

# The Existential Condition of Man as Depicted in Naguib Mahfouz's Story "Zaabalawi"

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**Abstract-** The present paper attempts at presenting the individual's contest that is futile because ignorance misleads him from the path. The research paper aims at highlighting the element of crisis mankind undergoes in Mahfouz's short story, "Zaabalawi". In this paper, I will examine whether there are any related points of similarities and dissimilarities between Mahfouz's short story "Zaabalawi" and Samuel Beckett's Waiting For Godot. What attracts our attention to discuss this issue is the word "existential" that is the key word in the title of this paper. A few studies have been carried on Mahfouz's affinity with other writers as Kafka, Conrad and George Eliot. A striking kind of such studies is Al-Sarayrah's study of the affinity between William Faulkner, Albert Camus and Naguib Mahfouz. Al-Sarayrah concludes "Camus and Mahfouz share the view that the human condition is illogical and purposeless; in their created worlds, the fictional characters live unsatisfying lives"( Al-Sarayrah 11) Mahfouz's point of view comes close to the view of the existentialist Camus that there is no definite rational justification for the absurd things in this world.

In this study, I will investigate the way through which Mahfouz provides the readers with panoramic portrait of man doing his duty, that is, his quest for inner relief, truth, existence full of meaning. Through my reading, I assume that there is an affinity of thematic relation between Mahfouz's "Zaabalawi" and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot. Both the writers are concerned with the existential predicament of the individual and they reveal man's suffering and his incompetence to accomplish a meaningful existence.

**Index Terms-** absurdity, affinity, existential condition, harmony, illness, pursuit, savior

## I. INTRODUCTION

Naguib Mahfouz (1911- 2006), the prolific and celebrated Egyptian novelist and short story writer and Nobel laureate, whose contribution has gained world-wide recognition as: "without Mahfouz the turbulent of history of twentieth -century Egypt would never be known"(The Norton Anthology of World Literature 2527). Needless to say, Mahfouz's short stories are remarkable for the issues they deal with. Mahfouz's literary work during the 1960s, inaugurated by The Thief and the Dogs (1961), represents a new phase in which, as Sabry Hafez says, we find "a new blend of realism, mysticism, and existentialism, mixed with social criticism and contemplative and analytical elements." (qtd. in Farley 33)

"Zaabalawi" is regarded as one of the best short stories of Mahfouz and "it is also one of his personal favorites"(Elad:632). Published in 1961 and, again, in 1963 in a collection of short stories titled Dunya Allah ( The World of God), "Zaabalawi" regarded as one of the most widely known stories of Mahfouz, has been "included in the last edition of the Norton Anthology of World Literature, which is probably the most widely used anthology of world literature in the English- speaking world, [it was also included] in at least one other world literature anthology."(Shankman 172)

## II. DISCUSSION

Naguib Mahfouz's story "Zaabalawi" is a highly philosophical piece of writing and one can find in it elements of the existential philosophy of Jean- Paul Sartre and the absurdist philosophy as propounded by Albert Camus in his The Myth of Sisyphus. But we must first closely follow this story to understand its philosophical contents. The story has a folktale structure, which is significant. Then the narrator or persona is unnamed, which also is significant. He is Every Man, that is, all of us. He is afflicted with a disease which no doctor can cure. This is something alarming, a matter of concern for all of us, simply because the persona represents all of mankind. But what is the disease? This is also unnamed. It is as well that the writer does not name the disease because if he told us about it, many or rather most of us would not take him seriously, we might even deride the writer for naming it. Mankind has lived with this disease for a long time now and may continue to live with it for some time more. Of course man's future, in fact, his very existence, has nothing to write home about unless he finds a cure for it, but this seems to be a tall order. Man is a very perverse creature and his perversity will be his death.

The persona, while he was a child, used to hear a song in which the aid of one Zaabalawi was invoked for remedying the sorry condition of the world. The following two lines were part of the song:

Oh what's become of the world, Zaabalawi?

They 've turned it upside down and taken away its taste (Zaabalawi 803). These two lines are the clue to the meaning of the whole story. The composer asks of Zaabalawi why the condition of the world is so bad. He also says that "they" have turned the world upside down and taken its taste away. Who are "They"? Obviously , the people – we all – have turned it upside down, and so it has lost all its taste. Zaabalawi was a saint, a miracle man and, according to some, a charlatan. The persona

thinks that Zaabalawi will cure him of his incurable ailment, just as the two tramps in Samuel Beckett's play Waiting for Godot think that Godot the savior will redeem them. But Zaabalawi is as elusive a figure as Godot is, and so the persona will never be able to get hold of him. The whole pursuit is a futile one. But let us see what experiences the persona undergoes in his pursuit. But first let us see what is his illness and what condition he finds himself in. To use his own words: " I became afflicted with that illness for which no one possesses a remedy" (Zaabalawi 804) and that having " tried everything in vain... was overcome with despair" (Zaabalawi 804). This is the true awareness of the Absurd. In such a condition the sufferer commits either suicide or overcoming despair, seeks a remedy for his illness. But it must be remembered that there is no savior, neither Godot nor Zaabalawi. The persona in Mahfouz 's story suffers from a delusion just as Vladimir and Estragon do. His idea of Zaabalawi curing his illness will never materialize. However, we shall see what efforts he makes to find this saint-cum-miracle man-cum – charlatan.

