

THE IDEA OF CONSTRUCTIVE FEMINISM IN NAGUIB MAHFOUZ'S THE ANSWER IS NO

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Abstract: *Constructive feminism claims that gender is socially constructed by the domination of men. Being constructive then also indicated that women could define their own meanings by themselves. The Answer is No is a short story written by Naguib Mahfouz. It explores dilemma of a female teacher who was assaulted by a trusted tutor at fourteen years old and now faces the perpetrator as her school's new headmaster. The woman refuses to yield before the man and chooses to maintain her dignity and self-respect. Through qualitative method, this paper underlines constructive feminism in which the woman could choose her own story for her future. Despite all her bad past memories, she could keep going on by saying no as her main answer. In conclusion, constructive feminism is crucial in the daily life of women since it could criticize matter of domination of men alongside with any possibility for woman to move forward.*

Keywords: *Constructive Feminism, Gender, Naguib Mahfouz, The Answer is No*

Abstrak: Feminisme konstruktif mengklaim bahwa gender dikonstruksi secara sosial oleh dominasi laki-laki. Pandangan konstruktif kemudian menunjukkan bahwa perempuan dapat mendefinisikan maknanya sendiri. The Answer is No adalah cerita pendek yang ditulis oleh Naguib Mahfouz yang mengeksplorasi dilema seorang guru wanita yang dilecehkan oleh guru yang ia percayai saat usia empat belas tahun dan sekarang menghadapi pelaku sebagai kepala sekolah barunya. Perempuan itu menolak untuk tunduk di hadapan pria dan memilih untuk mempertahankan martabat dan harga dirinya. Melalui metode kualitatif, tulisan ini menggarisbawahi feminisme konstruktif yaitu perempuan dapat memilih ceritanya sendiri untuk masa depannya. Terlepas dari semua kenangan masa lalunya yang buruk, perempuan dalam cerita pendek tersebut dapat melanjutkan hidupnya dengan mengatakan tidak sebagai jawaban utamanya. Kesimpulannya, feminisme konstruktif sangat penting dalam kehidupan sehari-hari kaum perempuan karena aspek itu dapat mengkritisi dominasi pria termasuk kemungkinan bagi tiap perempuan untuk dapat menentukan masa depannya sendiri.

Kata Kunci: Feminisme Konstruktif, Gender, Naguib Mahfouz, The Answer is No

Introduction

Men have long been regarded as superior in both physical and mental aspects. They are also the most likely to have upper hand situations based on their gender. In The Answer is No, an example of a such situation is given. Written by Naguib Mahfouz, this story has a great deal of sexual content. On one hand, there is a woman who is impoverished and feels trapped due to her past position (Mahfouz, 1991). On the other hand, her inability becomes her strength, which leads her to her firm character. The main character is a woman who has been wounded by a sexual encounter that has left her with everlasting scars. She finds nowhere to go and is compelled to be silent in her own misery. This short story is a perfect example for the research of constructive feminism, since it mainly focuses on how women are treated and how they affect their

surroundings. Sexual crime like this is still common among the newer generations as well as its silence to the public matter (JHPIEGO, 2020; Ormerod, 2022). Moreover, many of them have the exact story as this literary work by Mahfouz.

The Answer in No is Naguib Mahfouz's short story that tells about a woman who had stripped away from her honor, making her traumatized at the thought of having a partner (Mahfouz, 1991). The woman was a teacher at a school. At a time, she faced a bad news that the man who had dishonored her was being appointed as the new headmaster. She was shocked by this fact and was trying to avoid any contact. The man promised to fulfil his words of marrying but his intent was undermining her. She left him with the decision of not being in a commitment. As time slowly passes by, she became more content, it was not loneliness but it was self-respect. In the end, the man asked again about how is she, she only answered, "I'm fine." (Mahfouz, 1991). This paper underlines that woman does not need to have protection from a man, especially in this situation. This shows that woman can also live without a partner. The whole situations have put the female gender in a difficult space. At the end of the story, the female gender has a choice as proof of her own strong identity.

Method

By using qualitative method, certain concepts and written data are analyzed to answer the question in this paper. Written through description, online and offline scripts are used to explain correlations between Naguib Mahfouz's The Answer is No and constructive feminism. Online and offline scripts are derived from books and journals to understand shown matters. The data analysis includes attaining sources, reading sources carefully, comparing with other issues, quoting into paper, and writing down in references lists. The discourses of the short story are mainly included to pinpoint constructive feminism idea in society. The following analyses then include how the story illustrates total influence of men for women in society.

