

A Poetic Crisis: The Abject in Naguib Mahfouz's *The Beggar*

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the abject in Naguib Mahfouz's *The Beggar*, and how it is related to the poetic crisis of its protagonist. It uses Julia Kristeva's definition of the abject, which means an impure maternal element and a negative force, and its related term, abjection, which refers to being on a liminal space between the animalistic and the cultural and between the semiotic and the symbolic. Because Omar Hamzawi quit writing poetry, he could not sublimate the abject other within him. Immersed in the abject, he suffers from symptomatic depression and he himself becomes abject. His body becomes his poetic text disintegrating into nothingness. He tries to commit suicide in order to relapse to a pre-linguistic space where he achieves a union with the m/other. However, he fails to do so and returns to the symbolic by recalling a poetic line.

Keywords: Naguib Mahfouz, *The Beggar*.

According to the French philosopher Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, the abject is defined as the impure element including vomit, excrement, dung, mucus, corpses, etc. The abject is also an evil and negative force that causes heterogeneity in a literary text. These filthy objects and evil powers are related to the maternal body since it is dirty. The subject has to repudiate these disgusting elements in order to be part of the symbolic, patriarchal order. In this sense, the term abject is closely related to another term known as abjection. Abjection is a process where the infant starts to separate from the oneness with his mother's unclean and improper body, which is called the semiotic *chora*, in order to enter the symbolic world of language. This takes place before Lacan's famous thetic stage of the mirror and the subject's castration. By jettisoning the mother, the subject can structure its psychic borders as well as its "clean and proper body" (1982, p. 101). The abject takes place when separation from the mother is established, i.e., when a boundary is created between self and other, my mother (m/other). In short, the subject forms his identity by refusing animality and corporeality for the benefit of the cultural in the fashion of the ritualistic act of casting

off the scapegoat.

However, the expulsion of the mother is not final. She returns as an abject mother to haunt the subject and threatens its borders. This is close to Freud's concept of "return of the repressed" (1990, p. 87). The more the subject is faced by the abject, the more he loses the solidarity of his borders and the less he becomes integrated. The threat is that of being engulfed in an abyss of void as he releases death drive. Although this is horrifying, it is also fascinating as it promises fusion with the mother, which causes *jouissance* and pleasure, liberation from social constraints as well as rebelling against them. This causes the subject to be forever in a liminal space between the self and the other, nature and culture, inside and outside, subject and object.

The abject is coupled with the concept of the semiotic as they are both related to the maternal. The semiotic refers to a pre-symbolic, pre-oedipal space where the instinctual drives are allowed to breach the symbolic. This kind of violence does not only rupture the body of the revolutionary subject who defies the symbolic law causing symptomatic pain in his body, but also through negativity that masks the death drive it disrupts language. By bursting in the text, the semiotic and the abject cause musical rhythm that forms poetic language. This means that as much as writing poetry is a creative revolutionary work, it

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also causes the dissolving of the poet's identity. However and paradoxically enough, at the same time when the poet invokes the abject, he purges himself from it and from death: "The writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death" (1982, p.38). The purpose of this article is to show how the abject in Mahfouz's *The Beggar* puts its protagonist in a poetic crisis: he is eager to come back to writing poetry and to normal life by getting rid of the abject, yet he, being immersed in the abject, seems to love fusion with the mother and the nihilistic *jouissance* it brings. Because of this concentration on the personal, the poet's subjectivity, a turn towards a psychoanalytic approach from a Kristevan perspective becomes necessary.

