



# The Achievers Journal

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## **‘Stifling Dust in the Air’: Glimpses of Personhood of an Egyptian Anti-hero<sup>i</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores Naguib Mahfouz’s novella *The Thief and the Dogs* in an effort to draw the silhouettes of personhood of Said Mahran, the protagonist. A revolutionary at the outset, Mahran cuts a sorry figure ultimately owing to his inflexibility and thinking far removed from common sense. In spite of the fact that his release from prison is liberating to him personally, he could not settle for a harmonious life. The rebel-turned-thief fails to see the socio-political realities around him, and finds it difficult to change ways. He could not come to terms with the realities around him because of his incapacity to adapt. The mistaken adjudication of events and people leave him frustrated and vengeful. Plot, in other words, action determines the character. This paper makes an attempt to formulate an idea of his personhood<sup>ii</sup> through discussion of the protagonist’s actions.*

**Keywords: personhood; revolution; inequality; resistance; vengeance**

*The Thief and the Dogs* is the first of six novels which taken together forms the best of Naguib Mahfouz’s work, in the opinion of Moussa-Mahmoud. He discards the techniques of the naturalistic novels and prefers complex, more modern, and highly artistic ones. Naguib Mahfouz’s novella *The Thief and the Dogs* starts off with a sentence characterized by a sense of relief, but is followed by suggestive imagery pregnant with a foreboding that, there is no propitious moment for Said Mahran, the rebel turned thief, even after his release from prison: “Once more he breathed the air of freedom. But there was stifling dust in the air, unbearable heat and no one was waiting



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for him; nothing but his blue suit and gym shoes” (Mahfouz 151). Coupled with this forlorn condition, there is his past pursuing, wanting to hurt, haunt, and restrict him to the associations of the past. That there is stifling dust and unbearable heat and that there is no body out there to wait for him and that there is his blue suit and gym shoes, the associations he is left with in this world are indicative of his unpleasant and uncertain future waiting in ambush. An unhealthy friction between the individual and the society at large are suggestively indicated.

The rise of a rebel against class oppression goes off track in the middle to bring about destruction on his own self. The narrative is seemingly deceptive in taking sides with Said Mahran in that it does not offer any other narratives from anyone else. The author does not allow any other views to dominate or challenge that of Said Mahran. This restricts the possibilities of the reader’s own judgements on finding the veracity of the statements Said Mahran makes. However the narrative reveals innermost of his private thoughts<sup>iii</sup> in that his interiority and inclination are clear and the individual intent overrides that of the collective stand ostensibly represented by Rauf Ilwan. The most inmost of his personal thoughts with regard to the betrayal committed by Ilish and Nabawiyyah stings him to the core. The dominant emotion that emerges in Said Mahran is that of vengeance. Hartment points out that “it is his state of confusion and alienation from everyone and everything in society, Said decides to take his revenge by killing Nabawiyya, Ilish, and Rauf”. He swears:

*Nabawiyyah. Ilish. Your two names merge in my mind. For years you will have been thinking of this day, never imagining all the while, that the gates would ever actually open. You’ll be watching now, I won’t fall into the trap. At the right moment, instead, I’ll strike like Fate.* (1) [Italics in original]

*My profession will always be mine, a just and legitimate trade, especially when it’s directed against its own philosopher. There’ll be space enough in the world to hide after I’ve punished the bastards...But unless I settle my account with them, life will have no taste, because I shall never forget the past.* (182-183)



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How on earth had he got himself entangled in the whirlpool of inextricable mess of complications? It's not just that he has been afflicted with personal grief. He is more into a socio political muddle from which it is impossible now for him to extricate himself. For, the connections have been life-long, from childhood itself through youth. In both the cases he has become alienated. The innocence of his childhood was threatened by the form of poverty and helplessness. Dispossession and bereavement resulted in increasing the agony and isolation. If the death of his father left him helpless, the death of his mother left him destitute and isolated. He mortgages his conscience through his unfortunate theft attempt. There begins the aberration of the norms – the digression from what the society has laid out to be. Sheer necessity of parental obligation and poverty drive him to the act of theft. Yet, the act and the subsequent charge on him unsettle and dispirit him. The helping hand Rauf Ilwan offers and the words of comfort and courage restore him and Rauf's words become a gospel for him on a mission of dispelling his ignorance as to the root cause of the suffering of him and the likes of him, namely the poor. Said relegates him to an elevation. There is an intense degree of gratefulness too in his relegation:

*Rauf Ilwan.....had shown how capable he was. Yes, he was impressive all right, no matter what the circumstances, and you loved him as you did Sheikh Ali, perhaps even more. It was he who have later worked to have you.....take over Father's job as custodian for the building. (231) [Italics in original]*

*It was during the last month of illness, however that you stoe for the first time – from the country boy resident in hostel, who has accused you without any investigation and was beating you vigourously when Rauf Ilwan turned up and freed you, settling the matter without any further complications. You were a true human being then, Rauf, and you were my teacher, too. (232) [Italics in original]*

He towers above all in his imagination having seen the law student's shouldering the responsibility of enlightening the poor masses on the need for a struggle and his pointing out the root causes of



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their suffering as the existing dichotomy of rich and poor, owing to the social conditioning. The youthful vigour and the enthusiasm of Rauf Ilwan and his own personal suffering due to his economic condition had fashioned in him a rebel for a cause – a cause to bridge the gap bet the binary, along the Marxian line of thinking: “here I am studying, away from home and family, suffering daily from hunger and deprivation” (232). The genuine initial stage of Rauf Ilwan makes him really relentlessly committed to the cause so much so that he could clarify with eloquence the structural deficiencies in the system that perpetuates the existing inequalities. He could discover and attribute the plight to the shrewd calculated engineering of the rich, who are deliberately bent on preying the poor, even at the expense of their death and destruction. He throws light on the on this state of affairs existent, and inspires the poor masses with hope and confidence. The intellectual understanding of Rauf enable him to mobilise the lower rung of the masses in a bid to subvert the present order. Said’s interior monologue states how immersed Rauf was in the idea of a resistance:

*Not just a revolutionary student, but revolution personified as a student. Your stirring voice, pitching itself downward toward my ears as I sat at my father’s feet in the courtyard of the building, with a force to awaken the very soul. And you’d talk about princes and pashas, transforming those fine gentlemen with your magic into more thieves. And to see you on Mudiriyya road, striding out amidst your men you called your equals as they munched their sugarcane in their flowing gallabiyyas, when your voice would reach such a pitch that it seemed to flow right over the field and make the palm tree bow before it – unforgettable. (239) [Italics in original]*

The point where Said Mahran and Rauf Ilwan meet is crucial in the shaping of the ideology Said conceives and constructs within himself. It was a state of dispossession and bereavement. The path Rauf had been involved in was of a historical phenomenon, wanting to determine the future of a people, the poor. The situation Said finds himself in now is a personal one, but is explained by



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Rauf as socially and politically conditioned, and this vindication convinces him. For one thing there was no solution for his grievance and nobody was prepared to save his mother from dying. The institutions of health do not offer to help his mother or him. The harsh encounter and the despicable reaction the doctor exhibited and their subsequent throwing out of the hospital in the wake of young Said's uncontrollable outrage all have already created an aversion towards the institutions and the rich, for they were owned by them. Secondly, the guilt associated with his theft attempt while his mother was ill is being dispelled by Rauf's vindication of his aberration. The italicized lines reveal this: 'Alone with you Rauf had said quietly, "*Don't you worry. The fact is I consider this theft perfectly justified.....*" ' (232) [Italics in original translation]. Whereas Rauf had meant that the activism against the rich has to be organised in a collective manner so as to reach the goal of bridging the gap, Said's mind is cosily busy with carrying on with his digression of the social norms: "There is no real point in isolated theft; there has to be organization. After that I never stopped either reading or robbing. It is you who gave me the names of people who deserved to be robbed..." (240) [Italics in original translation]

What Said began to do individually now finds an excuse, for there is Rauf with his justifying instigation to go on with the mission of challenging the rich. The transition of the individual act of robbery and theft to the level of an organized one has the capacity to provide a moralising experience in Said. There emerges an ideological support now to relegate the act to the level of Resistance. Changing times call for changing measures.

