

**Social Issues in Egyptian Literature**  
**An Analytic Study through Selected Novels of**  
**Abdul Halim Abdullah**

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**Abstract**

*This paper sheds light upon the social role of novelist to highlight the social issues of his society through his literature. The study analyses the social issues in Egyptian Literature through selected novels of Abdul Halim Abdullah. The important social issues raised by Abdul Halim Abdullah in the selected novels are: social classifications, late marriages in older age, raising children, doubt and lack of trust in spouse, cheating and unfaithfulness, love, and poverty.*

**Keywords:** *Abdul Halim Abdullah, Social issues, Social role, Egyptian Literature.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Literature is a key to the horizons of different societies along with their social issues, ease and difficulties. And that's how it allows the reader to feel and live it through the pages, the way author reflects his society and foresees the brighter hopes in it. And this is what a real writer or a real artist is supposed to do.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, a writer generally highlights a negative image of his society in his literature, but on back stage he has a dire need to reform the society with fresh change, and not the bad intentions for his society. A real author is the one who feels the pain of his society; he is keen about it as his keen-ness for himself.<sup>1</sup>

It is said that the writer is a consultant guide to the society<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, while depicting real social issues in narrative discourse, a

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<sup>1</sup>الاتجاه الاجتماعي في روايات كاتبة سحر خليفة

(Social Aspect in Sahar Khalifa's Novels), KarimahZaki Ahmed Nasr. M.A Thesis, University of Al Azhar, Ghizza. 2015.pg: 13.

**Social Issues in Egyptian Literature an Analytic Study through Selected Novels of Abdul Halim** vigilant writer through his critical approach, not only describes the issue but he also proposes alternative solutions for those issues.

Abdul Halim Abdullah is one of those novelists who put great attention toward social issues and suffering of people in their hard times. A previous study by Karimah Zaki Ahmed Nasr about social issues in the novels of Sahar Khalifa (2015)<sup>2</sup> also pointed out number of social issues prevailed in Palestenian society. This paper aims to elaborate and analyze the social hardships and issues mentioned by Abdul Halim Abdullah in his three novels: *Al-laqitah* (foundling), *Shajaratul lablab* (the ivy tree) and *GhusnuzZaitun* (the olive's branch), as following: social classifications; late marriages in older age; Raising children with extremes; doubt and lack of trust in spouse; cheating and unfaithfulness; love; and poverty.

### **1. SOCIAL CLASSIFICATION**

The phenomenon of social differences and discrimination between people exists since the existence of human history. The excessive wealth causes arrogance in people with low moral values, so they degrade the people with fewer resources. Abdul Halim Abdullah portrays this issue in novel *Al-laqitah* (foundling) through Dr. Jamal's aristocratic arrogant family. They don't accept anyone new amongst them except for elite, with strong social and financial background. Jamal's father advises his son for not choosing Laila as his spouse for the same social reasons, he said: "my son, don't forget your social status and your family's reputation. So don't follow your heart blindly because these emotions won't last, then sooner you will regret for it but you won't be able to introduce her in your peers. One day your children will ask you about their maternal grandparents and uncles but you won't get any answer for them."<sup>3</sup>

That's how the family not only opposes his choice but also rejects Laila as Jamal's wife for her social status being foundling, taking her as a social epidemic for the family, while they totally ignore her elegance, well-mannered personality, professional excellence and other good characteristics, which made her extra ordinary in her time.

Father of this aristocratic family is against Laila at highest with his status consciousness. Then comes the mother, she also wants a rich girl with same social class for her son; While Dr. Jamal has uncertain feeling between his love and family traditions. And this is how Abdul Halim

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<sup>2</sup>See Endnote no. 1.

Abdullah depicts the issue in Egyptian society through three generations.

## 2. UNMACHED OLD-AGE MARRIAGES

Abdul Halim Abdullah also elaborates a critical social issue, old-age marriage to a very young spouse; as a first marriage or second marriage. It carried a lot of risks as we see in the novel "Shajaratul lablab" (Ivy tree) where Husni's father attempts for a second marriage with a very young girl after death of Husni's mother.

The young mother has no experience of motherhood and has no compassion for the child (Husni). She doesn't care for his needs, on other hand she slanders about him to his father and create hatred between father and son. Due to a large age gap between the spouses which is almost the gap between two generations, old man cannot meet other's emotional expectations except on the cost of Husni.