First, the persona goes to Sheikh Qamar, a prosperous lawyer in a posh area of Cairo practicing in "the religious courts." The irony in the expression "religious courts" is obvious. His office is expensively furnished –leather-upholstered chairs, lush and costly carpet on the floor. The Lawyer himself is wearing a lounge suit and smoking a cigar and seems to be satisfied with " both himself and with his worldly possessions" (Zaabalawi 804). His clients are rich as the persona finds a very " beautiful woman with a most intoxicating kind of perfume" (Zaabalawi 804) leaving the lawyer's office as he enters it. When the persona introduces himself and makes known to the lawyer the purpose of his visit, the lawyer looks at him with " a languor" in his eyes" and it appears as if he wanted to show the door to the persona just because the persona did not turn out to be a rich client. He, however, tells the persona that Zaabalawi used to be regarded as " a man of miracles" and he used to live " in the Birgawi Residence in al-Azhar". The lawyer seemed to have no interest in him because, like most rich men, he did not feel anything like a spiritual hunger in himself.

The poor persona goes to the Birgawi Residence , but he finds the big house in ruins. He finds that "time had so eaten at the building that nothing was left of it save an antiquated façade and a courtyard that, despite supposedly being in charge of a caretaker, was being used as a rubbish dump" (Zaabalawi 805). This description of the erstwhile residence of Zaabalawi has symbolic significance. More symbolic is the insignificant man there, "a mere prologue to a man, using the covered entrance [ to the house] as a place for the sale of old books on theology and mysticism" (Zaabalawi 805). The place is decaying and the seller of books on theology and mysticism is also in the same condition. And Zaabalawi has vanished from such a place. The seller of books has only a faint memory of the saint of God. So when the persona asks him whether Zaabalawi lives there, he exclaims "Zaabalawi! Good heaven, what a time ago that was!" He says that Zaabalawi lived there when the house was habitable and asks the persona himself, "where, though, is Zaabalawi today?" ( Zaabalawi 805) Disappointed, the persona returns, but not before making enquiries as to the present whereabouts of the saint or miracle man. Some go nostalgic about the times when they personally had known him and some make fun of him, call

him "charlatan" and ask the persona to put himself in the hands of a doctor. To their advice, the persona says to himself "as though I had not already done so."

The condition of the persona worsens, his pains grow severe so that he feels that he cannot "hold out much longer." In this condition he hits upon the idea of consulting the local sheikh. He goes to the sheikh, who has an office that looks like a shop. The persona introduces himself to him and wants to know the whereabouts of Zaabalawi. The sheikh gazes at the persona with great astonishment at being reminded of Zaabalawi, whom he has not seen for many years, but says that Zaabalawi is still alive. However, he has not the vaguest idea where this saint of God is to be found. But he can see that the persona's condition is serious. And what he does to help the persona is strange. He quickly draws a full plan of the district on a sheet of paper showing all the streets, alleyways, market- places, residential areas, police stations. Giving it to the persona, he says that he should scour the whole district to find that miracle man. He also tells the persona that being too much "preoccupied with the cares of the world", he has "not given much thought to the whereabouts of Zaabalawi" The poor persona goes about seeking the saint. At last a small shopkeeper who irons clothes tells him to go to the calligrapher Hassanein as Zaabalawi and he used to be friends.

Here one needs to pause and ponder over the three interviews ( fruitless) the persona has had. The lawyer knows how to have briefs for rich clients and earn heavy fees; the seller of the books on theology and mysticism is only a prologue to a man; and the sheikh of the district lives on his wits. These people and legions of people who belong to their types do not know that the world, having been turned upside down, has lost its taste. They have no awareness of the rot that set in long ago in human culture. They are part of this rottenness. Such people are not awake to the rotten existential condition of man. In Waiting for Godot, Estragon is sleeping and Vladimir, his companion-tramp, soliloquizes. Part of his soliloquy runs thus: " At me too someone is looking, of me too, someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on"(123). The life of most people, from birth to death, is a long sleep. There are only exceptions like the persona here. But even such exceptions do not know how to stand the world on its feet. They think that some savior will set things to rights. But this is mere delusion.