Findings and Discussions

Contrasting Ideas between Man and Woman in The Answer is No

This short story explores the subject of consent and argues that traumatizing events in the past can have a negative effect on future relationships (Mahfouz, 1991). The main protagonist of the short story is a woman who had been working as a teacher and a news of a new headmaster was spreading, quickly. The man was often talked about especially about his skills. It is told in this following quotation;

"The important piece of news that the new headmaster had arrived spread through the school. She heard of it in the women teachers' common room as she was casting a final glance at

the day's lessons. There was no getting away from joining the other teachers in congratulating him, and from shaking him by the hand too. A shudder passed through her body, but it was unavoidable. They speak highly of his abilities," said a colleague of hers. "And they talk too of his strictness." It had always been a possibility that might occur, and now it had. Her pretty face paled, and a staring look came to her wide black eyes. (Mahfouz, 1991)

This man was appointed as a headmaster at the school that the main character was teaching. In this part, the main character seems to have a bad history with the new headmaster. She refuses to congratulate the man, but she had no other choices. It made her mood go down in an instant. It is shown in the following quotation;

"She advanced with her eyes fixed on his chest. Avoiding his gaze, she stretched out her hand. What was she to say? Just what the others had said? However, she kept silent, uttered not a word. What, she wondered, did his eyes express? His rough hand shook hers, and he said in a gruff voice, "Thanks." She turned elegantly and moved off.

She forgot her worries through her daily tasks, though she did not look in good shape. Several of the girls remarked, "Miss is in a bad mood." When she returned to her home at the beginning of the Pyramids Road, she changed her clothes and sat down to eat with her mother. "Everything all right?" inquired her mother, looking her in the face.

"Badran, Badran Badawi," she said briefly. "Do you remember him? He's been appointed our headmaster." (Mahfouz, 1991)

The main character starts to remember and she says a name, Badran Badawi, He was fully trusted by the parents of the main character. Her father thought of him as a second father, but he has done bad things to her. It is shown in this quotation;

"Then after a moment of silence, she said, "It's of no importance at all – it's an old and long-forgotten story."

... She had forgotten him completely. No, not completely. How could he be forgotten completely? When he had first come to give her a private lesson in mathematics, she was fourteen years of age. In fact, not quite fourteen. He had been twenty-five years older, the same age as her father. She had said to her mother, "His appearance is a mess, but he explains things well," And her mother had said, "We are not concerned with what he looks like; what's important is how he explains things." (Mahfouz, 1991)

Things was going fine at first, the private tutor was teaching basic subjects, until then she was left alone with the tutor alone. The tutor had taken her honor at the age of barely fourteen. He was asking for the main character to keep quiet until her age was old enough to be committed in marriage. This was told in the following quotation;

"He was an amusing person, and she got on well with him and benefited from his knowledge. How, then, had it happened? In her innocence, she had not noticed any change in his

behavior to put her on her guard. Then one day he had been left on his own with her, her father having gone to her aunt's clinic. She had not the slightest doubts about a man she regarded as a second father. How, then, had it happened? Without love or desire on her part the thing had happened. She had asked in terror about what had occurred, and he had told her, "Don't be frightened or sad. Keep it to yourself and I'll come and propose to you the day you come of age." (Mahfouz, 1991)

Now, years have passed and Badran Badawi has come to propose her as he promised. The main protagonist had changed as well. She has reached maturity and she realized that the thing that the man had done was foul and immoral. She has no respect nor honor to Badran Badawi. Her father had passed away and her mother was shocked on the man's cunning proposal. However, her mother gives her the full right to choose. Here is the quotation;

"And he had kept his promise and had come to ask for her hand. By then she had attained a degree of maturity that gave her an understanding of the dimensions of her tragic position. She had found that she had no love or respect for him and that he was as far as he could be from her dreams and from the ideas she had formed of what constituted an ideal an moral person. But what was to be done? Her father had passed away two years ago, and her mother had been taken aback by the forwardness of the man. However, she had said to her, "I know your attachment to your personal independence, so I leave the decision to you." (Mahfouz, 1991)

This gave her a hard time. The situation was difficult for her either accepting Badran Badawi or close him off or any other person in that matter. This was a big choice for her future as this situation has made her helpless. The man was abusing her innocence and now he has the advantage in this proposal. It is asserted in this quotation;