The Beggar is considered by many critics as an existential and/or a social novel but rarely a psychological novel especially as related to poetry. For example, Rasheed El-Enany views the protagonist's search in the novel as metaphysical. He posits that Omar al-Hamzawi is "struck by existential angst" causing him a spiritual crisis (1993, p. 107, 108). El-Enany suggests that the ultimate truth which Mahfouz stresses in this novel, as everywhere in his *oeuvre*, is "in the reality of the world" and not in "transcendental escapism" (1993, p. 110). The ideals of poetry, as one understands from El-anany's explanation, are part of Omar's crisis but not the crisis itself and Omar's problem is not psychological. In the same way Khalifa and Al-Qaysi categorize *The Beggar* as a philosophical and an existential novel asking questions about life (2007, p. 129; 2007, p. 130). Abu Ahmad though put it more clearly that although *The Beggar* has a psychological element, it can never be categorized as a psychological novel (2009, p. 25). However, as mentioned above, this study believes that the focus on the personal crisis of the protagonist as it is related to language, namely poetry, is not only social or philosophical but prominently psychological.

The Beggar depicts the crisis of Omar al-Hamzawi, a rich ex-socialist lawyer who lives in a post-Nasser revolution Cairo. He was a poet in his youth, a fact that plays a pivotal role in his crisis. He is in his own words a man who "lost interest in everything" (p.11). He is bored of his work, his wife Zeinab, and everything that surrounds him. His success in his life could not overcome his ennui. After a non-traditional life in his youth – he was a revolutionary socialist, poet, and lover – he comes to see his success as worthless. In order to break his boredom, he leaves his wife and two daughters to indulge

himself in multiple sexual affairs that couldn't save him from his lethargy. Finally, he decides to live alone in the countryside away from the world, which puts him on the verge of hallucinatory madness. He is visited, after a year and a half of his seclusion, by his friend Othman who was an ex-prisoner because of his political activities. The story ends with Othman being caught and Omar being shot and wounded but feels he is returning to the world as he is brought back to Cairo.

The beginning of the novel is very significant. The portrait that Omar views in the waiting room of his physician friend, Hamid Sabri's office overshadows his dilemma. In it, there is a pasture, cows, a child, and a horizon. Omar describes the child in light of his crisis as a "searching child." This child resembles Omar in being a questionable subject, a subject in process, and a skeptic subject. However, the child is hindered from moving by riding a wooden, frozen horse and by an oppressive horizon that "tightly [...] grips the earth, closes in upon the earth from any angle you observe it. What an infinite prison" (p.1). In other words, the revolutionary questioning of the subject is blocked by a tightening material environment and too much restricting borders surrounding him.

Omar is obviously a border line patient who is on the threshold of madness. He is not psychotic yet, but he is a phobic oscillating between I and not-I. His psychic borders are threatened by the abject, or more precisely by an abject mother. His doctor friend diagnosis him well: "[t]here's nothing wrong with you for the time being, but the enemy lurks on the borders" (p.11). Omar is continually defending his borders from the abject in order to survive, a process that causes his suffering. He is trying to find meaning in his life by cleansing the abject stuck to him. But the more he does so, the more he finds himself immersed in filth:

Disgust has sprouted in a fetid swamp choked with traditional platitudes and household management. What wealth and success you've attained offer no comfort, for all is consumed by decay. Your soul is sealed in a putrid jar like an aborted fetus, your heart suffocated by apathy and by the grimy residues. The flowers of life, withered and fallen, will come to rest on the garbage heap. (p.66)

The first instance when Omar starts to sense the abject

is when he starts to feel disgusted by his wife. Zeinab is an ex-Christian called Kamelia who converted to Islam for her husband's sake. Although she stands for the perfect, faithful wife in the novel, Omar couldn't stop himself from being disgusted by her fatness: "He focused on his wife's thick neck above her white collar, and on her fleshy cheeks. She stood as the pillar of faith and virtue. Her green eyes were pouched in fat, but her smile was innocent and affectionate" (p.14). The fatness of Zeinab, according to Omar, "mar[s] her purity" and she becomes "the exemplary symbol of the kitchen and the bank" (p.14-15).

