

Identity Conflict in “The Cairo Trilogy” by Naguib Mahfouz: A Postcolonial Approach

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Abstract

This study analyzes identity conflicts in modern Arabic literature through a postcolonial approach, focusing on “The Cairo Trilogy” by Naguib Mahfouz. By combining literary analysis with a socio-political examination of early 20th-century Egypt, this research aims to explore how social, political, and economic changes triggered by colonialism and the rise of nationalism shape the characters' identities in the novel. Additionally, this study highlights how Mahfouz portrays the tension between traditional values and modernity within the context of Egypt's postcolonial transformation. Through a narrative rich in family and societal dynamics, “The Cairo Trilogy” not only illustrates Egypt's social shifts but also reflects the complexity of individual identity formation in an ever-changing world. The identity conflicts experienced by the members of the Abdel Gawad family, particularly in confronting deepening modernization, serve as a microcosm of the internal and external struggles faced by Egyptian society during this transitional period. Beyond being a mere depiction of socio-political realities, the novel also offers a sharp critique of modernization and postcolonial cultural transformations that redefine societal values and ways of life. Thus, this work is not only significant as a literary masterpiece but also as a lens for understanding the evolving dynamics of identity in a postcolonial context.

Keywords: Identity, Conflict, Cairo Trilogy, Postcolonial

Abstract (Indonesian)

Penelitian ini menganalisis konflik identitas dalam karya sastra Arab modern dengan pendekatan postkolonial, khususnya dalam The Cairo Trilogy karya Naguib Mahfouz. Menggunakan kombinasi kajian sastra dan analisis sosial-politik Mesir pada awal abad ke-20, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana perubahan sosial, politik, dan ekonomi, yang dipicu oleh kolonialisme dan kebangkitan nasionalisme, memengaruhi pembentukan identitas karakter dalam novel. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga menyoroti bagaimana Mahfouz menggambarkan ketegangan antara nilai-nilai tradisional dan modernitas dalam konteks transformasi masyarakat Mesir pascakolonial. Melalui narasi yang sarat dengan dinamika keluarga dan masyarakat, The Cairo Trilogy tidak hanya menggambarkan pergeseran sosial yang terjadi di Mesir, tetapi juga mencerminkan kompleksitas identitas individu yang

terbentuk dalam dunia yang terus berubah. Konflik identitas yang dialami oleh anggota keluarga Abdel Gawad, khususnya dalam menghadapi modernisasi yang semakin mendalam, menjadi cerminan dari pergulatan internal dan eksternal yang dihadapi oleh masyarakat Mesir pada masa transisi. Novel ini, lebih dari sekadar potret realitas sosial-politik, juga menghadirkan kritik tajam terhadap dampak proses modernisasi dan budaya pascakolonial yang mengubah tatanan nilai dan kehidupan masyarakat. Dengan demikian, karya ini tidak hanya relevan sebagai karya sastra, tetapi juga sebagai sarana untuk memahami dinamika identitas dalam konteks pascakolonial yang terus bergulir.

Kata kunci: Konflik, Identitas, Trilogi Kairo, Pascakolonial

INTRODUCTION

Modern Arabic literature reflects the social changes taking place in the Arab world, shaped by the interaction between local traditions and global influences, including Western colonialism and modernity¹. One of the most important works that illustrates this dynamic is “The Cairo Trilogy” by Naguib Mahfouz, which depicts identity conflicts in Egyptian society as it undergoes major transformations in the early 20th century. This work portrays the life of the Abdel Gawad family amid the socio-political upheavals that swept through Egypt following its independence from British rule.²

In his monumental trilogy, “The Cairo Trilogy” (Qawātī al-Qāhira), Naguib Mahfouz presents the story of the Abdel Gawad family, which represents the struggle between tradition and modernity in early 20th-century Egyptian society. Through this narrative, Mahfouz not only tells the personal stories of his characters but also illustrates how the social, political, and economic conflicts of the time influenced the formation of both individual and collective identities. A social-historical approach provides a framework for understanding how major societal transformations such as colonialism, modernity, and political change—created profound conditions that forced the characters in this trilogy to navigate and assert their identities. This article examines how these historical influences are reflected in the portrayal of family, gender, and the role of individuals within a constantly evolving society.³

¹ Ken Seigneurie, “Modern Nihilism and Naguib Mahfouz’s Faith in Liberalism,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 24, no. 3 (September 2, 2021): 167–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1475262X.2022.2147415>.