Husni says about this miserable situation as a result of unmatched old-age marriage:

"I am not sure that he was intended to marry a young woman, but this is how it ended up. Then he felt the burden of huge responsibility on tired fifty-years-old shoulders against the age of twenty. To keep him up to the mark, he risked his life. The compensation of his time to time failures was for sure on the expense of his finances. In other words, it was against the expense of my sister's and my needs."<sup>4</sup>

Few years later, Husni noticed a drastic change that his proud and strong father had become a defeated man. He felt on his thin wrinkled face his complaint for her negligence towards him. He may have realized her cheating on him too, but he wasn't able to do anything, except for lying on his bed waiting for death. Husni said about him: "He became remaining of a human on the bed. It seemed to me that the fortress is near to fall, even if it didn't defend for me. I imagined that the spark of fate mixes up with a flash of doubt, grief and sorrowing his eyes, while he said to his son: Husni, You will forget all that has passed, my son! I will meet the one who was most loyal to me."<sup>5</sup>

In the light of his father's life experience with a wife who is half of his age, Husni turns out to be advising his friend named Fu'aad who wanted to marry in his late age- not to marry younger woman with a huge age difference. As marrying a younger woman at later age causes worries, anxiety and troubles in life, more than happiness and peace. He said to him: "There is nothing wrong to marry a woman who eventually guarantees comfort for you, and she is aware of different kinds of personalities, she would be none other than a widow or a pretty

**Social Issues in Egyptian Literature an Analytic Study through Selected Novels of Abdul Halim** unmarried but older woman."<sup>6</sup>When Husni saw his friend not taking his words seriously and insists to marry a young lady, he said: "You will fall into a well the way my father did."<sup>7</sup>

The novelist suggests the solution through Husni's above mentioned saying to solve the problem from its root. So the second marriage is not the real issue because it may be a real need, but the real problem is the variation in age. If Husni's father would have married to a lady who is more or less of his age, perhaps all the miseries would not had happened to Husni.

### **3. RAISING CHILDREN WITH TWO EXTREMES OF STRICTNESS AND SPOILATION**

Raising children is one of the main social issues highlighted by Abdul Halim Abdullah in his novels. In the novel "Shajaratul lablab" (Ivy tree) he focuses on the childhood of Husni, who was deprived of his mother's love and compassion after her death. After a while Husni also lost his father who married a young woman and gave birth to his son. In Islam children's rights has a great value, it's their right to choose a righteous spouse. And this is the criterion for choosing a step mother for children who need mother's attention.

In the presence of Rabi', he started neglecting his elder son Husni. He maintained a distance between him and Husni without any compassion and love. Moreover, he was blinded with the beauty of his wife; he did not see anything except through her eyes. Husni became abandoned in his own home. So no one cared about his health and meals, or his out-door activities. While his younger step brother took his place at every inch.

At that point, he felt lost of his mother the most, and saw the cruelty of his father. He did not pay attention to Husni at all. He did not care about his presence or his absence. All his attention, care and compassion were focused on his son from the second wife. Husni wonders with bitter grief: "would he take the same stand with me and my mother?! If yes, I wish I could not grow up, and I wish my mother to be alive."<sup>8</sup>

His step-mother intentionally creates a war zone between her and Husni. Regardless of a real reason she used to make up a story on her own to curse him, for example she used to threaten him saying: "Did you return from school? I seek refuge in Allah from the demons of your filthy shoes. Take off your shoes right now and head straight to the washroom. Take breath in fresh air." If he stays behind her orders for a second, she scolds him, saying: I believe you are saying that I bother

you. If your mother was alive, she too would not bear your burden. Why do you look at me like this as if you want to abuse me? Just wait until your father comes back from work!"<sup>9</sup>

After such unhealthy behavior from his father and Umm Rabi' (step-mother), he started disguising family-time with them and began to wander around the streets and fields; wandering around his relatives and maternal uncles killing his time on his own, as he says: "My father's house was not close to my heart because it was not a place of good memories anymore, the place where my soul used to be connected to.