Omar is sickened by his wife's fatness although he himself is "drowning in a quagmire of fat" (p.21). He is "a wealthy lawyer sinking in gluttony" (p.32). He cannot resist food no matter how much he tries: "Omar announced that he would restrict himself to a chicken breast, fruit and one glass of whisky [...]. Although Omar hesitated a bit at the beginning of the meal, he soon ate and drank without restraint" (p.16). He tries to lose weight as the doctor recommended by sacrificing "tons of meat, fish roe, butter and eggs" but "having stuffed [himself] to death for so long, [he] yearn[s] for food" (p.22). The word that Omar uses to express his love for food – "yearn"- is very emotional. It is true then what his friend, Mustapha al Minyaw, remarks about food that it "offers a better explanation than sex of human behavior" (p.16). In fact food is connected emotionally to the m/other. Kristeva explains this:

Food [...] designates the other (the natural) that is opposed to the social condition of man and penetrates the self's clean and proper body. In other respects, food is the oral object (the abject) that sets up archaic relationship between the human being and the other, its mother, who wields a power that is as vital as it is fierce. (p.75-76).

This means that by eating, Omar is trying to appease his hunger for the ever lost mother by incorporating an oral object. This is why he never seems to find the right food to compensate the emotional loss: "What can we do when we find no food to satisfy our hunger?" (p.83). However, as the quotation above shows, this orality is not only nourishing but also threatening because the act of devouring is related to the mother who menaces the

identity and is thus disgusting and engulfing.

The abject that causes Omar to repel from his wife's obesity, which results from devouring food, is in fact inside him. He himself becomes abject, permeated by it. He hates the m/other within him as much as he is fascinated by it. This causes a conscious/unconscious conflict inside Omar:

Dear God, Zeinab and the work are the same. This malady which turns me from work is what turns me from Zeinab for she is the hidden force, she is its symbol. She is wealth, success, and finally illness. And because I'm sick of these things, I'm disgusted with myself, or rather because I'm disgusted with myself, all else sickens me. (p.39)

In many other places in the novel Omar points to himself as abject. For example, he confesses to Mustafa: "It sometimes consoles me that I hate myself just as much" (p.43). And on another occasion he feels that he is "a corpse, lying forgotten on the earth's surface" (p.97).

What created this narcissistic crisis in Omar? Why the longing for devouring, represented by food, and fear of being devoured? This orality goes back to the act of devouring language. According to Kristeva, the subject learns to speak and fills her mouth with words in order to compensate a lost mother. The link between speaking words and having a relationship with the mother is the appropriation of an oral object. Instead of devouring a mother, one devours words: "Through the mouth that I fill with words instead of my mother whom I miss from now on more than ever, I elaborate that want" (1982, p. 41). That is, in language one finds the lost mother: "'I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother,' is what the speaking being seems to be saying. 'But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her, I have not lost her [...], I can recover her in language'" (Kristeva, 1989, p. 43). Therefore, since Omar is a poet, his need to devour words is more urgent than any other person. But the problem is that he quit writing poetry and thus instead of sublimating the m/other within him in his poetic language, he represses it. Mustafa, who also used to write poetry, has noticed this crisis: "you were battling a secret urge in yourself which you suppressed cruelly, and my commitment [to poetry] must have been alarming to you"

(p.17). In other words, the other inside him stifles and imprisons him. This is why writing poetry for Omar, as he expresses many times is equated to his life:

I found myself caught in a whirlpool from which
there's no escape except
through poetry, for poetry is the very aim of my
existence. Without it, what
would we do with the love which surrounds us
like air, the secret feelings which
burns us like fire, the universe which oppresses us
without mercy? (p.28)

Somewhere else he puts the same idea differently:
"You know that poetry is my life and that the coupling of
two lines begets a melody which makes the wings of
heaven dance" (p.21).

