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Reflecting on the Human Condition Through Ahmad Mahmoud's Narratives: An Exploration of Social Sufferings



Abstract: - The domain of fictional literature is a pivotal and impactful realm within the literary landscape. Scholars note that the inception of the modern Iranian narrative began in 1930 with the works of Sadegh Hedayat, marking the evolution of storytelling into a fundamental literary genre that garnered significant prominence. Despite the extensive literature on Mahmoud, focused and explicit discourse on how his narratives mirror societal suffering has been lacking. This study aims to explore the depiction of societal anguish and hardships as portrayed by Mahmoud, offering a comprehensive and novel analysis. It scrutinizes the multifaceted sufferings of the "contemporary human" as depicted in Mahmoud's literature, dissecting themes such as social and political dilemmas, encompassing superstitions, the plight of women, poverty, addiction, imprisonment, exile, colonialism, and warfare. The findings reveal that misguided beliefs and a lack of faith contribute to the prevalence of superstitions, while the agonies of imprisonment and exile are depicted as perpetual. Mahmoud's works profoundly reflect and articulate the impacts of poverty and addiction. Although the tribulations of women are less highlighted, they are more profoundly explored in the context of maternal hardship. Moreover, colonialism and warfare are depicted in a comprehensive and detailed manner in Ahmad Mahmoud's narratives.

Keywords: Ahmad Mahmoud, Social Sufferings, Contemporary Human, Southern Literature, Social Realism

I. INTRODUCTION

Ahmad Mahmoud distinguishes himself among contemporary notable novelists with his extensive collection of novels, short stories, and longer narratives (Nakagawa N, et al., 2022). Originating from the South, his writings profoundly reflect this region. Golestan highlights that, for Mahmoud, the south, particularly Khuzestan, represents a venue of pivotal events, encompassing issues such as oil, migration, the welcoming nature of Khuzestan, as well as its industrial and agricultural sectors, water-rich rivers, and expansive palm groves (Golestan, 2007: 26).

Mahmoud made his official debut in the literary world with the release of his short story, *Mul* (The Paramour), in 1957 (Çora H, et al., 2022; Üzüüm B, et al., 2022). Initially influenced by Sadegh Hedayat and Sadeq Chubak, he eventually developed and honed his distinct style, showcased in *Za'eri Zir-e Baran* (A Pilgrim In The Rain) and further established in *Hamsayeha* (The Neighbors). From that point onward, Mahmoud consistently evolved his unique narrative voice, with his later works, including the novels *Derakht-e Anjir-e Ma'abed* (The Fig Tree Of The Temples) and *Madar-e Sefr Darajeh* (The Zero Degree Orbit), marking the pinnacle of his literary achievements through the evolution of his language.

In his novels, such as *Hamsayeha* (The Neighbors), *Dastan-e Yek Shahr* (Story Of a City), *Zamin-e Sukhteh* (The Scorched Earth), *Madar-e Sefr Darajeh* (The Zero Degree Orbit), and *Derakht-e Anjir-e Ma'abed* (The Fig Tree Of The Temples), Mahmoud vividly captures the essence of life and the profound influence of the environment on human experiences, including their aspirations, challenges, and adversities (Bajan, 44:2020). Ahmad Mahmoud's prose is imbued with the essence and hues of southern Iran, reflecting his deep understanding and utilization of the Persian language's unique features, phrases, proverbs, and nuances.

Ahmad Mahmoud's literary work is characterized by a natural flow of thoughts and a direct connection to "reality," presenting his views to the readers with genuine honesty. His fiction is notable for its courageous expression of his perspectives and his willingness to explore new ideas without fear (Bajan, 2020:49). He crafts his characters with careful consideration of social status and surroundings, allowing their experiences and interactions with various events to shape them into complex, action-driven figures (Bajan, 2020:51).