It is said that the home is the best school and the father is the best teacher. But in this case, Husni only had received hatred from his father. So he does not want to return to him when he is in dire need of him. And if his mother had not left him a handsome money with which he graduated in Cairo and became an engineer, he would have become prey to bad peers and social criminals.

On other hand, his younger step-brother, Rabi', he was strayed by his own mother. She pampered him and put her every strength to make him a stereotypical only spoiled son. For that she cleared her home from Husni in a manner that no one felt it but Husni. So the house become free for his son Rabi' with all its surroundings and no one can share it with him. Eventually, Rabi' ended up with a rude careless and irresponsible personality by the abundance of poisoned unnecessary love and tenderness.

The two brothers grew up, but with huge difference between Rabi' and his elder brother Husni. The younger one stayed in the house for a long time without bearing any social responsibility. As an obvious result, he didn't come up with a responsible attitude toward life and finance. For that he looked upon his elder brother who did not degrade him or his mother in revenge for the past, instead he showed good moral values and become their helping hand for financial needs.

#### **4. DOUBTS AND LACK OF TRUST IN SPOUSE**

Excess of illusionary doubts and lack of trust is one of the most dominant social issues that have been described with great attention in two novels: "The Ivy Tree" (Shajaratul lablab) and "The Olive's Branch" (GhusnuzZaitun) as following:

In the novel The Ivy Tree, young Husni once found his father's wife cheating on him. This accident planted a doubt about the woman in young innocent heart, and by the time it became a walking nightmare with him when he saw such cases in his uncle's house once again<sup>10</sup>. He

**Social Issues in Egyptian Literature an Analytic Study through Selected Novels of Abdul Halim** entered the age of maturity as more or less sociopath because of his doubts about sincerity of woman to a man.

That's why he doubted Zainab all the time even though he didn't feel anything wrong which he has illusion about women for a long time. She loved him from the core of her heart, and she cared about him solely. Instead of loving her back, he made her in a test for a long time; she couldn't bear for that long and committed suicide.

In the novel 'The Olive's Branch' (GhusnuzZaitun), sir "Abdu" fall in love of his student "Atiyyat" in the female section of high school. He kept track on her activities at school and off the school until he married her, regardless she loved another teacher named 'Jamal'. It wasn't a hidden fact despite that, he married her and was always suspicious of her loyalty to him. He started her interrogation about her past, which was not hidden to anyone. He used to observe her blank expressions for him and a spark on her face for Jamal.

These doubts started haunting him in nightmares, he says: "I saw a disgusting dream, as if a man was lying in my bed alone. I did not recognize him until I turned him to his face as he was lying upside down. I screamed for twice; because he was Jamal and he was wearing one of my robes."<sup>11</sup>

He moved with his family to another city 'Fayoum' to start a content and peaceful life away from sir Jamal, "but sir Jamal was right there in my subconscious and hers too."<sup>12</sup> These hallucinations made him think about her doubted every single day and night. Until she began to defend herself in everyday interrogations ending up by divorce.

So Abdul Halim Abdullah has shown a drastic social issue which not only affects the unit of society comprising of husband and wife, but also influence generations badly. A content and healthy thinking about the spouse results in good relationship, which is missing in the above mentioned social samples in the novels. On the other hand, a sick and trustless beginning ends up tragically in Abdul Halim's literature.

## **5. CHEATING AND UNFAITHFULNESS**

Sincerity and faithfulness is a key ingredient to happy, healthy and strong family relations. On the other hand, Unfaithfulness in any relationship has no other result except for fall. This is how; Abdul Halim Abdullah has focused on the root cause of a doubtful sick mindset which leads to a hellish life as have seen in the novels: 'The Olive's Branch' (GhusnuzZaitun) and 'The Ivy Tree' (Shajaratul lablab) as following:

In the novel GhusnuzZaitun, as mentioned before 'Atiyyat' had feelings for Jamal but agrees to marry Abdu; after Jamal was appointed

as a teacher in Alexandria while she was in Cairo. It was all going nicely until Abdu knew that Jamal is back in town. He paid a visit to her house for some reason; he also met her father and her brother. That's how; his comfort zone fills up with anxiety and depression. He used to look into Atiyyat's expressions and gestures during any discussion about Jamal. He was jealous of Jamal because she missed him without showing that.

