Introduction
The prostitute is a recurrent and diversified figure in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz. There are top-notch prostitutes, such as the celebrated singers Madame Zubayda and Jalila in *Palace Walk*. There are the more modest semi-professionals, such as Tahiya, whose seamy career as an actress in *Wedding Song* cannot totally exclude an element of procuring. Again, there are the retired matrons – Mariana in *Miramer*, who runs a small but lucrative pension house; and the aforementioned Jalila, who re-surfaces in *Sugar Street* as the elderly proprietress of a brothel. At the other extreme are the young girls, the newly-initiated bent on making a fortune out of the trade, examples being the lute-player Zanuba in *Palace Walk*, and Hamida in *Midaq Alley*. And then, again, there is Nur, the jaded, warm-hearted, and endearing heroine of *The Thief and the Dogs*.

Nur is a particularly engaging character because her unfortunate circumstances have not diminished her compassion. Her achievement in this respect is underscored by the fact that she is constantly placed side by side with another socially-challenged individual, Said, who allows his circumstances to brutalise him. Said is a thief, and a murderer. Both himself and Nur see the worst that their fellow citizens have to offer, but while his moral fibre warps significantly in the process, hers remains comparatively even. The narrative traces a fascinating parallel between the two outlaws and their response to exploitation, but ultimately it is Nur, the minor character, that seems to make the major impact. *The Thief and the Dogs* is what its title implies – the story of a thief and treachery (symbolised by the dogs), but on a deeper note it is a story of a prostitute and benevolence, an account of an unforgettable woman who somehow manages to retain her ‘personhood’.

Personhood can perhaps be most easily defined as the sense of individuality, or ‘self’. The concept of personhood to be utilised in the forthcoming discussion is borrowed from the feminist lawyer, Margaret Jane Radin.\(^1\) Radin points out that the original concept has undergone modification over the years. As first advanced by the philosopher, Immanuel Kant, it involves a clear distinction between the things internal to a person (constituting the ‘self’, or the subject), and the things external to a person (constituting the ‘other’, or the object).\(^2\) The Kantian ‘I’ is a single consciousness comprising two faculties of cognition: ‘the outer sense of the five bodily [senses] [and]… the inner sense, which is the soul.’\(^3\) The outer sense and the inner sense together respond to independent entities of nature or morality governed by ‘rules and laws’.\(^3\) The independent rule-governed entity is the object, or the ‘thing-in-itself’.

\(^2\) Quoted in Radin 403.
\(^4\) Kant 29:753, 117.

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*Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.
Radin observes that contemporary philosophers no longer take the subject/object dichotomy to be as clear-cut as Kant posited, but his theory still provides the foundation for valid discourse on the things that make up the ‘essential’ person, in the sense of the substantive and inalienable attributes of the person, and following from that, the things that either promote or destroy a positive sense of self. She focuses on three overlapping aspects of personhood which she delineates ‘freedom,’ ‘identity,’ and ‘contextuality’:

The freedom aspect of personhood focuses on will, or the power to choose for oneself. In order to be autonomous individuals, we must at least be able to act for ourselves through free will in relation to the environment of things and other people. The identity aspect of personhood focuses on the integrity and continuity of the self required for individuation. In order to have a unique individual identity, we must have selves that are integrated and continuous over time. The contextuality aspect of personhood focuses on the necessity of self-constitution in relation to the environment of things and other people. In order to be differentiated human persons, unique individuals, we must have relationships with the social and natural world.