Mahmoud is celebrated for his unique approach to realism in his narratives, positioning him within the realm of social realism (Mirabedini, 2008:477-478) (Sadovnikova N, et al., 2022). His literary output is categorically segmented into three phases: The initial phase begins in 1958 with the story collection *Mul* (The Paramour) and includes works like *Darya Hanuz Aram Ast* (The Sea Is Still Calm), *Bihudegi* (Uselessness), and selections from *Za'eri Zir-e Baran* (A Pilgrim In The Rain) up until 1969. The subsequent phase, emerging in pieces from *Za'eri Zir-e Baran*, evolves with collections such as *Pesarak-e Bumi* (The Little Native Boy) and *Gharibeh-ha* (The Strangers) and is distinctly marked by the publication of *Hamsayeh-ha* (The Neighbors). This era is defined by Mahmoud's development of a unique literary style, culminating in the release of the three-volume novel *Madar-e Sefr Darajeh* (The Zero Degree Orbit) in 1993.

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During this era, Mahmoud's publications, including "Story of a City" (1981), "The Scorched Earth" (1982), "Visiting" (1990), and "Familiar Tale" (1991), reflect the evolving sophistication of his writing. Notably, the commencement of the third phase with "Story of a City" (1981) highlighted Mahmoud as an innovative author, constantly seeking to explore vast intellectual landscapes (Bajan, 2020:49-51).

Mahmoud's narrative technique vividly portrays societal realities, life's occurrences, and the dominant circumstances. When analyzing his story themes, Mahmoud divides authors into those devoted to societal issues and those who are not, asserting that literature's purpose is solely to delineate humanity, society, and the individual (Golestan, 2007: 98). Mahmoud infuses his narratives with social themes drawn from his surroundings, attentively unveiling deeper strata and, through his investigative realism, devises novel methods to depict social truths, essentially "unveiling the societal underpinnings of the present circumstances beneath everyday life's facade" (Shokri, 2007: 208).

This study is dedicated to meticulously and critically identifying the social and personal themes Mahmoud articulates through the subtle expressions and dialogues of his characters. As we progress with our analysis, focusing on the narrative elements and personas in Ahmad Mahmoud's literature, we will thoroughly investigate and interpret the tribulations and adversities faced by the "human" figures in Mahmoud's tales. Ultimately, we will explore the author's approaches to addressing the challenges and afflictions encountered by his characters, aiming to attain an accurate comprehension of the "human" as conceptualized by Ahmad Mahmoud amidst societal adversities and distress.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

In this descriptive-analytical study, the methodology begins with an overview of the author's works and narratives. This is followed by an in-depth examination of each piece to collect data and essential insights into Ahmad Mahmoud's stylistic approach. The information thus gathered is subjected to a thorough review and analysis, culminating in the presentation of findings. The research employs library studies and meticulous note-taking from various sources and references to procure the relevant information concerning the subject matter.

Theoretical Foundations

Introduction to Ahmad Mahmoud

Born on December 26, 1931, in Ahvaz to parents from Dezful, Ahmad E'ta Mahmoud began his literary journey by delving into the lives of the working-class and rural communities in southern Iran, engaging in various jobs among these people firsthand. His notable literary contributions, inspired by the lives of these communities, began with short stories published from 1954 to 1957 in journals like *Omid-e Iran*. Influences from Hedayat and Chubak are evident in his early works. However, starting with "A Pilgrim In The Rain" (*Za'eri Zir-e Baran*), Mahmoud progressively developed and then firmly established his distinctive literary voice in "The Neighbors" (*Hamsayeh-ha*) (Bahrami, 2015: 36).

The narrative style of Mahmoud's stories is greatly influenced by the southern Iranian dialect, demonstrating his deep understanding and effective use of Persian language nuances, including vocabulary, phrases, idioms, and proverbs. A hallmark of his storytelling is the extensive use of verbs and concise sentences, which infuse his narratives with vitality and movement: "I look at the corpse. It's Kal Shaban. He must have slept in the shop overnight. His wide eyes are open. It's as if he's looking at me." (Ahmad Mahmoud, 2019: 321)

Mahmoud actively chose the realities depicted in his work, establishing himself as a realist who went beyond merely documenting the superficial aspects of daily life (Maghsoudloo, 2019: 23). He maintained that the true purpose of literature is to express the essence of humanity, society, and the individual (Golestan, 2007: 98). As a result, a compassionate view of society and a genuine portrayal of individuals' lives during their era characterize much of Mahmoud's literary work.