"She had been conscious of the critical position she was in. She had either to accept or to close the door forever. It was the sort of situation that could force her into something she detested. She was the rich beautiful girl, a byword in Abbaiyya for her nobility of character, and now here she was struggling helplessly in a well-sprung trap, while he looked down at her with rapacious eyes. Just as she had hated his strength, so too she hated her own weakness. To have abused her innocence was one thing, but for him to have the upper hand now that she was fully in possession of her faculties was something else. He had said, "So here I am, making good my promise because I love you." He had also said, "I know of your love of teaching, and you will complete your studies at the College of Science." (Mahfouz, 1991)

For a long time, she has been alone by herself. She started to feel that being alone was different that being lonely. She had respected and loved herself enough to not have the company from others. She was angry at this situation. However, fortunately, she rejected the proposal outright and her mother fully supported her rejection. Here is the quotation;

"She had felt such anger as she had never felt before. She had rejected coercion in the

same way as she rejected ugliness. It had meant little to her to sacrifice marriage. She had welcomed being on her own, for solitude accompanied by self-respect was not loneliness. She had also guessed he was after her money. She had told her mother quite straightforwardly, "No," to which her mother had replied, "I am astonished you did not make this decision from the first moment."(Mahfouz, 1991)

Badran Badawi was confused with her answer, he tries to make her accept his proposal. However, she answered him with a straightforward answer that made him stop. She told him that anything is better than committing a relationship with him. Time passes by and she graduated from her studies, opportunities of marriage has come and gone, but she refuses all of them and accepts herself without company. Her mother starts to concern her action, but yet again, she is satisfied with her own choice. Those are indicated below;

"The man had blocked her way outside and said, "How can you refuse? Don't you realize the outcome?" And she had replied with an asperity he had not expected, "For me any outcome is preferable to being married to you."

After finishing her studies, she had wanted something to do to fill her spare time, so she had worked as a teacher. Chances to marry had come time, but she had turned her back on them all.

"Does no one please you?" her mother asked her.

"I know what I am doing," she had said gently.

"But time is going by."

"Let it go as it pleases, I am content."(Mahfouz, 1991)

The main character grows older by time, love and company was not as worrying as it used to. She tries to convince herself that being happy is not always to be in love with someone or being in motherhood. She regretted nothing from her choice of self-satisfaction. Then she was one room with him, Badran Badawi, and he asked her about how she is doing, she simply replies with answers that made him stop. She asserts herself in a firm tone. It is in this quotation;

"Day by day she becomes older. She avoids love, fears it. With all her strength she hopes that life will pass calmly, peacefully, rather than happily. She goes on persuading herself that happiness is not confined to love and motherhood. Never has she regretted her firm decision. Who knows what the morrow holds? But she was certainly unhappy that he could again make his appearance in her life, that she would be dealing with him day after day, and that he would be making of the past a living and painful present.

Then, the first time he was alone with her in his room, he asked her, "How are you?"

She answered coldly, "I'm fine."

He hesitated slightly before inquiring, "Have you not... I mean, did you get married?"

In the tone of someone intent on cutting short a conversation, she said, "I told you, I

am fine."(Mahfouz, 1991)

This short story from Mahfouz indicates that being alone does not mean that the person is lonely. It also confirms that men are not always in control of the life of someone. In this case, the main protagonist takes control of her own life by rejecting the proposal from Badran Badawi. It also shows that it does not take a man to define what a woman is, as she already and always lived her life as a woman. Moreover, she intends to keep her identity without the company of man and living in motherhood. She accepts herself as who she is without any complaint of any bad memory (Mahfouz, 1991).

Constructive Feminism beyond Essential Meanings of Identities

Constructive feminism is a branch of feminist theory that investigates how gender stereotypes influence global politics. Gender equality is the main idea that would like to be achieved (JHPIEGO, 2020; Just & Muhr, 2020). However, there is crucial difference between feminists and constructivists. First, most feminists approach gender and power as integral elements in processes of construction, whereas most constructivists consider power to be external to such processes (Just & Muhr, 2020; Locher & Prüggl, 2001). Here, idea of gender exactly goes in the process of making. It is not stated as given, but goes to process of re-affirming every time someone faces various obstacles.

The difference between men and women is concerned with the essentialist feminism in which its idea believes that gender is a natural reflection as it is biological (Goode, 2019; Malone et al., 2020). Gender then is also seen as mere reflection of biological difference between man and woman. Any repression related to gender exists because of the total difference that is valued hierarchical in society. The difference is so intact that anyone could not escape that fixed identity whatsoever. Once a woman is defined, she will always speak only as woman (Malone et al., 2020; Rivkin & Ryan, 2017). She even could not say anything about masculinity that has been oppressed matter of womanhood in the history.