In summary, personhood embraces a freedom to choose for oneself, a sense of continuity and integration, and relationships with the external world. Radin maintains that where these three aspects are nurtured, personhood can flourish despite seemingly debilitating odds. Further, based on her notion of personhood as exceeding sheer subjectivity, she ranks prostitution as one of the odds in which ‘self’ may not necessarily be harmed. Radin’s thesis is complex and geared towards an analysis of commodification, but it can readily be adapted to a reading of Nur in The Thief and the Dogs. Mahfouz purposely calls her ‘Nur’, meaning ‘light’ in Egyptian, a name calculated to convey his appreciation of her inherent worth as well as compare her favourably with the bulk of Egypt’s presumably respectable inhabitants. In respectable circles Nur is considered smutty, a proverbial ‘soiled dove’. Further, in the world of wantons she is not on a level with refined playgirls like Firdaus, who we will examine later. Nevertheless, Mahfouz creates Nur through images of light: as a match flickering along a dark hallway; a beam shining in under a closed door (96); a brightly illuminated apartment window overlooking a graveyard (107); fluorescence ‘filling the room’ (134). Her person makes a difference. Indeed, Mahfouz’s grasp of personhood is a key to understanding his liberal position in one of the most heated debates in contemporary scholarly circles; viz, the extent to which selling sexual services is or is not destructive of a woman’s probity.

The literary critic, Raymond Stock, notes that Mahfouz’s topic ‘has always been mankind’s fate, depicted (with rare exceptions), in scenes from his native Egypt.’ In the sixty or so books Mahfouz has written, mankind’s fate is a regular preoccupation, regardless of whether he is writing in the realistic mode, as evidenced in The Cairo Trilogies, or in the symbolic mode, as in The Thief and the Dogs. Farida Abu Haidar concurs with Stock but narrows down Mahfouz’s preoccupation from mankind

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5 Radin 408, emphasis added.
6 Naguib Mahfouz, The Thief and the Dogs, trans. Trevor le Gassick, and M.M. Badawi (Anchor, 1984) 84. Further references to this book will be included in parentheses in the text.
comprehensively to women specifically. Abu Haidar is struck by Mahfouz’s sensitivity when handling female characters, in particular those who have fallen below society’s expectations. His approach to prostitution, for instance, is unusually dispassionate for an Egyptian writer of his era in that he admits that women alone are not the offenders: ‘As far as [Mahfouz] is concerned, prostitution is a broad term which can also apply to men demeaning themselves to those wielding power over them.’ Mahfouz realises that (traditional) prostitution may be no more harmful to personal integrity than other forms of compromise.

Abu Haidar alludes to the ‘malaise’ affecting Mahfouz’s prostitute-ridden cosmos. Both comments highlight the social dolour the author tirelessly attacks. Said continues: ‘Just as [Mahfouz’s] realistic novels were an indictment of the social conditions prevailing in Egypt before 1952, the novels of the sixties contained much that was overtly critical of that period.’ The novels of the 1960s in fact begin with The Thief and the Dogs (published in 1961), which is unwavering in its theme of social indictment but marks a change so radical in the author’s style that Said avers it is ‘in a way like switching from a Dickens or a Balzac to a Graham Greene or a William Golding.’ The new spotlight is on ‘the inner working of the individual’s mind,’ ‘evocative vocabulary and imagery,’ and ‘free indirect speech’; features which add psychological symbolism to the conventional social exposé. Although Mahfouz is nowhere explicit, he plainly has firm opinions on what it means for an individual to be socially and psychologically healthy, and health is not dependent upon deference to sexual taboos:

according to Mahfouz’s moral code, those who only seek their own individual salvation are damned. … Characters who are saved in Mahfouz’s work are only those with altruistic motives, those who show concern for others and demonstrate a kind of awareness of their particular predicament being part of a more general one.

In our estimation, Nur is such a character. We count her among the few with altruistic motives and an awareness of the general nature of her peculiar sad predicament. In addition, she is the sole character that sustains these qualities in the teeth of prolonged abuse. This does not imply that we deem her a model citizen, or that Mahfouz deems her to be such, but simply that both the critics and the author concede that her profession does not negate the reality of her moral stamina. The narrator says her devotion to Said is ‘like a nightingale singing to a rock’ (60). The simile is a reminder that resilience and beauty can indwell the frailest of beings. Undoubtedly, something holds together in the frail Nur that snaps in her rock-hard partner, Said. By examining the former in terms of Radin’s theory of identity and contextuality, and drawing comparisons with Said

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9 Abu Haidar 232.
11 Said 8.
12 Said 7.
13 Said 8.
14 Said 8.

intermittently, we have located the inner resources of this singular prostitute and find that Mahfouz persistently affirms her personhood.