Depicting the Pains of Contemporary Humans from the Perspective of Ahmad Mahmoud

Social Aspect

1. Superstitions: In "The Fig Tree of the Temples," Ahmad Mahmoud intricately depicts the rituals of superstition and tree adoration. Visitors to the tree attach pieces of cloth to its hanging roots and ignite candles, hoping their prayers will be answered. They engage in acts of charity and sacrifice, chant dedicated hymns, perform rituals for the tree, and even wear black attire for their pilgrimage, believing a spirit resides within the tree. For instance, "Tadj ol-Molouk briefly genuflects before the tree and then departs" (Mahmoud, 2020: 2/738). The narrative mentions a specific vow to Bibi Seshanbe highlighted in "The Fig Tree of the Temples." Additionally, the novel touches on the theme of spiritual possession: as recalled by the narrator, "My grandmother used to say that ghosts manifest as black cats, often playing tricks on humans" (Mahmoud, 2014: 165).

In another of Mahmoud's stories, "Temple," from the collection "Three Books," the ancient belief that cats are mystical entities is explored, with an expectation that a dark area would invariably harbor a cat intent on causing mischief: "I opened the closet to take out an incense stick, but as the door swung open, I instinctively ducked and sat down. For some reason, I had the baseless fear that a black cat would leap out and claw at my face, yet there was nothing there. To my surprise, it was empty. I was convinced a cat was lying in wait inside, poised to leap at me and claw out my eyes" (Mahmoud, 2014: 165).

In "The Zero Degree Orbit," the narrative unfolds as Baran, having fallen for Maedeh, faces his mother and sister's attempts to thwart this affection by resorting to casting a spell on him.

2. The Suffering of Women: Mahmoud depicts the women in his stories as victims of various societal issues, including economic, social, cultural, industrial, and political challenges. Coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, or below the poverty line, these women are often driven to engage in activities such as petty theft, prostitution, and other crimes out of necessity or as an unavoidable choice (Pouyan, 2010: 39). In Mahmoud's perspective, the maternal figure consistently embodies enduring hardship, patience, self-sacrifice, and dealing with unappreciative spouses or children (Pouyan, 2010: 39). In his book "Familiar Tale," specifically in the story "A Cane for Old Age," Mahmoud highlights the neglect elderly women experience from their children and their profound need for more support, affection, and respect from their family. This issue of children's indifference towards their parents is a persistent problem across generations.

In the story "From Passenger to Cold Sore," a mother single-handedly raises her children while her husband is detained for political reasons, facing numerous challenges and societal pressures. She holds onto hope for her husband's return, tirelessly sustaining her family's well-being and protecting her child from the truth of his father's absence and political imprisonment. She endeavors to fulfill the roles of both parents to the best of her ability.

Another character, Tadj ol-Molouk, illustrates the physical and emotional pain prevalent in Mahmoud's works, suffering from vitiligo—a skin condition characterized by white patches that diminish the skin's beauty. "She is dressed in a long black Sati, with a high neckline and sleeves pulled down to her wrists, adorned with a red flower on her chest, observing the bare arms of other women. She sighs." (Mahmoud, 2020: 60)

In "The Fig Tree of the Temples," Mahmoud explores the loneliness and anguish of a young, attractive woman named Farzaneh, who, after the death of her father, Esfandiar Khan Azarpad, loses her sense of protection. When she seeks comfort from her mother, Afsaneh, Farzaneh confronts the reality of her mother's remarriage and new preoccupations, feeling completely isolated with only her aunt, Tadj ol-Molouk, to confide in. Like her aunt, Farzaneh deals with vitiligo, a hereditary condition, but she only feels comfortable sharing her struggles with her aunt.

3. Unemployment: Ahmad Mahmoud skillfully addresses the theme of rural-to-urban migration, driven by drought and famine, in his literary works. Rural farmers, unable to sustain agricultural production, feel compelled to relocate to cities in the hope of finding lucrative job opportunities. However, upon their arrival, they face the grim reality that even securing basic labor positions is significantly more challenging than expected, resulting in widespread unemployment and financial difficulties. This predicament leads to emotional distress and depression among community members, and in some cases, the extended period of joblessness drives individuals to resort to criminal activities, theft, and tragically, even to contemplate suicide.