In other word, essentialists' views on feminism made people think that only woman can have a feministic view on life. Then, what about those people who are not women or who transition into men or who are gender neutral and do not identify male or female? Indeed, they could also have a feminist view on life without being a woman (Ciurria, 2019; Rivkin & Ryan, 2017). The idea of constructive feminism could answer this problem. Anyone may construct his or her idea without being constrained with his or her biological sexual organ. A man could think femininely and otherwise either. It is due to understanding that gender is about construction. It moves among perspectives of people regarding own and other's identities (Ciurria, 2019; Locher & Prüggl, 2001).

Consequently, essentialist's point of view defines any party who could say that someone is considered as this gender or not. It means that those who controlled the gender roles of male and

female were created by those who controlled them, and that conditioning only made women appear to be more ethical and caring. It will never make woman free since it will always prolong any oppression (Locher & Prügl, 2001; Rivkin & Ryan, 2017). The perspective then should be shifted from matter of essential to idea of purpose. Gender roles then are not inherent; they are socially constructed.

Therefore, essentialist are sharply different from constructivist one in matter of feminism. Essentialist feminists argued that men think in terms of rights when confronted with ethical issues, while women think in terms of responsibilities to others (Davis, 2020; Rivkin & Ryan, 2017). Constructive feminism considers that gender is established by the patriarchal culture in history. The gender construction that constructed by the patriarchal culture intended to make men to be more superior to women (Davis, 2020; Goode, 2019). However, like seen in ideas of superiority and inferiority complex, any idea of being superior is used to cover up any inferiority within. It works in the same way as the toxic masculinity used by someone to cover up his or her fragile masculinity behind. It is since the society thinks that women have no enough power to be superior (Davis, 2020; Just & Muhr, 2020). Then, it standardizes men as the figures who take control the world while women are commanded to take care of the world that controlled by men. As if men were frightened if women begin to take control over the world, men would be the ones who obey how the world works by women. Then, there must be any idea that tries to control everything, but actually, it will never able to grasp everything in its hands, even if those are infinite ones (Burrell & Flood, 2019; Just & Muhr, 2020).

Constructive feminism intended to investigate how patriarchal culture imposes identities of gender onto women. The constructivists also declared that language does not reflect identity but creates it (Burrell & Flood, 2019; Goode, 2019). In the literary work especially in narrative essays, there are plenty female characters in the stories that implied the essentialism and constructivism. In the female characters, the readers frequently finds the "angel" and "monster" in the characters. The "angel" mostly defined as a perfect female character who is pure, selfless, passive and ordinary, submissive and powerless. Meanwhile, the "monster" mainly defined as the imperfect female character who is being able to express her desires and have an opinion of her own, she shows a certain autonomy, authority, and aggressiveness (Goode, 2019).

As each society places on sexed bodies through its cultural conceptions, gender identity is superimposed on the idea of sex. Sex refers to biologically defined and genetically acquired differences between males and females, according to their physiology and reproductive abilities or potentialities (Carpenter, 2003; Rivkin & Ryan, 2017). It is universal and largely unchanging, without intervention. Gender equality refers to the state or condition in which women and men are able to have equal opportunities, socially valued goods, opportunities, and resources (Burrell & Flood, 2019; Subrahmanian, 2005). Violence based on gender then is a form of sexual

discrimination that arises from gender norms and roles, as well as unequal power relations between women and men. Since the doctrine of patriarchal culture taught men to be the dominant ones, women are told to be the subordinate ones. Men are superior and women are inferior (Davis, 2020; Just & Muhr, 2020). Such doctrine made men have those violence thoughts or even actions due to the fact that men consider women as powerless and submissive where women are inferior in gender norms. Because of their gender, violence is specifically directed against a person, and it affects women disproportionately. It includes, but is not limited to, physical, sexual, and psychological harm (JHPIEGO, 2020).

Firm Identity of Gender in The Answer is No

This short story from Mahfouz explores the dilemma of a teacher, who has been raped by a trusted tutor at fourteen years of age, that must face the attacker again as her school's new headmaster (Mahfouz, 1991). It tells how a woman is able to define herself without the help of a man. The woman tries to identify herself as a woman without having motherhood and a love life. This story underlines how a certain thing that happened to a woman can affect future choice since recovering from it is difficult (Mahfouz, 1991).