Identity

The identity aspect of personhood focuses on the integrity and continuity of the self required for individuation. In order to have a unique, individual identity, we must have selves that are integrated and continuous over time.\(^\text{15}\)

The argument may be simplified thus. Identity rests largely on an integrated and continuous consciousness. Where integration and continuity are cultivated, the self is more likely to have a correct perception of its own uniqueness, and, conversely, where they are lacking the perception of the self will suffer. In effect, identity is pre-eminently a matter of mental cohesion. It is the attribute of a mind that correctly appraises and accepts what it is, and knows where it is coming from. This is an important argument in assessing Nur and ladies in her camp. It indicates that the activities of the physical body may affect identity, but they cannot unilaterally dictate it. It is systems of mental activity that more accurately determine personhood. This line of thought informs Mahfouz’s presentation of Nur. She has both mental continuity and mental integration, and they enable her to regard herself in fairly positive terms, despite her infraction of social norms.

Prostitution is not a profession that readily encourages a positive identity. In fiction as well as in reality, it is frequently physically and mentally degrading; more so in a third world context. Mahfouz does not attempt to glamorise the vocation. He introduces Nur to the reader through the eyes of Said, a protagonist with typically male prejudices, who registers with scarcely concealed contempt her emaciated frame, her extravagant make-up, and her skimpy skin-tight clothing. She is thirty years old, the same age as Said, incidentally, but in far worse physical condition. While he is described as being slim and strong and simmering with excess energy, she is described in language designed to stress a premature decline – she is ‘tired’ (85), ‘hovering on the brink’ (87), ‘ageing’ (95), ‘worn out’ (126). Mahfouz spares his reader the superfluous details as to how she arrived at this state of atrophy. We see her as her flat-mate, Said, sees her, and that is strictly after working hours. The routine is that she goes out at dusk and returns in the small hours of the morning, smelling of wine and the combined sweat of herself and her customers. She then showers, eats, and collapses into a dead sleep which does little to improve her physical state since she wakes up with ‘her hair disheveled, looking unrested and run down’ (89). The monotony is broken on a certain evening when she comes home and vomits until she is drained, having been beaten by some young boys who refused to pay for her services. Without any form of civil redress, she stretches out helplessly on the sofa, sick, weeping, and overwhelmed by pain and despair.

Nur is not an abnormality. Mahfouz’s prostitutes are, without exception, subject to decay and injury. The example that comes closest to Nur in the area of utter wretchedness is Atiya in Sugar Street. For Atiya, a divorcee with two children to support, vomiting is a regular feature on the timetable. In her own case it is provoked by the

\(^{15}\) Radin 408.

copious amounts of alcohol required to get her through a heavy night’s work. When saturated, she is apt to ‘become rowdy, twitch, weep, and throw up.’

In some ways, the above are stereotypes of weary streetwalkers, which makes every sign of a positive identity the more arresting. Atiya, for example, considers Kamal, the protagonist of Sugar Street, her favourite customer, and prides herself on providing him with snacks at her own expense, which they share together in a cordial manner before lovemaking. Nur is a more illuminating case study because the narrative permits the reader a glimpse into her childhood, and thereafter establishes the links between childhood and adulthood that prove to be so crucial in the chain of a balanced human identity. The glimpse discloses her skill in incorporating the values of a sheltered rural past into the humiliating realities of the present. The inner Nur is conspicuously love, faith, and laughter; items of her childhood person that she has carried over into maturity and adjusted to her city circumstances and her new city ‘self’. The following scene is among the most penetrating with respect to identity:

Nur drank until she could hardly sit up. Her real name was Shalabiyya, she confessed. Then she told him tales of the old days in Balayana, of her childhood amid the quiet waters, of her youth and how she’d run away. ‘And my father was the umda,’ she said proudly, ‘the village headman.’ ‘You mean the umda’s servant!’ [Said said.] She frowned, but he went on: ‘Well, that’s what you told me first.’ Nur laughed so heartily that Said could see bits of parsley caught in her teeth. ‘Did I really say that?’ she asked. (115-16)

Her exaggeration notwithstanding, it is evident that her memories are coordinated and benign. She was not born on the streets but within the reputable structure of the family and the community. A reader acquainted with the premium Mahfouz places on a home background will know that this is devised as a major advantage for any of his characters, and for Nur the home is the plausible realm for the cultivation of the values that are continued and integrated into her full personhood. The dominant value, perhaps unimaginatively on the author’s side, is a largeness of heart which he usually reproduces as ‘love’. It becomes a defining trait of the adult Nur: ‘Is there anything more important than love?’ she queries Said (87-8). Nonetheless, in foregrounding love the author is not trite. He does not concentrate on the euphoric emotion of the soap opera but on Nur’s undaunted compassion and esteem for others, which is not too common in a scenario where extortion is the order of the day. At times Nur’s compassion is decidedly sentimental; her fondness for dogs, for instance. At times it is more exuberant – she loves life, both in the sense of reveling in it, and in the sense of revering its sanctity. The first time Said takes life she is distraught upon discovering it: ‘She broke down in front of him. “You’ve killed someone!” she said, letting out the words with a wail of despair. “How terrible! Didn’t I plead with you?”’ (110). The second time she is even more pathetic: ‘Her eyes were dead tired, her lower lip drooped and her shoulders slumped. [Said] knew in an instant what the trouble was; she’d heard about his latest exploit and it


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had shocked her deeply’ (134). The two illustrations above hint at the type of love that distinguishes Nur most often. It is just sacrifice, an offering of herself and her resources unreservedly to the destitute thankless Said.

Another element of Nur’s continuous and integrated self is optimism. Assuming the inner Nur is a ‘natural self’, i.e. that which contains intuitive traits of personality, then her confidence in a better future, a good God, and even the promises of fortune tellers, is natural. The optimism in Nur emerges as constant laughter. It is to her credit that, although there are episodes in which she exhibits melancholy or lawlessness, she is never permanently embittered. On the contrary, she is as much associated with merriment as she is with tears, and in fact makes her debut by means of the sound of laughter carried across an evening breeze: ‘As [Tarzan and Said] passed the open doorway, they heard a woman’s laughter ringing outside. Tarzan chuckled. “It’s Nur, remember her?”’ (59-60). It is deliberate on Mahfouz’s part that before he allows his readers to view Nur’s worn-out body, and draw the relevant conclusions as to her business, he acquaints them with her buoyant spirit. It communicates the idea that she is first and foremost a woman of personality, and only after that a woman of the town.

In substance, as different as Nur’s childhood and adulthood turn out to be, she succeeds in uniting them. Love, faith, home, and family combine in a system of private principles she doggedly carries forward from the past to the present. In accordance, without bias to how she uses her body, her consciousness is sufficiently modulated to permit a legitimate identity. She has the potential to see herself as a unique individual, and she does so. She considers herself alone to be the calibre of woman suited to the tastes of a crime king.

Nur has identity, a mandatory ingredient for a positive sense of self. Her accomplishment can be better evaluated if the reader stops to ponder on Said. Like Nur, he has a family background, probably more solid than her own, but his consciousness is not integrated and a series of grave anomalies stem from this. The ugliest is a disturbing kind of split in his psyche. The split is not in the typical Jekyll and Hyde style, whereby the individual is two persons in one, but in an unnatural demarcation between Said the man (the ex-convict), and Said the boy. The advantage of a home background has been noted, but had a home background in isolation been the foothold of a stable identity then it would have saved Said the way it saves Nur. It does not, and this emphasises the import of continuity in personhood.