For example, in "The Strangers" (Gharibeh-ha) and "The Little Native Boy" (Pesarak-e Bumi), specifically in the story "The Blue Sky of Dez," a group of villagers from Dezful, who have lost their means of livelihood due to drought, migrate to the city in pursuit of financial security. Their move is characterized by reluctance and a lack of alternatives. They quickly become disillusioned with the urban job market and the challenging living conditions, as they struggle to find even the most basic forms of employment. Confronted with unemployment, the lack of a stable income, and pressure from their families to send money home, they are forced to sell their personal belongings and struggle to pay their rent. This is illustrated in the narrative:

"When the sedan left, the oil-spraying truck arrived on the road, spilling black oil, and before the oil-spraying work in front of the office was finished, several trucks arrived one after the other." (Mahmoud, 2020: 52)

"The trucks had not yet stopped, and they were still slipping on the black oil on the road when the onslaught began." (Mahmoud, 2020: 52)

Another instance of a family grappling with joblessness is depicted through Amu Firuz's family in "The Zero Degree Orbit." They relocate to the city after their lands are taken from them, facing the challenges of adjusting to an urban setting. Shahbaz, one of Amu Firuz's sons, struggles with the societal impact of unemployment, finding it difficult to secure employment that suits him due to his inability to adapt to urban culture and feeling out of place in the new environment. While migration may offer opportunities for those who are quick to adapt and resourceful, for the majority, it results in feelings of alienation, displacement, and despair.

In "The Strangers," the desperation brought on by unemployment and poverty drives people to raid a train wagon. The narrative follows Rashid, who, facing unemployment for the first time, is desperate for any form of work to alleviate the hunger and poverty he experiences, exacerbated by the loss of income from drought and famine.

Through the narratives of Ahmad Mahmoud, it becomes evident that modern humans are perpetually engulfed in the crisis of unemployment caused by various factors, with neither individuals nor governments offering effective solutions. It suggests that a portion of the unemployment issue stems from personal inadequacies, while another significant portion is attributed to national economic and production policies, affecting different layers of society.

4. Poverty and Addiction: Banu represents yet another tragic figure in the narratives of Ahmad Mahmoud, the offspring of Khwaj and Afagh. She is part of a dysfunctional household, with a father addicted to substances and a mother who resorts to smuggling fabric as a means of survival.

Banu, too, succumbs to the influence of her father's addiction, turning to drug use herself. "Banu, the pallid daughter of Khwaj Tofigh, struggles with addiction. Aged over twenty-five, her complexion has taken on a yellow hue so intense it might seem as though she bathed in turmeric-infused water." (Mahmoud, 1974:19)

In Ahmad Mahmoud's stories, addiction manifests in various guises, from illicit sexual encounters and drug abuse to the compulsion of buying lottery tickets and engaging in gambling, each casting a harmful shadow over both individuals and the broader community.

Furthermore, the narrative "The Blind Sky" is noteworthy for featuring a main character caught in the webs of alcohol and gambling addiction. This character is also rendered unable to work at his friend's store due to the economic recession and downturn. Indeed, the vices of alcoholism, gambling, poverty, and deprivation collectively erode the will to engage in productive work, leading individuals down a path of ruin. In this tale, the protagonist finds himself jobless and destitute as a direct result of his addictions. Conversely, "The Fig of the Temples" by Ahmad Mahmoud portrays a wealthy and noble family that falls into decay and poverty due to addiction, underscoring once more the profound impact of addictive behaviors.

In the story "Together," Ahmad Mahmoud befriends a man who indulges in alcohol and nocturnal activities, with their bond anchored in mutual habits of smoking and drinking. Through this narrative, Mahmoud effectively highlights the repercussions of addiction within the core of a family. Additionally, in this story, the narrator's devoted wife voices her protest against his reckless actions, exclaiming, "What about me? I... I am a mother!".

In "The Opium-addicted Chimpanzee," Ahmad Mahmoud explores the theme of addiction. The story focuses on Firuz, a chimpanzee who becomes addicted to opium through the influence of a café owner he once frequented. Now, Firuz earns coins on his own in streets and public areas. He visits his regular café daily to exchange the coins he collects for opium. Firuz enjoys the sensation of opium smoke, but his addiction ultimately results in his death from an overdose, with his body found behind the café.