However, the persona's search for Zaabalawi is not over. The next two persons he visits one after another are artists. The first one of these is Hassanein the calligrapher who receives the persona "with unaffected gentleness". He tells the persona certain things which are of great significance. He says Zaabalawi is a real man of mystery. He adds "He 'd visit you so often that people would imagine that he was your nearest and dearest, then would disappear as though he 'd never existed." He also says, "He was so constantly with me ... that I felt him to be a part of everything I drew. " ( Zaabalawi 807) But Hassanein also is not able to tell the persona about the present whereabouts of Zaabalawi. When the persona speaks of his dire need for the saint, adding "and no one knows better than you of the ailments in respect of which he is sought"; The artist replies, " Yes , yes . May God restore you to health"(Zaabalawi 807)

Then the persona goes to another artist-- "Sheikh Gad, the well-known composer". He also played on " his famous lute", in

which, the persona tells us, were concealed "the most beautiful melodies of our ages." Sheikh Gad also receives the persona with "understanding and kindness". He also tells the persona:

Whenever I was overcome by weariness or my inspiration failed me, he would punch me playfully in the chest and joke with me, and I would bubble over with melodies... (Zaabalawi 808)

One very significant remark that Sheikh Gad makes in response to the persona's question, whether those who seek Zaabalawi suffer as he does, is this: "Such suffering is part of the cure" (Zaabalawi 808). As far as we can see, it is only the persona who is suffering from an incurable ailment. The question that arises is why he alone of all the people is suffering. Because his being is seeking something that others do not feel the need of. He will not find Zaabalawi, because whoever he might have been in the past, now he is not physically to be found anywhere. The sufferer, that is, humanity (because the unnamed seeker in the story represents us all, or at least a universal, though inarticulate urge in us) has to find the cure himself.

One significant thing about the persona's interview with the two artists is that they, at their best, worked at their art under the direct guidance of Zaabalawi. The calligrapher says to the persona "It was due to him that I made my most beautiful drawings" (Zaabalawi 807). And Sheikh Gad, referring to his best musical rendering of a poem says to him this: "I composed the music of this poem in a single night" (Zaabalawi 808) and that "Zaabalawi was my guest for the whole of that night." The opening bars of this composition were:

I make lavish mention, even though I blame myself of those I love,  
For the stories of the beloved are my wine (Zaabalawi 808)

Truth and love are the vital elements of art. That is why the two artists in the story have had, till recently, Zaabalawi's loving guidance. And so both of them give the persona hopes of his meeting Zaabalawi. The persona will not, of course, meet Zaabalawi in person because, as the musician tells him,

Today, though the world has changed, and after having enjoyed a position attained only by potentates, he is now pursued by the police on a charge of false pretenses. (Zaabalawi 808)

The world has changed – It has been turned upside down and lost its taste, that is, lost truth and love. The great Russian novelist Mikhail Sholokhov says in his masterpiece And Quiet Flows The Don: "What the people want is Truth, but it is being buried every day and earth heaped over it. They say it's been a corpse a long time already." Truth and Love are, however, alive in real works of art. Without these two elements art will not be art. To resurrect them and make them the guiding principles of ordinary life of man the persona will have to make herculean efforts. Their suffering alone one day, if ever, find the cure, or man will be as dead as the Dado.

The persona's last interview is with a hardened drinker called Hagg Wanas in a bar in Cairo. He has, when the persona comes to him, "two bottles in front of him, one empty, the other two-thirds empty". It is difficult to believe a hardened drinker like Wanas. He tells the persona that he can talk to him only when the persona gets as much drunk as he himself is. But the persona, having had three glasses of wine, loses his memory, and after the fourth glass, the future vanishes and the world begins to turn round about him. He then goes into deep sleep while still sitting

on his chair in the bar. He sees a strangely fascinating dream. In that dream, he tells us, there was an extraordinary sense of harmony between me and my inner self, and between the two of us and the world, everything being in its rightful place, without discord or distortion." (Zaabalawi 810)

But this dream lasted only for a short while and when he wakes up, he says "consciousness struck at me like a policeman's fist..." Here we have the true clue to the persona's ailment. He wants to live in a world he sees in his dream. In the dream his unconscious self found, howsoever brief, fulfillment in a transcendent world; when the dream broke and he regained consciousness of the real, everyday world, it struck him like a policeman's fist. We know what a policeman's fist is or can be. The world of dream, in which there was harmony between him and his inner self, and between the two selves of his and the world and in which there was no discord or distortion, should have been the real world. But the real world of man's existence has been turned upside down by man himself and its taste has been taken away. It is not the fault of the world. It is man's own perversity that has made the world unlivable. The world of the persona's dream must become the real world if the human species is to get rid of his existential disease. This change or transformation or metamorphosis has to be brought about by man himself. If he fails to do it, he will look in fact, he really looks, like a huge insect into which the hero in Kafka's long short story "The Metamorphosis" is metamorphosed and finally dies. No Zaabalawi will come to his rescue, just as no Godot will ever come to redeem Vladimir and Estragon.

Naguib Mahfouz's story ends with these words spoken by the persona to his inner self: "Yes, I have to find Zaabalawi!" If he perseveres in his resolve, one day will find Zaabalawi within himself and then he will be able to realize himself, find the real harmony between his outer and inner selves and between the two of them and the world. We all of us have to attain this kind of harmony. Only then can this world be really livable.

In writing his story, Naguib Mahfouz seems to have been inspired by Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot. "Zaabalawi" stands on its own merits and the product of a particular culture, which is different from the Western culture. But irrespective of cultural differences, man's existential condition today throughout the world is alarming. Mahfouz's concern, like Beckett's, is for this alarming condition of man's existence.

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