However the phase of conflict starts when the people involved overstep the collective interest. In the first place Said does not modulate himself to the changing situations. The release from prison lets him see the outside world. But he has been left behind in its temporal movement. He still thinks of the life that had fashioned him and harks back to the dictates of it.



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Of course, Said too had known the developments taking place in the country when he was in prison. He, along with others, was astounded to hear that the revolution has won. When released, he is being told that the difficulties they- the exploited- had in the past are no more, and things have changed (“Everything that used to spoil life’s pleasure for us has now completely disappeared”, says Rauf in page 177). Said is supposed to change himself. Rauf is even verbally articulate to put this in Said’s ears. The leader of the struggle is not any more engaged in it, now that there came about a change in the conditions as a consequence of the revolution. No further reference is made to either to him or to his connection with any further struggle. Yet, Said wouldn’t think in the lines of change during the post-revolutionary period. He turns out to be a misfit. He becomes a drop-out of the revolution. He takes the law unto his arms and dares to wreak revenge on those whom he supposed to have betrayed him, in whatsoever spheres – individual, familial or ideological. He could not differentiate things with critical discrimination. He becomes the epitome of revenge. So much so that he even does not care about his daughter Sana. He is so much immersed in his thoughts of settling score that he goes to the extent of executing his plan of revenge disregarding the present and future life of Sana, his daughter. For, she is young and needs parental care.

In addition, it is conspicuous that violence and aggressive attitude have become part and parcel of his nature. He thinks what the Sheikh would do if he all of a sudden directed his gun towards him. His thinking has become ego-centric. Despite his reading and acquisition of a worldly knowledge, it gets him nowhere except to make him temporarily justified in his “profession”. He could not come to terms with the change that has come the society in his absence<sup>iv</sup>. Said feels betrayed when his demand is not met with. He is not willing enough to try a hand at earning through an honest trade and improve financially. Mahfouz appears to show how the means employed could be destructive when things turn to normalcy in the utility of violence and burglary to achieve the ends.



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What is unique about the novel is that it doesn't allow any other views other than that of Said Mahran. Yet it is apparent that Said is acting according to the dictates of his impulsive emotions – emotions of revenge; vengeance on different levels: one on personal level and the other on his supposedly ideological level as he feels that Raulf Ilwan had betrayed the cause, having himself become one in the camp of the oppressors. Said juxtaposes the betrayals he has been through and in the process, the familial one pales beside the ideological one as it looms in his interior landscape. For Rauf, for Said, has been like a father figure – the one who had saved him from the abyss of guilty feeling, the one who had shown him the ideological construct of the society, the one who had helped him learn to read. *“You taught me love reading. You discussed everything with me, as if I were your equal. I was one of your equal. I was one of your listeners- .....- and times themselves were listening to you, too: The people! Theft! The holy fire! The rich! Hunger! Justice!”* (240) [Italics in original translation]

Yet now Said couldn't reconcile himself with the fact of Rauf's having struck up a deal – an agreement to stop the war- with the rich. Whether Said is right in his line of thinking as to the way Rauf has stepped into or Rauf is being opportunistic is impossible to decide as the author does not allow other narratives. However, that Said is reluctant to engage himself in any honest trade despite his skill, especially the tailoring skill he had learned in the prison states that he is not in the public kind of thinking. His thinking is confined to his individuality alone. He ruminates over what Rauf had ingrained in him as legitimacy: *“So you have stolen. You are actually dared to steal. Bravo! Using theft to relieve the exploiters of some of their guilt is absolutely legitimate; Said, don't ever doubt it”* (191) [Italics in original translation]. These words possess the maximum potential of meaning to Said since he comes from a class that know the poverty very well. When the leader said, *“a revolver is more important than a loaf of bread. It's more important than the Sufi sessions you keep rushing off to the way your father did”* (191) [Italics in original translation]. This ideal entrenches itself in Said to the deeper level of his mind from which he would never return. The