Ahmad Mahmoud effectively portrays the severe consequences and significant problems associated with poverty. This theme of suffering due to poverty recurs throughout almost all of Mahmoud's works, treated with precision and insight. In the story "The Return," Atr Gol Khanom, Garshab's mother, represents the hardworking woman who, despite her son's (Garshab or Khaled) absence and her husband's financial difficulties, starts a small tailoring business. She helps support the family by working alongside the father. She also washes clothes for the wealthier members of society, striving to lessen the effects of her husband's absence and the presence of poverty in her life.

"After you went to the café with Aman Agha this morning, my mother and I went to the garrison commander's house on Timsar Street. Jamileh, where did you go? What was your purpose? We went so my mother could wash their sheets." (Mahmoud, 1974:83)

Similar to Atr Gol Khanom, Sanam is another noteworthy character. In a story from "The Neighbors," Ahmad Mahmoud presents "Sanam Khanom" as a determined and hardworking woman. In the absence of her husband, she sustains herself by baking and selling bread, despite facing numerous obstacles and hardships in her pursuit of a livelihood. This includes opposition from local bakers who complain about her selling bread near them, fearing that Sanam Khanom's business negatively affects their customer base.

5. The Suffering of the Contemporary Human in Prison and Exile: Khaled, a teenager about fifteen or sixteen years old, unintentionally becomes entangled with the Tudeh Party of Iran. A dispute with his neighbor, Gholam Ali Khan, escalates into a physical altercation and a subsequent complaint.

"As I gaze at the carriage, I am startled by the sound of glass shattering. Then, I see Ibrahim fleeing and putting on a slingshot. Before I can think to run, Gholam Ali Khan pries open one of the broken window slats and hurls vile insults about my sister and mother. I feel the urge to stand up and respond, but since I didn't break the glass, I wonder why I should unjustly bear the blame." (Mahmoud, 2006: 42)

Within the police station, Khaled finds solace leaning against a wall. A voice beckons him to come closer. "Leaning against the police station's stone wall for support, my back aches and my heart is heavy. Conversing with someone and sharing my troubles might lighten my burden. Someone calls out to me." (Mahmoud, 2006: 45)

Through Khaled, Ahmad Mahmoud skillfully depicts the persistent suffering that afflicts individuals like him in society. Khaled, the story's protagonist, faces the trials and tribulations of prison life, especially the harsh and gloomy conditions of solitary confinement, which cause him considerable distress. Additionally, the prison's location in a tropical region intensifies the discomfort, making it extremely hot and stifling. Khaled experiences such harsh conditions. "The solitary cell is three steps long and two steps wide. There is hardly any air to breathe. It is extremely hot inside. The high ceiling weighs heavily on one's spirit." (Mahmoud, 2006: 297)

Political Section

1. Colonialism: Ahmad Mahmoud, originating from Ahvaz in the southern region of Iran, grew up during the occupation of his country and its southern territories by colonial powers. He openly discusses the impact of these colonizers in numerous stories, holding the British government accountable for the nation's suffering and developmental delay. During the colonial era in Iran, the colonizers adeptly exploited the nation's resources, showing no intention of

relinquishing control. The Iranian people of that era staunchly opposed the colonial forces, advocating for the expulsion of these foreign entities and the complete achievement of national sovereignty.

In works like "The Blue Sky of Dez," Mahmoud vividly depicts the colonial presence and its effects: "A foreigner, puffing on a cigar, impassively observed the throng of men." (Mahmoud, 2020: 51) "A portly foreigner stamped out his partly smoked cigar and, turning his bulky frame, entered one of the rooms. Emerging shortly afterward with a camera, he discreetly captured the scene from several angles." (Mahmoud, 2020: 52)

Through "The Fig Tree of the Temples," Mahmoud subtly refers to colonialism by introducing the character of Engineer Wolf. Foreigners operated the premier oil drilling and large-scale manufacturing firms, with only a small portion of the profits benefiting Iran and its citizens. The ruling regime at the time, the Shah's monarchy, enabled foreign dominance within the nation, compromising its autonomy and progress and leading to widespread distress and impoverishment.

