A Semiotic Study of the Titles of *'The Cairo Trilogy'* by Naguib Mahfouz

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

The title of every literary work is intertwined with its ideological concepts, characters and its other elements; It Challenges the readers' mind, puts forward hypotheses for them, provokes them into a new reading of the text and is like a riddle which the main text strives to solve. A prominent literary work for which its author was awarded The Nobel Prize in Literature, *The Cairo Trilogy* by Naguib Mahfouz is a trilogy whose titles, apparently, are taken from the names of Cairo districts; however, the events that take place in the novel are indicative of the fact that beyond these titles lie hidden meanings, congruent with the overall spirit of the novel in portraying its ideological concepts. The trilogy, which is comprised of three novels (Palace Walk, Palace of Desire, and Sugar Street), depicts the challenges among three generations of middleclass fathers, offspring, and their descendants. In order to lay bare the relationship between the titles of the novels and their axes, semiotic theory, developed by Ferdinand de Saussure, can be used. To this end, the present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What has the author's main intention been in choosing the names of Cairo's districts?
2. To what extent has the main text of the novel been able to disentangle the titles' puzzle, reflecting the author's main intention?

It is worth mentioning that to this date, this trilogy has been the subject of many studies, though none has studied it from a semiotic perspective.

2. Theoretical Framework

Regardless of researchers' inattention to the titles of literary works, following the success of structuralism in understanding texts, experts grew interested in meanings and titles, leading to the advent of "la titrologie". Roland Barthes defines "title" as "signifying and sign-based systems into which moral, social and ideological values are embedded" (Alhamdawi, 1997: p96). Charles Grivel believes titles serve three functions: identifying the work, designating the work's subject matter, and playing up the work (Abou-tayyib, 1996: p193). After him, Mitran added two more functions to the list: 1. Historical attraction, and 2. Ideological function (Hoek, 1981: p5). In order to discover the

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relationship between the title of a literary work and its hidden ideological concepts, one should resort to semiotics.

Linguists define semiotics as the scientific study of linguistic and non-linguistic codes "validated as a communicative tool". Among the prominent figures in the field of semiotic theory Ferdinand de Saussure and Robert Emmanuel Pirès can be named. Saussure's theory of semiotic hinges upon the notions of signifier, signified, and the relationship between the two. To him, a linguistic sign is comprised of a signifier (a vocal notion) and a signified (conceptual notion). In Saussurian semiotics, signified is not recognized through reference to reality, but it is a mental concept; that is, signified is not the object, but the concept of the object and signifier refers to a concept, and not an object. Assuming the titles of the trilogy to be signifiers, the present research aims to study whether Cairo's districts are the references of these signifiers or whether their perceived concepts were objects of desire.

3. Research Method

 The present research, using the titles of Naguib Mahfouz's trilogy in a descriptive-analytical approach and drawing upon semiotic concepts, aims to discover the relationship between the tiles (signifiers) and concepts and intentions behind them (the signified); hence the titles are studied at two levels

First level: title as an independent structure at two grammatical and lexical levels

Second level: title as a structure parallel to the text at a semantic level

4. Conclusion

Palace Walk is the scene of events facing the first generation of "fathers", characterizing imitation, mindlessness, tyranny, hypocrisy, patriarchy and presenting contradictions that create a problematic protagonist. The events of this novel indicate that members of the family have fallen to the abyss of two types of tyranny: the dominant patriarchy together with British domination, tyranny and colonialism.

Palace of Desire is a portrayal of questioning a father's values and the collapse of his ideals. Characters, in order to become free from the two aforementioned tyrannies, strive to produce solutions to their problems and endeavor; however, their spirits and souls are wounded along this trajectory and they end up in some sort of mental, moral deadlock. In other words, they succumb to some sort of spiritual tyranny and domination.

Sugar Street recounts the process of the development of thought and culture and the creation of social commitment along with the entrance of individuals into social and revolutionary streams. The term "sugar" in Sugar Street boasts two contradictory meanings and begets some sort of paradox, for on one hand the protagonists of the third generation have found a way to emancipate themselves from the problems besetting the two generations before them, which is a reason for euphoria; though unforeseen incidents such as the death of the daughter (Aisha) and Amina (the mother), sours the sweet taste of achievement. In other words, the incidents pertaining to the third generation appear as joyful (The Sugar Street: sugary) and the ones pertaining to the second and the first generation appear as woeful (The Sugar Street: poisonous)

Finally, the characters of The Palace Walk face both internal and external confinements, but in Palace of Desire they mainly face internal, psychological confinement. In Sugar Street, though, the protagonists of the third generation have broken free from the internal confinement and know the path they want to take; notwithstanding the external confinement (political pressure) they are free from the bewilderments of the previous generations, striding toward their transcendental goals, howbeit the tragic backdrop created by the viewpoints of the two generations before them has, also, touched on their lives.

Keywords: Semiotics, Title, Trilogy, Naguib Mahfouz, Tyranny, Hopelessness .

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