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freedom and power he gets by his possession of the gun blinds his vision to see beyond what is convenient to him. When the leader said that he needed gun and book, this means defence and dialogue. However in the times of war there prevailed a class-wise fabricated legitimacy. Now that there is a truce in effect he is not supposed to take to arms. The same act of violence is interpreted depending on the contexts in which it is employed, ethics of war apply only when there is a political turmoil. What happens with Said is that he cannot get himself out of the way- the lifestyle he has found himself growing. He couldn't adapt to changes happening around him. He fails to realise the fact that the fight he took upon himself along with others was for the national struggle. He is stuck to the means, oblivious of the end. The understanding he has got about the struggle appears to be inadequate. Even when he accuses Rauf of betrayal, he couldn't account for his adamant stand- that he would go back to burglary. This denial to consider the situation springs out of his greed, ambitious nature. He tends to place himself along with Rauf, a law student then, and he now tries to elbow a place for him in the media, which is rejected by Rauf on the grounds that he had never been a writer. This annoys and provokes Said and drives him conclude illogically and unreasonably that how easy it is for the rich to recommend poverty to the poor. Moreover the means so far adopted has become his way of life. Weaning away from this style of life and pattern of thinking might be incredibly difficult. The transformation that had shaped him from childhood through youth now needs to be restrained all of a sudden. Unlearning what he had learned to do during the times of the beginning of the struggle and later during the war, may need a greater psychological strength. The unlearning process may require a new ideology to be imbued into him as a precondition. Provided there had been a better structure to impart the political dimension of the fight, and a provision to enlist them in the national labour force, there could have been a better structure to deal with the likes of the problems, namely, defections, desertions, correct awareness, rehabilitation process, reaching out to those former participants lest they get frustrated with the regime and the newly set up social order. Of course Said has learned tailoring. Even then he is not willing to go for such jobs. There could be an element of comparison of himself with Rauf. The





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shimmering and palace-like look of the house Rauf is living in causes a kind of envy and it prods him into action – burglary. This act is more than an act of anger and envy. He is too steeped into his ‘profession’ and this time the target has become Rauf. It’s just that. The feeling at the root of all his actions is that burglary is “rewarding”.

Another fact to be noted is that Rauf is being friendly with him and offers some money. This might have triggered off a complex in Said that Rauf has begun to play the game of the rich. Said goes back to the teachings of Rauf. He goes over them. The legitimisation of something that contains a challenge to the existing order had created the personality of Said. He had always wanted to pose challenge in the past. In this case the legitimisation had been carried out on the ideological level by one who has known the law of the land itself. Then it must quite be true and can be followed. This could be the conviction that he could have embedded in Said himself. Being so young this would have had its intensive imprint in his young mind, when he was beginning to learn the way of the world.

He shrugs off the fact that there is a community of people he has to take into account of. He does not take the opportunities that come his way. He forgets that he strips himself of the collective interest that he had taken upon himself at the outset of his rebellious course. He refuses to attach meaning to that cause by refusing to fall in line with the collective line of thinking. By the denial to consider it, he rejects the other. The other he is supposed to embrace for a harmonious peaceful cohabitation. His narcissistic kind of thinking assumes an aggressive pose than being positively assertive to make a space for him. His failure to read the mentality and trend of the world ends up in his blind determination to carry on with the style of life that he had so far been adopting.

There is another factor as well too might possibly have influenced Said as to his understanding of life as a whole, that is, since he was born into a times and society where things are chaotic and not



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necessarily just and the adoption of the law by each individual unto their arms impinge a disordered kind of image of the life on earth. This, coupled with the inciting instigation of Rauf during his period of boyish youth gets entrenched to the profounder depths of his mental makeup that he is unfortunate to be deprived of an ordered peaceful life on earth. His conception of the world is that it is dominant with viol