The constructivist feminists believe that gender is formed by culture in history. They believe that patriarchal culture constructed gender identities with the intention to make men seem superior to women (Carpenter, 2003; Rivkin & Ryan, 2017). This story pictures constructivist feminism in a fitting way. At first, the man, Badran Badawi did an immoral thing that refers to how society permits man always at the top or above woman. It is a very immoral tradition that society may not notice for more than a century. Then it depicts that the main character was helpless but she still proceeds to live with abundant strength. She shows the man who proposed to her that she still has a choice, that she is not at all helpless in this situation (Mahfouz, 1991).

Her courage in facing the trouble shows her firm identity of gender though she may be scared to face reality of him. In which it is stated; "What was she to say? Just what the others had said? However, she kept silent, uttered not a word. What, she wondered, did his eyes express? His rough hand shook hers, and he said in a gruff voice, "Thanks." She turned elegantly and moved off." (Mahfouz, 1991). The main character was having a hard time thinking what was best for her until, she was firm with her answer to not commit in a marital status. She was content with being in solitude. She asserted that being alone is not similar as being lonely. It was more of a self-accepting journey rather than being lonely. She knows that she has to be able to accept herself alongside with her past. However, she keeps doing that bravely by refusing the man's offer every time he tried to get close to her.

Her journey of moving on was very admirable. She was a strong woman, she was stripped away of her honor that common people would say that someone could not live without it. The main character proves that there is still hope in living with dignity in the absence of virginity. It is

proven that the oppression towards woman was just a dark side of history that is needed to put into light (Carpenter, 2003; Subrahmanian, 2005). The light itself is self-esteem in facing the reality bravely by not turn her head back to the past. Living with the man may be such comfort zone that she would get as she will have husband that will be with her and makes her safe. However, she always considers him as the one who hurt her the most, so she will never accept him at any cost.

Conceptually, the constructivist feminism worried that the essentialists were taking an effect to be a cause, interpreting the subordination of women as women's nature (Ormerod, 2022; Rivkin & Ryan, 2017). This quotation states that most woman are thought to be submissive because they are interpreting subordination of women, since it is thought by essentialists that women are more ethical than men, but this is just merely a result of patriarchy's conditioning (Beyer, 2019; Subrahmanian, 2005). It is clearly proven in the story that the condition does not affect the main character at all, as she lives on her own, not under the oppression of the man, Badran Badawi.

The man was using her past to his advantage. He was using the fact that he has her under his plan to make her his wife and take her fortune. Fortunately, the main character realized this and declined him. Her decision is precise since it makes her on the same level as the man, not under his oppression. This shows how capable she really is, how capable a woman is with her life choices, with or without the company of men (Burrell & Flood, 2019; Carpenter, 2003). The woman also did not believe that her nature is to follow the destined life. She is the one that will make her own future. It is seen in her ultimate decision to stay away from the man in such unreachable distance.

Badran Badawi was a very educated man, the school staff speaks highly of his abilities, and his appearance was that of a decent man (Mahfouz, 1991). It depicts that such a situation can arise from any kind of man, especially one of high status. A man of high status tends to overuse his status and use it to empower women. He was also in a high status in the first paragraph of the story, as shown by the main character. They are incomparable in time, knowledge, and logic (Beyer, 2019; Carpenter, 2003). The man knew this and took advantage of it. Since the main character was still young at the time, he took her innocence and kept her quiet.

As far as the story goes, Badran Badawi, is objectifying the main character. He sees her as a sexual object and only a part of his plan to get her fortune. Woman was a victim of gender violence for a long time, and this short story depicts it more clearly to the public that gender inequality still a very big problem to the society. It seemed that he was empowering her as picture of the concept of gender inequality. He went further to ask her how is she doing in a later time that only shows that getting rid of the inequality mindset is difficult. However, in spite of any difficulty, the main character did refuse him at all to prove her firm identity as the focal point of

her choice (Mahfouz, 1991). She was successful to construct her own identity, not by her bad past, but by considering her brighter future by living her world alone.

Conclusion

This short story by Mahfouz explores the dilemma of a teacher who was raped by a trusted teacher and must face the doer again as the new principal of her school. The main character seemed helpless but she could say no to him no matter how hard the decision is. Her journey forward was very admirable as she is in line with idea of constructive feminism. she knows that bad past will always haunt her. However, she was a strong woman by proving that there is still hope and that hope must be shaped and realized by herself. While most women are thought to be submissive due to patriarchal conditioning, the main character of this story rejected that idea by her choice to live alone and not under the oppression of a man. This discussion was asserting that it does not take any other person or any conditions to define any gender, including woman. This short story represents realities that women are oppressed but they could always choice to choose her own path of life as a dignified person.

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