Mahmoud also recounts the jubilation following the legislative endorsement of the oil industry's nationalization: "The city was ablaze with excitement and happiness. Motorists illuminated their vehicles' lights, honking incessantly, filling the streets with noise. The air was alive with the sound of radio broadcasts, with announcers speaking passionately and assertively. At last, the parliament ratified the public's plea for the oil industry's nationalization. Joyful faces and laughter surrounded musical bands, engaging in dance and celebration. Confectionery shops distributed large trays of sweets among the crowd. Strangers and friends alike embraced, exchanging congratulations." (Mahmoud, 1974: 211)

2. War: In "The Scorched Earth," Ahmad Mahmoud vividly captures the realities of war in the southern cities through his own experiences of witnessing the devastation and anguish it brings. Upon receiving news of the enemy's imminent attack, residents swiftly engaged in constructing trenches and preparing Molotov cocktails. Women and girls, alongside young soldiers, repurposed rice sacks filled with sand for the fortifications.

Mahmoud writes, "No exceptions are made... Mercy is a foreign concept... Flames consume everything... Panic and voices merge. A mother, in a state of desperation, wonders aloud about disposing of something, her daughter equally unsure... On the ground... In that pot... The urgency leads children to knock on doors, seeking help. Homeowners shout in confusion, 'What's wrong with you? Give us soap, anything you have...' All was taken, leaving nothing behind. Molotov cocktails are strategically placed, ready for use at a moment's notice." (Mahmoud, 2020:27-28)

The narrative also highlights the plight of those affected by looters, exploiting the chaos to steal whatever was left behind. Mahmoud comments, "While citizens defend their homeland amidst the chaos of war, cowards seize the opportunity to plunder." (Mahmoud, 2020:270)

Displacement, a direct consequence of war, inflicts profound suffering, characterized by loss, estrangement, and the relentless search for refuge. War-induced displacement, arguably the most severe, strips individuals of choice, unlike migration or exile. Mahmoud observes, "The city's essence is transformed as groups abandon their homes, seeking safety elsewhere with whatever means possible." (Mahmoud, 2020:75)

Additionally, the war exacerbated economic hardships, as essential goods were sold at inflated prices, depleting the savings of those already struggling, a stark illustration of the war's far-reaching impact on everyday life.

III. CONCLUSION

This research delves into the themes of adversity, social distress, and the challenges faced by contemporary individuals as depicted in the literary works of Ahmad Mahmoud. The analysis reveals that individuals in Mahmoud's narratives, regardless of their social standing, encounter various forms of distress, including addiction, poverty, unemployment, superstition, war, solitude, exile, and incarceration. Initially, the study focuses on the challenge of overcoming the ignorance associated with superstition, highlighting it as a complex, sometimes insurmountable task. It is noted that there is a widespread fascination among the general populace with the supernatural and the prediction of the future.

Further research examines the hardships faced by women and girls. Ahmad Mahmoud intricately portrays the endurance and compassion of women and mothers as they await the return of their loved ones. He also depicts the plight of women trapped by the dual forces of poverty and colonialism, who nevertheless assert their presence through valiant resistance against oppressive regimes. Another significant form of suffering addressed is unemployment; it is depicted as a persistent scourge affecting contemporary individuals, with no effective solutions offered by either individuals or governing bodies.

The study also addresses the longstanding issues of addiction and poverty in Iran, noting how these problems have deeply affected various segments of society. It suggests that reducing unemployment could naturally lead to a decrease in mental health issues and a lower propensity for addiction. Poverty, described as deeply entrenched in history, is presented as an unsolvable problem that has defied all attempts at eradication by any governance or policy. Ahmad Mahmoud's works also prominently feature social injustice.

The findings indicate that Mahmoud's literature consistently reflects the intertwined themes of poverty, addiction, and unemployment more than any other form of suffering, dedicating approximately 52 percent of his narrative content to these issues. Furthermore, themes of imprisonment, exile, and colonialism are significant, comprising about 26 percent of his literary output. The author's engagement with the theme of "war," particularly through his book "The Scorched Earth," which recounts the trials of the Sacred Defense era, is another critical area of focus. Discussions on superstition

and the trials faced by women and mothers sporadically appear throughout Mahmoud's works, accounting for about 9 percent of his literary exploration.

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