This may be the reason why Omar is envious to his pregnant wife for in her pregnancy she is able to produce an other while he merges with his, which makes him unable to produce language or be artistically creative: "Here she is, able to create, while all his efforts have failed" (p.92). In comparison to her, he becomes barren and most importantly silent. She becomes for him an embodiment of the abject mother that fascinates and horrifies him simultaneously: "She sings songs of love, while I'm mute; she's the pursuer while I'm the fugitive; she loves while I hate; she's pregnant while I'm sterile, she's sensitive, perspicacious while I'm stupid" (p.39). For Omar it is either he "begets" melody or, interestingly enough, "[i]t's an abortion" (p.21, 76).

As a result, Omar does not like Zeinab's speech because it is "too sober" (p.22). Because of her alterity, she is part of the symbolic world. He is annoyed by her speech since he is lulled by the maddening "call of the mother" as fusion with her (Kristeva, 1977, p.39). His language, contrary to Zeinab's, is disintegrating towards silence and death exactly like the language of that madman he meets near the Glim beach. He describes the madman's language as "obscure" and as "no less strange than mathematical equations" (p.22). It is not a reasonable language but rather the language of the beyond that loses meaning when the semiotic disrupts the poetic language which dissolves into nothingness. For Omar, love lies in such language and not in logical speech. This precisely what shocks him in the conversation of the lovers he overheard. In it, the woman says: "You're speaking reasonably which means that you

no longer love me" (p.23). In such language, he is searching for an archaic, maternal "old friend called love" (p.23).

Omar's suffering is definitely due to his abandoning writing poetry. He is oppressed by silence and deprived of sublimating his suffering into poetic words. His suffering itself becomes a kind of *jouissance* that produces a kind of poetry literally on his body: "Agony lifted me to poetic ecstasies" (p.23). Somewhere else he murmurs: "Let me be a sentence never uttered by a tongue before" (p.62). And finally he puts it clearly in a question: "Isn't it better to live poetry than to write it?" (p.71). The bodily drives that permeates him causing hurtful symptoms defy all the materiality that he lives. He himself becomes an open wound walking alive and nothing can heal this wound except writing it in the form of poetry or by embracing the arms of an archaic love, death: "Your soul longs for escape, the magic key at the bottom of a well" (p.35). A rebellious poet cannot live without a revolution and if he could not achieve it, he wishes for a revolutionary death: "How we need a violent storm to wash away this cloying humidity" (p.35). He sometimes tries to go back to writing the "lost tunes," but it seems that he is now in search of a stronger "intoxication" (p.43, 44).

Omar's daughter, Buthayna, who is also a poet, stands for the equilibrium between the symbolic and the semiotic that he could not achieve. She is beautiful and, unlike her mother, slim as she "ate with moderation" (p.16). She still believes in God, or what she calls "the final purpose of all things" when Omar stopped to do so (p.29). She fell in love with Omar's friend, the socialist Othman Khalil, after he got out of prison at the time when Omar was trying to get rid of him and every one in his social realm. Buthayna and Othman together stand for what Omar longs for and what he lost: love, poetry and revolution. This is why Omar clings to Buthayna and never tries to hurt her while he frankly hurts his wife Zeinab.

On the border of animality, Omar tries to revive his lost m/other through involving in different affairs. He seems to quench his unbounded desire in different sexual relationships with prostitutes, especially with Margaret and a longer one with Warda. At the beginning of the relationship with the latter, he felt a kind of revival and that he is on the "threshold" of the world (p.56). In fact, Omar confesses that "[i]n the feminine sex, [he] seem[s] to see life on two feet" (p.54). The feminine sex is related