² Alen Ontl, *A Comparative Analysis of the Great American and Arab Novel: A Study of the USA and Cairo Trilogies* (Cambridge scholars publishing, 2018),

³ Rehnuma Sazzad, “3 Naguib Mahfouz’s Cairo Trilogy,” *Islam and Postcolonial Discourse: Purity and Hybridity*, 2017, 51.

To understand the context of social change faced by the characters in “The Cairo Trilogy”, it is essential to examine the socio-political conditions of early 20th-century Egypt. Since the 19th century, Egypt had been under British colonial influence, which brought modernization and Western influences⁴. Although Egypt gained its independence in 1922, British influence remained strong, and the country was in the process of navigating between traditional values and modern innovations.⁵

Additionally, during this period, the nationalist movement was growing in Egypt, fostering a desire to establish a more independent identity, free from colonial influence. The social changes that took place amid the tension between religious devotion, family values, and the push to embrace Western culture shaped the worldview of many individuals, including the characters in “The Cairo Trilogy”. The characters in this trilogy serve as a microcosm of the larger society, depicting the ongoing struggle between tradition and modernity in Egypt.

The social-historical approach is used in this article to analyze “The Cairo Trilogy” by connecting the literary text with the social context and historical processes that shaped it. This approach focuses on the relationship between social structures, social change, and cultural values as reflected in literary texts. In this regard, Mahfouz's work not only portrays the personal lives of his characters but also reflects the broader socio-political dynamics of Egypt.

Social history reveals how major transformation such as colonialism, Western education, and social revolutions have influenced the formation of the characters' identities. Through this approach, we can observe how Mahfouz depicts the internal conflicts and dilemmas experienced by his main characters, who are caught between the desire for progress and adherence to family values deeply rooted in tradition.⁶

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a textual analysis method focused on applying a postcolonial theory perspective. The aim is to analyze the identity conflict depicted in “Cairo Trilogy” by Naguib Mahfouz through a postcolonial lens, exploring how colonial forces and

⁴ Ali Dakhil Naem and Lajiman Bin Janoory, “Analytical Study: The Existential Predicament Perspective in Naguib Mahfouz’s Selected Novels,” *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature* 8, no. 4 (2019): 104–10.

⁵ Omama Khayyal, “A Study of Rendering Stylistic Shifts and Their Thematic Transformations in Mahfouz’s The Cairo Trilogy” (Master’s Thesis, University of Alexandria (Egypt), 2019),

⁶ Nezar AlSayyad and Heba Safey Eldeen, *Cinematic Cairo: Egyptian Urban Modernity from Reel to Real* (American University in Cairo Press, 2022),

their effects shape individual experiences and the collective identity of Egyptian society in the postcolonial period.

This research will use Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, which is the primary focus of this analysis. Hybridity describes the condition of postcolonial identity that is never pure but rather formed through the intersection of colonial and local cultures. This research will analyze how the characters' identities in “Cairo Trilogy” are influenced by the encounter between traditional Egyptian culture and Western postcolonial influences.

Methodology

1. Data Collection:

The data used in this research consists of the full text of “Cairo Trilogy” by Naguib Mahfouz. The researcher will read and identify parts of the trilogy that depict identity conflict, social changes, and interactions between characters with colonial and traditional values.

2. Text Analysis:

Identifying Main Themes: The researcher will analyze the theme of identity in the novel, specifically the conflicts experienced by the main characters (such as Ahmad Al-Jawad and Kamal) in facing tradition, modernity, and colonial influences.