Abdu thought that Jamal was in Alexandria so he left his wife in Cairo at her father's house while he was in Fayoum for his job. Once, he met one of his friends who told him that Jamal was here in Cairo and he got married. He assumed it by the fact he saw him walking with a beautiful woman, so Abdu asked him, if Jamal himself told him that the woman next to him was his wife? But the answer was 'no'. At that point, Abdu was sure that the man was talking about his wife cheating on him.

On this basis, Sir Abdu was suspicious of the lineage of his daughter, who was born to Atiyyat after three years of their marriage. He could not love her and wished her to die when she fell ill. When he spent time with his wife, he always had a strange feeling that she was not with him. Despite her presence she was far away from him, as she never had the same passion that he carried for her.

She had feelings for another man other than her husband. Abdu was not sure that she really cheated on him, but he was barely surviving this torture of doubts and uncertainty of faithfulness, until he divorced her.

In the novel 'The Ivy Tree' (Shajaratul lablab), Abdul Halim portrayed another example of cheating and dishonesty in the sick character-wife of Husni's father. She was into her cousin Mahfuz, while Abu Husni was surprisingly unaware of this. Even Husni used to wonder how his father could not guess what is happening right under his nose. Husni used to ask himself: how would a husband stay unaware of being deceived? How couldn't he feel the cheating even for a moment? Didn't he suspect it at least for once!?"<sup>13</sup> One day when Husni came back from Cairo he finds that his father has realized the matter, but it was too late.

In this case the novelist has pin-pointed the core reason behind this issue which is unmatched weddings. As Husni said in the novel "the Ivy Tree"(Shajaratul lablab): "I am not sure that he was intended to marry a young woman, but this is how it ended up." While referring to his old age he says: "Then he felt the burden of huge responsibility on tired fifty-years-old shoulders against the age of twenty".<sup>14</sup>

## 6. LOVE

Abdul Halim Abdullah mentioned this phenomenon in the novel "The Olive's Branch" with its two dimensions:

### *Positive love:*

It is known from the characteristics of Egyptian society that workmates spent their spare time with gossips, which fill their life with fun, joy and laughter, so the love is also one of their gossip crunch, as narrator said: 'We used to have conversations about love a lot more times.'<sup>15</sup>

The teachers at Al Nasr schools were the best example of this kind of gatherings, where they used to talk a lot about love. What motivated them to that the most, was their young age. It is said about this age that these are the years: "in which a person dominantly feel the presence of the heart, in a way that feeling of hunger would barely compete it."<sup>16</sup>

The notable point here is the beginning of this novel, where Abdul Halim described a good version of love, the way human instinct admires the beauty; and dislikes the ugliness. Although the novel emphasizes on the evil characteristics of society like: betrayal, insincerity, and lack of trust. This hateful love destroys the beauty of hearts, and by the time the beauty totally fades away from the lives. At last, life itself collapses entirely.

Except that he introduced this novel with an admirable picture of love and affection, by which he raised his optimistic approach toward an ideal society with every color in it.

The other novel 'Laqitah' (the foundling) contains a beautiful manifestation of love at an orphanage where Zainab fosters Laila with great care and affection like a mother. She served her day and night; she sacrificed her ease for Laila's health and well-being, therefore, people used to say that she might adopt her.<sup>17</sup>This priceless love is no doubt at its highest beauty. Because Zainab was not Laila's real mother but she loved her and served her as if she were her mother.

### *Negative love*

This is the second dimension of the social phenomenon which has been mentioned in the novel the Olive's Branch as a primary issue, which is the root cause of other problems such as suspicion, doubtedness, anxiety and jealousy and so on.

While highlighting this issue Abdul Halim aims to purify society from it and to reveal its poisons to the reader. The novelist diversifies in the picture of his real society, to show both sides of the coin; beautiful and ugly because no whole good or whole bad exist in society. Abdul



Hamid Jaudah Assahhar says: "human personality is a combination of good and evil. There is no such example exists in society which is whole good or a whole evil. And if an author depicts such society in his fiction, it would be far away from realism and fictional truthfulness."<sup>18</sup>

The character of Sir Jamal in the novel "GhusnuzZaitun" depicts the evil love. He has charming personality which may appeal teenager girls in high school. He used to attract young girls and had a bad reputation for dating and affairs with a large number of girls from all around the city, which ended up on his transfer to Alexandria.

