his college fee. She is forced to indulge in this kind of activity as a female is not given proper opportunities to make outshine and earn an honorable living. Engels articulates that sexual persecution to women is a capitalistic trait (Engels, 1972: 72). She had no other choice except from being a prostitute.

## CONCLUSION

Generally a female is treated inversely in a patriarchal arrangement. So feminists attempt to break the restraints of slavery (economic, political, psychological and social) for the women. Feminists want to change the power structures that are the perpetual reasons of a female victimization. Feminists want to publicize the strong-willed and opinionated women who must have their own claims and could sustain in a better way. Power structures make a breach between the upper and lower class of people and become cause of oppression. Financial oppression is the main reason of a female vulnerability in a capitalistic society. Karl Marx has divided a society into the bourgeois (the haves) and the proletariats (the haves not). It is mode of production that is responsible for our social status. Women are included in the proletariat class of

people according to Marx. They are oppressed economically as they are excluded from economic circle. This financial oppression leads towards gender based oppression in the society. Marxist Feminism is concerned with financial repression of the women in the man-made society. Naguib Mahfouz's, *The Beginning and The End* is a social documentary. It is a story about the predicaments of women in the Egyptian society. The women are trying to earn an honorable living but facing much opposition in a patriarchal society. The essence of the novel is that women's oppression is linked with economic disproportion spread in the society. It is not easy to remodel the conventions of the society. Actually women are considered another being at economic level. It is shown that the women are victimized due to economic inequality. This inequality, in the end, claims the life of the central character (Nafesa). She has to work outside the four walls of the house to support her family.

But she is forced to work as a prostitute for a few piasters. She earns herself a scandalous reputation. She is not provided formal education as the reward from a woman's education is not high in a male dominant society. Soliman rejects her as she does not have dowry. The bride of Soliman also does not respect her as she is very poor. Socially she is marginalized due to economic inequality. This disparity creates a gap even between the brother and the sister. Hassanein, after getting a respectful job, in the end of the novel, expects her to get drowned herself. Hassanein also rejects former fiancée, Bahia, as she belongs to a poor family. Samira the mother of the Kamel Effendi family is also the victim of economic disparity. She works all the day long but is unable to earn enough to satiate the stomachs of her four children. Samira even has to sell the furniture to meet the needs of the family. Moreover it is also visible from the novel that a female is forced to adopt inferior roles in the patriarchal society due to conventional power structures. Similarly Lady Sana and Nafesa are compelled to approve prostitution as a profession as they do not have right prospects to earn honorably in the man-made social set-up. So both of the women do not get respect in the society due to economic oppression. The women in *The Beginning and the End* try to avert their bad fortune imposed upon them in the form of economic disparity. But their attempts go futile.

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