Character Analysis: Using psychological and sociological approaches, the researcher will examine how the main characters struggle with their concepts of identity, both within the family context and in broader social relations.

Symbolism and Metaphor: The researcher will examine the use of cultural symbols, rituals, and spaces in the novel to depict identity tensions. For example, the depiction of physical environments (e.g., the Al-Jawad family's home) reflects the social and cultural values at stake.⁷

3. Narrative Analysis:

⁷ Deema Ahmad Nasser, “Writing the Revolution: Egypt and the Story of Tahrir” (PhD Thesis, 2016),

This research will examine the narrative structure in “Cairo Trilogy” to understand how Mahfouz constructs the story to show the tension between tradition and modernity. Emphasis will be placed on how the narrative illustrates the dynamics of identity conflict within Egyptian society during that period. This analysis will also consider the language style used by Mahfouz and how it portrays the discomfort or confusion felt by the characters as a result of colonial influence.

4. Postcolonial Approach:

Hybridity and Identity Tension: The researcher will analyze how the identities of characters influenced by two worlds (traditional Egypt and Western influences) create internal and external conflicts. The concept of hybridity will be used to understand how these characters form new identities that are a mixture of different cultural elements, but never fully pure.⁸

Colonial Influence on Identity: The researcher will explore how the characters in “Cairo Trilogy” depict their struggles in dealing with the dominance of colonial culture. For example, the role of the British in Egyptian society, both socially, politically, and culturally. The research will examine how these characters adapt to foreign influences while still maintaining some aspects of their local cultural identity.⁹

Supporting Data Sources

Primary Text: Cairo trilogy by Naguib Mahfouz (in the original language or translation).

Supporting Literature: Books and scholarly articles on postcolonial theory, studies on Egypt, and literature related to postcolonial identity in Arab countries.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data will be analyzed using content analysis by marking themes, motifs, and symbols related to identity conflict in the novel. Each theme will be analyzed through the perspective of hybridity theory to uncover the influence of colonialism on identity formation within Egyptian society. The researcher will also use narrative analysis techniques to

⁸ Aram Ziai, “Postcolonial Perspectives on development” (ZEF Working Paper Series, 2012),

⁹ Pat Noxolo, “Postcolonial Approaches to Development,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of International Development*, ed. Jean Grugel and Daniel Hammett (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 41–53,

understand how the structure of the story and characters in “Cairo Trilogy” depict the postcolonial experience of Egyptian society.¹⁰

DISCUSSION

The Cairo Trilogy by Naguib Mahfouz is a monumental work that portrays the life journey of the Al-Jawad family within the historical and social context of early 20th-century Egypt. In this novel, Mahfouz not only highlights the social dynamics of the family but also delves into the broader issues faced by Egyptian society, namely the struggle between traditional values and the influence of modernity that emerged after the British colonial influence. In this context, one of the central themes that arise is the conflict of identity, which is essential to understand within a postcolonial framework, particularly with the tension between local Egyptian culture and Western culture.¹¹

The application of a postcolonial approach in this research allows us to observe how Mahfouz depicts the condition of postcolonial Egyptian society and how the individuals in the novel grapple with the identity clashes that emerge due to the social transformations triggered by colonialism and modernity. This study employs Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity as the main theoretical framework to analyze the identity conflict in “The Cairo Trilogy”.

Postcolonial Theory and Hybridity

Postcolonial theory emerged as a response to colonial dominance and its impact on the formation of national and individual identities. In the context of Egypt, the influence of British colonialism, which governed Egypt as a protectorate from 1882 to 1952, resulted in significant transformations in the country's social, political, and cultural structures. Postcolonial theory emphasizes exploring the ways in which colonized societies strive to reclaim their identity after gaining independence.

