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 English Composition II: An Intro. to Literature

**Victimized Against Her Will in
 Naguib Mahfouz's "The Answer is No"**
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Naguib Mahfouz's "The Answer is No", plots around a beautiful and rich young Egyptian teacher who was raped at a young age of fourteen by Badrani Badawi, a man she had respected as her second father. To this day she suffers the repercussions of the tragic event, partly because the moral standards in the Egyptian culture dictate that a woman be pure to be given into marriage. An article in The International Herald Tribune reported that "In Egypt, and across the Arab world, respectable sex requires marriage, particularly for a woman and especially for the first time" (MacFarquhar). Naguib's unnamed protagonist is raped, victimized, against her will and not a virgin any more; therefore a social misfit. She has been pushed against a wall into the corner of loneliness and solitude, "day by day she becomes older. She avoids love, fears it" (Mahfouz 635). Ultimately her position as a woman is compromised by the nature of her culture and she is "struggling helplessly in a well sprung trap" (Mahfouz 635). According to the grapevine, "Rape is a crime of sexual violence that causes long term emotional devastation to its victims" (Repp 16). Nevertheless, she is a strong and independent woman who will not lie down in self-pity; she will not reminisce about her misfortune, but rather walk elegantly and stand by her principles.

This woman's options are minimized and her choices are limited because of the effect of rape. The act of rape is a strategic weapon of psycho-social-spiritual destruction designed to undermine the well-being of a woman. Theoretically, "Young women suffer a great long time distress after an act of rape and experience the symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder, fear, excessive vigilance, shame and often encounter difficulties with intimate relationships" (Burby 96). Society gives her another option however, to marry Badrani the man she now hates and disrespects for the reason that he abused her against her will. Therefore she says to him, "For me any outcome is preferable to being married to you" (Mahfouz 635).

As a teacher, she has the opportunity to teach young women of Abbasiyya knowledge of their rights and to empower themselves with education as a weapon toward their liberation and emancipation. Manifestly, her culture has ignored, and failed to address such catastrophes that befall the every day woman. Apparently, "Like other women in African societies, Egyptian women have made great strides in gaining their legal rights but they remain well behind men in both socioeconomic and cultural rights" (Asante 101).

Meanwhile, this woman is an educated, "rich, beautiful girl, a by word in Abbasiyya for her nobility of character" (Mahfouz 635); a role model therefore –

future change will begin with women like her - because to save a woman, is to save her children and her children's children. In his forward-thinking work, Egyptian writer and pre-revolution civil rights activist Qasim Amin saw the importance of education for women as the key to the success of any political and cultural freedom. Amin argues; "How could we advance the move toward independence and representation without taking the women along. The liberation of women was a prerequisite for the liberation of the society. Since women are the nucleus of the family, and the family is the basic unit of society, then to liberate women was to liberate society" (Asante 100). Naguib's protagonist here clearly comes from the same school of thought.

Perhaps many women in the culture are similarly frustrated, but some like her mother, are forward thinkers. They refuse to be subject to, and be enslaved by the culture that is apparently inattentive to their concerns. Both mother and daughter may not have the freedom of choice, or the freedom to vote - but they sure have their freedom of thought. Her mother had said to her, "I know your attachment to your independence so I leave the decision to you" (Mahfouz 635). She has now decided not to marry and "never has she regretted her firm decision" (Mahfouz 636).

It is important to note however, that the continuing urban drift and a steady rise in tourism means that modern economic values and western cultural ideas filter back even into all of Egypt, and it cannot be long before they are affected by the change sweeping the north African region. Suffice-to-say that almost all customs in Egypt are related to the Islamic religion or its influence; on the contrary to these popular beliefs about Egypt, numerous African intellectuals and writers have continued to come out as defenders and advocates of women's rights since Qasim Amin. It is also noted that "Naguib Mahfouz's keen awareness of social injustices, and his realistic account of Egypt's social and political history have earned him both international acclaim and condemnation, as have his more experimental and fantastic works" ([Contemporary Authors Online](#)).

Naguib Mahfouz does not reveal his protagonist's identity, partly because she represents every woman in every society, every day. Published in 1991, the story could have been told a decade before, but it speaks of, and to our generation today. Badrani Badawi could have gotten away with rape then, but currently in Egypt, rape is, technically speaking, punishable by life imprisonment. Egyptian president; Hosni Mubarak issued a decree, six years ago nullifying a law that allowed rapists who marry their victims to walk free. Amnesty International and International Human Rights Organizations are in support of the new law which denies rapists any legal liabilities. This is a clear road to women's emancipation despite the countless rape cases that go unreported. Evidently, "The Answer is No" is not confined to conflict rape in Rwanda, Sudan nor Bosnia; this story is about culture, worldwide that allows violence against women to operate with impunity.

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