ence and chaos and disproportionate assertion of certain powerful sections of the society. His idea of life could altogether be a different order that might essentially be in contradistinction with the world that is trying to assert its place in the form of a government – a legally approved institution. The nucleus for his upstream struggle, against the way of the world, could be divined on this basis. He accords his world with a sense of goodness, as he says, by his following what the Sheikh had advised him to do: “Start out Said...making sure that from whatever action you initiate some good comes to someone” (230) [Italics in original translation]. When Rauf says that there has to be organisation in the act of robbery and when he used to point out the rich people from whom he should rob, Rauf himself does not play the role of the active thief but he panders, encourages something at somebody else’s expense. Once there emerges a sort of settlement he has already become part of the rich. While there is a question about the sanctity about Rauf’s stand, Said does not take into account the changing reality around him. He is adamantly stuck up to his own past and still wants to carry along with it in an ambience which completely the other way round, meaning to foster an unexpectedly hostile treatment to him. The daughter’s rejection of him, then the betrayal s one after the other culminating in the biggest, that of Rauf, pose an existential threat. The memory is his past tugs him, pulls him backwards. He couldn’t think of a larger goodness which will ultimately deliver him from the particularistic thinking of his having been betrayed. He fails to recognise that there is a life to be lived out and there is an emotional support comes up to him in the form of Nur, whom he likes too. He simply shrugs off the possibilities of creating something out from scratch.



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The feeling that he has been betrayed by Rauf Ilwan creates in him a searing emotion instigating him to settle scores. Yet the personal side of his feeling of betrayal as regards Iliyash Sidra and Nabawiyyah unsettles him to the core. As for Nabawiyyah he thinks of her as one rotten to the core ethically as she had probably designed his arrest in collusion with Ilish and had agreed to marry him divorcing Said. That his daughter Sana, for whom he has an overflowing sort of filial feeling, has denied him agonises him. That Ilish, his former underling, has dared to betray him causes an uncontrollable emotion of antagonism.

The struggle that he that he took upon himself in terms of ideology, now become reduced to the level of personal enmity due to his association with individual emotions. He prefers narrow particularity to the relatively universal phenomenon. When he says the following, his animosity on the grounds of his personal anger amounts to be on a revenging course just like that of Frankenstein<sup>v</sup> and refuses to think along the lines beyond the personal: *“You made me and now you reject me: your ideas create embodiment in my person and then you simply change them, leaving me lost -- rootless, worthless, without hope -- a betrayal so vile that if the whole Muqattam hill toppled over and buried it, I would not be satisfied”* (181) [Italics in original translation].

Once he is into the public arena with his daring attacks, he is then carried away by the flippant remarks of the popular masses. That he serves to remove their boredom invigorates him for nothing except to infuse him with a meaningless pride. Besides his nature has been to keep him afloat by repeated reminding of his past youthful feats and deeds he carried out for adventures and escapades. So there is an inherent nature in him to be absorbed in the opinions of the masses which is fickle and indifferent. He ponders: *“you are a source of fear and fascination- like some freak of nature – and all those choking with boredom owe their pleasure to you”* (255) [Italics in original translation]. The interior monologue is revealing of his unconscious intentions: *“yes, you always wanted to cause a real stir, even if you were only a clown. Your triumphant raids on the homes of the rich were like wine, intoxicating your pride head”* (255) [Italics in original translation]. Now



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he is totally in the roads of his own absurdity – some meaningless banality. When he muses over what might the fate hold for him now that fear takes over him and he goes on hiding, his fear-haunted sick brain hold out for him a dream which is full of confusion. In the dream Rauf is the Supreme Being, even above the Sheikh, and the Sheikh demands his identification. This is indicative of him being pushed to the margins, even from the Sheikh who had been a refuge for him since childhood days.

Said Mahran simply is a hubristic figure who shrugs off the warnings and perils that entail. And that is his tragic flaw which leads to his death and downfall. He badly fits in the changed world. Had there been a transformation in his perception of the world and had he abided by them, he could possibly have prevented the way of his tragic ending.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> A central character in a story, film, or drama who lacks conventional heroic attributes (See Oxford online dictionaries.)

<sup>ii</sup> The sense of individuality or “self”. (Akhuemokhan and Okolocha conclusively sum up the attributes of personhood as a freedom to choose for oneself, a sense of continuity, and integration, and relationships with the external world.)

<sup>iii</sup> The use of interior monologue, says Salti, points up the fact that psychological and the socio-political realities are inseparable.

<sup>iv</sup> An interesting parallel between Said Mahran and Okonkwo in *Things fall Apart*: just as Okonkwo did not realise the changing scenario and accordingly did not transform himself, Mahran too fails to change his ways. Both are justified in their own self-righteous manner.

<sup>v</sup> Mary Shelly’s character in her novel *Frankenstein*.



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