Homi Bhabha, a key figure in postcolonial theory, offers the concept of hybridity, which describes the condition of postcolonial identity as fragmented and impure. Bhabha states that individual and collective identities in the postcolonial context cannot be understood as separate entities—such as local culture and colonial culture—because these cultures interact, mix, and

¹⁰ Kenneth Strickland, *The Quotidian in Naguib Mahfouz's "The Cairo Trilogy"* (Liberty University, 2015),

¹¹ Risty Sugidiyanti Zahara, “Deiksis Dan Pemahamannya Teks Narasi Bahasa Arab (Telaah Novel al-Karnak Karya Najib Mahfuz)

create new, complex forms. In the context of The Cairo Trilogy, hybridity is reflected in the experiences of characters caught in the tension between maintaining Egyptian traditions and adopting Western values that emerged post-colonially.¹²

Colonialism and the Influence of Western Culture

One of the key strengths of “The Cairo Trilogy” is Mahfouz's ability to depict the direct influence of British colonialism on Egyptian society. Although Egypt formally gained independence in 1952, the influence of Western culture, whether in politics, economics, or even lifestyle, continued to create tensions in daily life. This is reflected in the experiences of the central characters, such as Ahmad Al-Jawad, Kamal, and other family members, who are trapped in a dilemma between respecting their Egyptian cultural heritage and adapting to a new world shaped by colonialism.

Ahmad Al-Jawad, the patriarch of the Al-Jawad family, represents strong traditional Egyptian values, yet he is also a character who cannot ignore the modernization brought by Western influence. As a father and family head, Ahmad feels pressured between upholding morality that has been in place for centuries and the changing social realities brought by Western education, the colonial political system, and the shifting values introduced by foreign influence

However, the character of Kamal, Ahmad's son, represents the younger generation who seeks to bridge two worlds although in this case, Kamal is more inclined to adopt a Western lifestyle and education. Kamal embodies a young man who critically examines the social and political conditions around him, yet he also experiences deep identity confusion because the Western world he tries to embrace is often not fully accepted by Egyptian society. Kamal, although desiring progress, still feels alienated from his own cultural roots.¹³

Hybridity and the Identity Formed

The concept of hybridity according to Homi Bhabha reveals how identity in the postcolonial context is always in a fragmented state. The identities of individuals or groups formed after colonialism can no longer be seen as monolithic or pure, but rather as something in constant process, creating new cultural mixtures that are often filled with internal conflicts.

¹² Rania Mahmoud, “Towards an Egyptian Bildungsroman: The National Intellectual after the 1919 Revolution in Naguib Mahfouz’s Sugar Street,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2019),

¹³ Paul Gillen and Devleena Ghosh, *Colonialism & Modernity* (UNSW Press, 2007),

In the Cairo Trilogy, we see how characters like Kamal undergo a complex transformation of identity. Kamal, who wishes to break free from backwardness and achieve knowledge considered "modern" through Western education, also cannot completely detach himself from the deeply ingrained Egyptian values. For example, when Kamal studies at university and interacts with Western thought, he feels connected to progressive ideas. However, at the same time, he feels a loss of connection with his family and Egyptian culture. Kamal is caught between two worlds a world that seeks to free itself from the colonial past but remains tied to the social and political realities of stagnant Egypt.

Mahfouz portrays this in depth, using symbolism and metaphor to illustrate Kamal's predicament in the encounter between the Western and Eastern worlds. For instance, the family home of the Al-Jawad family, located in Cairo, symbolizes a connection to traditional values, while the dynamics outside the home—whether in education or social interactions with Westerners suggest the unavoidable identity tension.

Modernity, Nationalism, and Postcolonial Identity Formation

The Cairo Trilogy also depicts the close relationship between modernity and nationalism in the postcolonial context. When Egypt gained independence from British rule, many aspects of social and political life underwent significant changes. One of the greatest challenges for Egyptian society was how to rebuild a national identity free from foreign influence while still facing the challenges of globalization and modernity.¹⁴

The identity conflict depicted in this novel is not only an individual struggle but also a collective one in the search for a new national identity post-colonially. This is where the concept of hybridity becomes highly relevant, as The Cairo Trilogy shows that the new national identity is not a monolithic entity but a result of encounters, mixing, and tensions between various values both local and foreign.