One of those girls was Atiyyat who had a short-term relation with Jamal which affected her entire life and ruined her healthy relationship with her husband Abdu as mention before who never succeeded in trusting her due to her previous history. Ending up on their divorce, and after no long time she found dead stabbed with knife at some other guy's place.<sup>19</sup>

On other side of story, Jamal's implanted seed of evil also ruined Abdu's life to the extent that he wished the death of her own daughter; divorced his wife and lost his trust in women's sincerity forever. So at first place if Jamal focused only on his job with devotion and established a family other than involving in multiple evil affairs without any purpose of life, the story of Atiyyat and Abdu and many others would not end up tragically.

Therefore, the author evidently fulfilled his view to bring a serious social issue manifested in evil love with real life lessons, starting from deceiving the girls at first place, and defaming them through their past, that lately affects her marital life and she lost her husband's trust, ending with a broken family and evil death.

## **7. POVERTY**

One of the important social issues in Abdul Halim's fiction is poverty. The reader finds this phenomenon in each novel in different ways. In the novel the Olive's Branch, Abdu reflects the financial status of his family in the village in the following statement: 'I saw my mother and my sister both in a status which never changes; both behold the monthly living pension that my father left for them; they plant some grains with the help of some relatives; buy saturated fats, and raise birds.'<sup>20</sup>

Here the word pension refers to the poverty, so is the word grains which reflects the small crop. The sentence 'they buy saturated fats' symbolizes to unavailability of an animal, unlike the traditions of

**Social Issues in Egyptian Literature an Analytic Study through Selected Novels of Abdul Halim** peasants in remote areas. All of these statements suggest that their financial and social living was at the least level of poverty.

After he had been married to Atiyyat for more than a year, he paid a visit to his village. His mother curiously and constantly asked him if his wife was pregnant. After his denial, she encouraged him to be concerned about it. She wished to see her grand-children before her death. She insisted in her own way until he replied furiously: I do not want children, I am a poor man!<sup>21</sup>

Here, the writer highlights this issue with verses from the Holy Quran in his mind that in the life of a Muslim there is no room for such thoughts. Allah SubhanahuWaTaala says:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الرَّزَّاقُ ذُو الْقُوَّةِ الْمَتِينُ<sup>22</sup>

'Verily, Allah is the All-Provider, Owner of Power, the Strongest.' and:

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ مِنْ إِمْلَاقٍ نَحْنُ نَرْزُقُكُمْ وَإِيَّاهُمْ<sup>23</sup>

'And kill not your children for fear of poverty. We shall provide for them as well as for you.'

On other hand, once he was one of the guests at his father-in-law's house, while his mother-in-law helped someone at the delivery of a baby-girl. Abdu heard his father-in-law say: 'He is waiting for her provision by Allah who created her, will provide her food'.<sup>24</sup> That's how Abdu, who didn't want children due to his poverty, came across these ideas through his father-in-law.

The same picture of poverty has been drawn in the novel (The Ivy Tree) which was in fact enforced on young children by step-mother. Husni wanted to eat some mat, but couldn't resist his desire, eventually so he did not find it except at his aunt's house, which was far away. He used to reach there after half an hour walk with severe hunger, he said: 'she used to serve me the food with meat; I used to say I'm full, but my eyes deny my words. So she feed me what was enough for me.'<sup>25</sup>

The novel 'the foundling' shows the miserable life of the foundling Laila surrounded by poverty, whether she was in the orphanage or in Dr. K's hospital until she was sent to Alexandria in order to earn a hard living.

## CONCLUSION

These are the prominent social issues analyzed in this paper, including: social classifications, late marriages in older age, raising children, doubt and lack of trust in spouse, cheating and unfaithfulness, love, and poverty, which emerged in Egyptian society through the selected novels. Furthermore, it shows that Abdul Halim Abdullah was

not an isolated artist from his society, but he brings the issues from the core of society and elaborates it for the people, then he provides homework for those reformers who want to bring the solutions to these social issues.

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- <sup>5</sup> Ibid. pg: 172.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. pg: 182.
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- <sup>8</sup> Ibid. pg: 25.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid. pg: 36- 37.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. pg: 65.
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- <sup>13</sup> Shajaratul lablab. pg: 45.
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