to the flesh, to what is animalistic on the threshold (thetic) of the symbolic. Therefore, in these affairs, he is closer to the maternal, to the semiotic that he lost when he quit poetry, to the abject. However, Omar declares somewhere else that he hates women (p.84). This becomes clear when we understand that he refers to the paradoxical love/hatred relationship to the mother, to what is fascinating and horrifying at the same time. In this sense, Omar's affairs, which are an indulgence in the feminine and the maternal, to his mind are aesthetic. This is what he tries to explain to Mustapha about his ventures: "You don't realize I'm living the art I always longed to create" (p.65). Mustapha seems to understand, even beyond Omar's theory, that the latter is searching for a lost ingredient that can be found in art, that art is not the end but the means to that lost thing, the mother: "No, it's not art, but it may be what we turn to art in search of" (p.65). But why prostitutes to create such an art? It is because they are closer to animality and the abject that defies the social and the symbolic. Although Zeinab is repelling in her fatness, she is still pure in her manners. On the contrary, in their prostitution, the whores are revolutionaries violating the borders of society. Paradoxically enough, Omar tries, through his relationship with Warda, to get rid of an abject society for when he built a flat for her "[h]e spent without limit, as though ridding himself of a painful financial tumor" (p.59). Yet, in getting rid of a cancerous, social abject, he immerses himself in an animalistic, primitive abject. In light of this, we can understand why Omar used to take these women to the pyramids to have sex with them. Pyramids cause ecstasy for him as they encompass him in timelessness as a last word of liberation, maternal love, and death:

How dense the darkness is around us. If only its density could shut out the world, obliterating everything before the weary eye so that the heart alone might see, might gaze on the blazing star of ecstasy. It approaches now like the rays of dawn. Your soul seems to shun everything in its thirst for love, in its love for love, in its yearning for the first ecstasy of creation and for a refuge in the wellspring of life. (p.49)

He becomes one with the lover and the place as he

experiences the "beauty of darkness" (p.49). This could not be achieved if the lover has an identity and a name. The names of the prostitutes are fake (Margaret, Warda), but the name of his wife, Zeinab, is a traditional name that itself has an identity. Making love to these unknown women is a symbolic act of committing suicide. In his conversation with Warda by the pyramids, Omar talks about killing himself in her arms in the natural scene of the pyramids:

Pressing her close, he said, "But at one time, I was about to kill."
 "Because of a woman?"
 "No."
 "Don't talk of such things in the moonlight."
 "In the end I decided to kill myself."
 "In my presence?"
 "In your arms."
 "In the moonlight."
 "Now the moon is disappearing." (p.56)

This kind of oneness and fusion with the lover and nature is a way of dissolving the identity into nothingness, of answering the call of the mother. Love for him becomes an act of death as when he describes "a couple embracing as if in the throes of death" (p.79).

The sadomasochistic conflict between Eros and Thanatos, between getting rid of death and answering the call of death, and between questioning and silence, comes to an end when Omar leaves Warda, whose name indicates withering fast. All his sexual adventures do not seem to answer his yearning to a bigger love. The flat with its Oriental room that he built especially for meeting Warda also turns out to be disgusting, "a strange house the spider builds to hunt flies" (p.76). He ends his love/hate adventure to "enjoy the silent, empty flat" (p.84).

Omar is a radical avant-garde poet who begs the impossible. In fact, as El-Rai suggests, "he has no aim but to seek the impossible" (1989, p. 47). He wants to utter silence and death on the "brink of creation" (p.87). He is an extremist, romantic poet who wants all or nothing. The last poem which he wrote before renouncing poetry declares this transcendental thought:

*Because I neither played in the wind
 Nor lived on the equator
 Nothing charmed me but sleeplessness*

*And a tree which doesn't bend to the storm
And a building which doesn't shake*

This is may be why he moves to an isolated place at the end of the novel away from any social being in order to transcend "the confines of time and space" (p.114). In his exile, he is connected to the symbolic world only by "a fence lined with cypress trees" (p.114). It is a maternal, pre-linguistic place where Omar relapses into the imaginative where he could only encounter abject, incomprehensible creatures. One horrible scene Omar hallucinates seems like one presented in an absurd theatre:

The devil has played havoc with the dream.
Ecstasy has become a curse, and
paradise a stage for fools. I lay there submissively,
no longer trying to resist,
then raised my head slightly to look around. A
willow recited a line of poetry,
a cow approached and stated she was giving up
the milk business in order to
study chemistry, a spotted snake crept forward,
darted out his poisonous fang,
then proceeded to dance merrily. The fox stood
upright, guarding the chickens,
a choir of beetles sang an angelic hymn, and a
scorpion confronted me, wearing a nurse's
uniform. (p.119)

These semiotic images threaten Omar's identity of disintegrating into psychotic nothingness. The most significant of these images is when he sees Samir, his expected grandson, putting on Othman's head. After Othman has been caught again to be put in prison, Samir replaces him in Omar's realm. As he is the son of Othman and Buthayna, Samir, a name which means friend, stands

for the reconciliation of revolution and poetry that may compensates Omar's loss. He is the other of Omar. He becomes the reason for Omar to come back to the symbolic world.

Omar says goodbye to the semiotic world where the "willow tree talks, snakes dance, and beetles sing" (p.124). At the end of the novel, Omar is shot and wounded by the police who was chasing Othman. Although some critics think that Omar is killed (2010, p. 5), many others believe that he survived the accident (1989, p. 149). The last lines that he reverberates in the ambulance indicate the return to the symbolic world: "If you really wanted me, why did you desert me?" (p.124). "Me" here might refer to the world which is deserted by Omar. It also might refer to writing poetry which could not be achieved except in the symbolic world. Might Omar find "the magic key at the bottom of a well" and comes back with it (p.35)? Might he ride a genuine horse rather than the wooden horse he saw in the painting at the beginning of the story? Will he ever escape the abject? The future cannot tell.

As can be seen, informed by a psychoanalytical approach from a Kristevan perspective, this article aimed at showing how Omar Al-Hamzawi who is an ex-poet faces a poetic as well as an identity crisis where his psychic borders are threatened by the abject. He is in a constant struggle to keep filth out of his life and go back to normal, a process that causes him immense suffering. The only thing that could save him is returning back to writing poetry to sublimate that suffering. This oppressing silence becomes a kind of *jouissance* that produces symptomatic pain on his body. In fact, he starts to seek a destructive fusion with the m/other, a dissolving of his identity into nothingness. The end of the novel shows an evidence of Omar's ability to overcome his crisis by uttering a line of poetry. However, this ending does not guarantee the return of the abject in Omar's life.

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أزمة شعرية: الدنيء في رواية نجيب محفوظ: الشحاذ

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ملخص

هذا المقال يناقش "الدنيء" في رواية نجيب محفوظ *الشحاذ* وكيف انه مرتبط بالأزمة الشعرية لبطلها. يستخدم المقال تعريف جوليا كريستيفا للدنيء، الذي يعني العنصر الأمومي غير الطاهر كما يعني أيضاً الطاقة السلبية، وهو تعريف مرتبط بتعريف آخر وهو الفطيع الذي يعني الوجود في مكان متأرجح بين الحيواني و الحضاري و بين السيميائي و الرمزي. لأن عمر حمزاوي ترك كتابة الشعر، فإنه لم يستطع ان يصعد الآخر الدنيء الموجود داخله. وبما انه أصبح مغموساً في الدنيء، فإنه أصبح يعاني من اكتئاب ذي اعراض جسمانية، اي انه أصبح نفسه دنيئاً. كما أن جسده أصبح هو نصه الشعري المتحلل الى اللاشيء. يحاول عمر لذلك الإنتحار ليرجع الى مكان قبل- لغوي حيث يمكنه الإتحاد مع الآخر الذي هو أمه. عمر يفشل في ذلك و يعود للعالم الرمزي باستحضاره بيتاً شعرياً.

الكلمات الدالة: الدنيء، نجيب محفوظ، الشحاذ.

* جامعة فيلادلفيا، الأردن. تاريخ استلام البحث 2013/4/24، وتاريخ قبوله 2014/3/9.