Mahfouz also shows how the ideology of nationalism plays a role in the formation of postcolonial Egyptian identity. However, this nationalism is often mixed with elements of Western values that are seen as more modern. This creates a dilemma for the characters in the

¹⁴ Nadia Atia and Lindsey Moore, *Global Arab Fiction* (Taylor & Francis, 2024),

novel, who strive to maintain the dignity and pride of Egyptian culture but also feel threatened by modernization and globalization.¹⁵

Postcolonial Identity in “The Cairo Trilogy”

1. Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity

One of the key aspects of postcolonial theory is the influence of modernity brought about by colonial powers, which not only impacted economic and political structures but also culture and social identity. In the context of Egypt, which was still under British colonial rule at the time, Western modernity became a symbol of progress but also posed a threat to the traditional values deeply rooted in Egyptian society.¹⁶

The characters in The Cairo Trilogy struggle with the tension between the traditions they inherited, which are often tied to religion and patriarchal family structures, and the modernity brought by Western intellectualism and the influence of Western education and social movements.

- Ahmad Abdel Gawad, as the head of the family, symbolizes traditional values rooted in the patriarchal structure and Islamic religion. For Ahmad, the values passed down through generations are essential, and he strives to maintain a strong social structure within his family. On the other hand, he cannot ignore the modernity brought by Western influences, which lead to changes in mindset and ways of life among the younger generation like Kamal and Yasin.

- Kamal represents the tension between two worlds. On one hand, he yearns for the modernity brought by Western education, but on the other, he feels bound to his family's conservative traditions. In this sense, Kamal struggles with a dual identity that mirrors the condition of Egyptian society during a period of transition—colonized by Western powers but also attempting to preserve its local culture.

In Palace of Desire (the second part of the trilogy), Mahfouz illustrates how Kamal, influenced by Western education, struggles to find a life path that can reconcile these opposing worlds.

"Kamal felt alienated from the world around him. He wanted to be part of the rapidly developing modern world, but each step he took was always hindered by the memories of his childhood, religious teachings, and his father's conservative views."

¹⁵ Raudhatul Jannah and Tatik Maryatut Tasnimah, “Tokoh Dan Perbedaan Aliran Realisme Barat Dan Timur Dalam Perkembangan Kesusastraan Arab,” *A Jamiy: Jurnal Bahasa Dan Sastra Arab* 12, no. 1 (2023): 1–14.

¹⁶ Rehnuma Sazzad, “Naguib Mahfouz’s Cairo Trilogy: Mediating Secularism in Postcolonial Egypt,” in *Islam and Postcolonial Discourse* (Routledge, 2017), 51–65,

This reflects how colonialism (through education and Western influence) impacts Kamal's search for a broader identity, torn between Islamic values and Western ideals.

2. Ambiguity and Cultural Differences: Postcolonialism and "Orientalism"

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism explains how the West (especially Britain and France) portrayed the East (including Egypt) as exotic, primitive, and backward in order to justify their colonial domination. In postcolonial works, including *The Cairo Trilogy*, this is reflected in the tension between local identities rooted in Eastern values and identities shaped by Western influences.

- Yasin, Ahmad's son, represents a younger generation that feels alienated by the conservative norms passed down by his parents. Yasin desperately wants to break free from the patriarchal family structure but also feels a loss of self-identity when connected to the modern world, which he considers freer. This sense of alienation is part of the postcolonial process where individuals feel trapped between traditional Eastern identities and modern Western influences.

"Yasin felt freer than the other members of his family. He was not bound by what a typical Egyptian man was supposed to do. However, that freedom made him feel more alienated and increasingly distanced from his family's roots."

Yasin struggles with the ambiguity of his identity, where he wants to break away from tradition but also feels alienated when trying to adopt a more modern identity. This is a classic portrayal of postcolonial cultural difference, where characters find themselves at the intersection of two very different worlds.

3. Resistance to Colonialism and the Search for National Identity

In many postcolonial works, there is an effort to reclaim or revive the local cultural identity that has been suppressed by colonial influence. In *The Cairo Trilogy*, characters like Kamal and Yasin struggle to find their place in the postcolonial world, shaped by the conflict between Western modernity and Eastern tradition.

For Mahfouz, the search for national identity is significant, as Egypt was in the process of determining its future after gaining independence from Britain. In this context, modernity is not only seen as a symbol of progress but also as a threat to local identity, reflecting doubts about the unity of postcolonial Egypt.

- Kamal tries to integrate these two distinct worlds, striving to build an intellectual identity that leans toward Western modernity while remaining connected to the roots of Islam

and Egyptian culture. Kamal seeks to be a free intellectual, yet he often feels trapped between traditional obligations and the desire to pursue progress.

- Throughout his journey, Kamal struggles to find a national identity that can unite the values within Egyptian culture with the advancements offered by the Western world, which becomes a major challenge for the younger generation in the colonized Arab world.

4. The Search for Psychological and Social Liberation

For the characters in “The Cairo Trilogy”, the search for identity often involves not only national or cultural identity but also psychological and social liberation from colonial influence. Characters like Yasin and Kamal fight to free themselves from the burdens of history they have inherited, leading to feelings of alienation and internal division.

Colonial influence is evident not only in social changes but also in the psychological structures created by modernity. Therefore, postcolonialism in the context of The Cairo Trilogy is also related to the pursuit of personal freedom and self-awareness, shaped by the legacy of colonial history.

This exploration of postcolonial identity in The Cairo Trilogy showcases the complex, layered challenges faced by individuals and nations as they navigate the aftermath of colonial rule. The tensions between tradition and modernity, local and Western identities, and the search for both personal and collective liberation are key elements in understanding the evolving identity of postcolonial Egypt.¹⁷

The Influence of Social History on the Formation of Identity in the Main Characters

1. Ahmad Abdel Gawad: Representation of Patriarchy and Tradition

Ahmad Abdel Gawad is a central character that embodies the traditional social structure of Egyptian society during his time. As the head of the family, Ahmad holds a dominant role, strongly emphasizing religious and patriarchal values, and is deeply bound to family traditions. In Palace Walk, Mahfouz portrays Ahmad as someone who upholds rigid family principles and feels pride in his role as the authoritative figure within the household. At one point in Palace Walk, Mahfouz writes:

"Ahmad Abdel Gawad upheld the rigid principles of family life. He believed that everything that occurred in his household, whether big or small, should be based on principles

¹⁷ Fadlun Suweleh, “Karakteristik Heterotopia Ruang Kafe Dalam Al-Karnak Karya Najib Mahfudz: Analisis Other Space Michel Foucault,” *Atavisme* 23, no. 2 (2020): 135–46.

that had long been followed. He took pride in being the symbol of authority in his family. For Ahmad, tradition was a foundation that could not be shaken."

This quote shows how Ahmad, despite being influenced by the progress of the times, remains tied to the conservative values passed down by his society. Ahmad's identity as a patriarchal figure reflects the difficulty of changing a social structure that has existed for centuries. He feels trapped between the traditional way of life he firmly believes in and the inevitable social changes that surround him. Ahmad thus represents the social tension in Egypt at the time, faced with the choice between maintaining tradition and embracing the influence of a more modern world.

2. Kamal Abdel Gawad: Modernity and the Conflict of Identity

Kamal, Ahmad's eldest son, represents a younger generation that is more educated and influenced by modernity, especially by Western education. As a young intellectual, Kamal faces a deep identity dilemma. Although he is educated and open-minded, he remains bound by the expectations of his family and the strong traditions they follow. At one point in “Palace of Desire”, Mahfouz writes:

"Kamal felt alienated from the world around him. He wanted to be part of the rapidly developing modern world, but each step he took was always hindered by the memories of his childhood, religious teachings, and his father's conservative views."

This excerpt illustrates Kamal's internal conflict in his search for personal identity. Kamal feels anxiety because he is caught between the desire to advance and his loyalty to family and religion. Although inspired by Western ideas, he is also fearful of leaving behind his cultural roots and the values shaped by his society.

Kamal's story reflects the struggle of the younger generation in Egypt, trying to balance modern education and ideas with the deeply ingrained traditional values of their society. Kamal's internal battle is not only personal but also shaped by the expectations of society, which heavily influences his identity formation.

3. Yasin Abdel Gawad: Resistance to Tradition

Yasin, Kamal's brother, is a character who is more open to social change and is freer in exploring life beyond the limits set by the family. Yasin, who prefers a more pragmatic lifestyle and is less bound by conservative values, directly contrasts with both Ahmad and Kamal.

In “Sugar Street”, Mahfouz describes Yasin as follows:

"Yasin felt freer than the other members of his family. He was not bound by what an Egyptian man was supposed to do. However, that freedom made him feel more alienated and increasingly distant from his family's roots."

Yasin reflects a younger generation that wants to break free from the shackles of tradition, but he also feels lost because he lacks a clear foundation. In this sense, Yasin embodies a broader identity conflict in Egyptian society, which is torn between tradition and progress. Yasin's character represents the tension of wanting change and freedom but realizing the emotional and psychological consequences of losing the traditional anchors that give life meaning and purpose.

The characters of Ahmad, Kamal, and Yasin demonstrate how social history and the evolution of societal norms deeply influence personal identity in postcolonial Egypt. Ahmad represents the entrenched patriarchal and traditional values, Kamal embodies the struggle of reconciling modernity with tradition, and Yasin represents the yearning for personal liberation, but with the complexities that arise from abandoning those traditions. Through these characters, Mahfouz captures the broader social conflict of a nation at a crossroads, grappling with its past while seeking to define its future.¹⁸

Identity Conflict in the Cairo Trilogy: Tradition, Modernity, and Colonial Influence in Character Formation

Social and Historical Context of Egypt

In Cairo Trilogy, Mahfouz not only presents the story of the Al-Jawad family but also depicts the social and political situation of Egypt during a period of great transition after British colonialism. Following Egypt's independence in 1952, the country faced significant challenges in determining its future direction, caught between preserving long-held traditional values and adapting to the influence of Western modernity. This tension is strongly felt in the novel's characters, who each represent larger societal changes.¹⁹

Ahmad, as the family patriarch, embodies the old values, representing a segment of society that wants to preserve the status quo and feels threatened by the rising tide of modernity. Kamal, on the other hand, represents the educated younger generation that longs for progress

¹⁸ Dwi Oktarina and M. Luthfi Zuhdi, "Mourning, Melancholia, Dan Trauma Dalam Karnak Kafe Karya Naguib Mahfouz: Tinjauan Psikoanalitik Sastra," *Sirok Bastra* 11, no. 1 (2023): 77–90.

¹⁹ Novriantoni Kaharudin, "Dari Nuktah Menuju Nobel Sastra: Menyimak Najib Mahfuz Berkisah," *Dekonstruksi* 5, no. 01 (2022): 94–105.

but is confused by their fragmented identity. Meanwhile, Yasin, although more open to social change, struggles to find his place in a new, limitless world.

The Impact of Western Education on Identity

One of the strongest aspects of the novel is the influence of Western education on its characters. Western education here is not only seen as a more advanced system but also as a symbol of the social transformation brought about by colonialism. Kamal, for example, spends much of his time learning and interacting with progressive Western ideas, which influences his view of the world.

However, despite Kamal's access to Western education, he can never fully sever his ties with the Egyptian culture that shaped him. The Western learning, while offering new knowledge and opening pathways to progress, exacerbates Kamal's internal conflict as he feels trapped between two vastly different worlds. This creates a fragmented sense of identity, where characters like Kamal experience alienation and loss of direction in their search for self-identity.

The Role of Religion and Patriarchy in Identity Formation²⁰

Islamic religion and the patriarchal structure of the family are also key factors in the identity formation of the characters in this novel. Ahmad, as a father and head of the family, adheres strongly to Islamic and patriarchal values. His responsibilities as the head of the family go beyond economic and social matters, extending to the moral and religious education of his children. For Ahmad, tradition and religion are principles that must be upheld to maintain family harmony and social stability.

However, for Kamal and Yasin, these values pose significant challenges. Kamal, influenced by Western education, believes these values hinder his development as a more free and educated individual. Meanwhile, Yasin, who is more pragmatic, feels that the patriarchal structure created by their father is no longer relevant in the modern world.

Modernity vs. Tradition in the Search for National Identity

One of the central themes in Cairo Trilogy is how post-colonial Egyptian society struggles to find a new national identity. After independence, Egypt had to choose the right path to modernity without neglecting its cultural heritage. This dilemma is felt by the younger generation, such as Kamal and Yasin, who struggle to find a balance between progress and tradition.

²⁰ Özlem Ulucan, *The Modernization Process of Egypt and Turkey in Selected Novels of Naguib Mahfouz and Orhan Pamuk* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019),

Cairo Trilogy portrays modernity not only as something progressive and forward-looking but also as a threat to cultural heritage and national identity. The characters in the novel must struggle to understand how they can preserve the authenticity of Egyptian culture while adapting to an increasingly interconnected world influenced by Western values.

Symbolism and Metaphor in Identity Conflict²¹

Mahfouz uses rich symbolism and metaphors to illustrate the identity tensions experienced by his characters. The Al-Jawad family home, for example, can be seen as a symbol of unshakable tradition, while the changes occurring outside the home whether in the context of education, social life, or interactions with the Western world suggest a clash between two opposing worlds.²²

Additionally, characters like Kamal are often depicted in situations where they feel trapped, both physically and psychologically, between the expectations of their parents and their own dreams. This symbolism deepens our understanding of the internal journeys of these characters as they face the profound changes occurring in their world.

The Search for Psychological and Social Liberation

The identity conflict in Cairo Trilogy is not only about cultural or national identity but also about psychological and social liberation. Characters like Kamal and Yasin strive to free themselves from the burdens of the past, which include the legacy of colonial history and the deeply entrenched social structures in their lives. Their feelings of alienation and identity confusion reflect how individuals in post-colonial societies struggle to find their place in a new world. This conflict is not just external, but internal, as these characters battle feelings of fragmentation and confusion about who they truly are.²³

CONCLUSION

The identity conflict faced by the characters in Cairo Trilogy by Naguib Mahfouz portrays the tension between tradition, modernity, and colonial influence in the formation of identity. Through characters like Ahmad, Kamal, and Yasin, Mahfouz illustrates how Egyptian society in the post-colonial era struggled with a major challenge: how to preserve long-established traditional values while adapting to the influence of Western modernity after gaining independence from British colonialism.

²¹ Monda Edfanda, Fadlil Yani Ainusyamsi, and Deden Hidayat, "Ragam Ansietas Masyarakat Mesir Pada 1960-An," *Hijai* 4, no. 1 (2021): 61–79.

²² Atia and Moore, *Global Arab Fiction*.

²³ AlSayyad and Eldeen, *Cinematic Cairo*.

Western education and its influence on the younger generation, especially Kamal, create an internal conflict that exacerbates feelings of alienation and identity confusion. Islam and the patriarchal structure within the family also play an important role in identity formation, with Ahmad representing conservative values that contrast with the views of Kamal and Yasin, who are more open to change.

The conflict between modernity and tradition in the search for national identity is a central theme in this trilogy, depicting how the characters struggle to find a balance between progress and cultural heritage. Through symbolism and metaphors, Mahfouz conveys the internal tension experienced by the characters as they navigate social, cultural, and political changes in the post-colonial world.

Overall, this article demonstrates how “Cairo Trilogy” portrays the search for identity within the social and historical context of post-colonial Egypt, exploring the roles of education, religion, patriarchy, and modernity in shaping individuals and societies adapting to a new world after independence.

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