Said is raised by affectionate and pious parents whose solitary entertainment is attending prayer meetings. When they die, their adolescent son is thrown on a pitiless world, but neither the early death of his parents nor the callous world can be held liable for Said’s personality crisis. The problem is his broken identity. He betrays it himself when he admits his perverse belief that he is ‘compelled to forget everything good in life’ (94). ‘Everything good’ embraces ‘all the good feelings that ever were’ (95), which are predominantly his childhood and adolescent attachments. ‘Everything good’ equally has to do with the good things of life before his four-year jail sentence. The sentence yawns like a gulf between ‘then’ and ‘now’. ‘Then’, four years ago, he was the prosperous overseer of a crime network. Unluckily for him, he was sold out to the police by his wife and an underling in his syndicate called Ilish. They were having an affair behind his back and wanted to dispose of him. ‘Now’, four years later, he leaves jail with nothing but vengeance on his program. From the first step to the last, he tries to consolidate in his

mind what he was and what he has vindictively become, but the reality is that the pieces barely held together in the past and now they have become jagged beyond reconciliation. By no effort can he integrate the Said of yesteryears – an idealist with spiritual and revolutionary inclinations – into the present malignant design. Rather, he opts to live each day in blind and murderous confusion, with segments of his bygone experience – especially as they relate to his youth and boyhood – conveniently plucked out. In this imprudent manner he willfully dismembers his consciousness, which has already been cut precariously in two by his imprisonment. He selects only the hurtful portions of his awareness and, because he cannot integrate them, he clumsily runs them parallel in his mind to produce a distorted ‘Said’.

His experiment terminates when he is shot by police in a corner of a cemetery. Preceding this, he has killed two innocent people and lost Nur, and his ex-wife has taken their five-year-old daughter and fled. He dies without a regret for himself or anyone else, showing incontestably that he is not a candidate for an individual with a positive sense of self.

**Contextuality**

The contextuality aspect of personhood focuses on the necessity of self-constitution in relation to the environment of things and other people. In order to be differentiated human persons, unique individuals, we must have relationships with the social and natural world. Radin proceeds to list several particulars central to these relationships and therefore to the individual’s self-constitution, including the individual’s politics, religion, family, moral commitments, altruism, friendships, wisdom, and work. She clearly views self as encompassing more than the ‘subject’ aspect of Kant’s traditional subject/object divide. Subject, in fact, is affiliated to object in that the former is constituted in relation to the latter. However, this is not the most exciting prospect Radin’s theory holds for our study of Nur. Infinitely more exciting than the philosophising on subject and object is the elementary precept that work is but one of multiple factors that qualify an individual for uniqueness. It means that prostitutes are not automatically ruled out. Granted that the relationship between the prostitute and her work is the major factor that may be self-negating, and her other relationships affirm her probity and prestige, then her personhood will still be secure.

In the aspect of contextuality as well as in the aspect of identity, Mahfouz defends Nur’s personhood. A truth that arises from reading *The Thief and the Dogs* is that relationships centering on moral commitments, altruism, and friendship constitute vastly more of the innate Nur than her relationship to her work. Her work is her occupation; altruism and friendship lie at her soul. Bearing in mind her inglorious circumstances, she has surprising rapport with the social world. For example, at the beginning of the text she is conducting a flourishing relationship on moral commitments, altruism, and friendship constitute vastly more of the innate Nur than her relationship to her work. Her work is her occupation; altruism and friendship lie at her soul. Bearing in mind her inglorious circumstances, she has surprising rapport with the social world. For example, at the beginning of the text she is conducting a flourishing relationship with the heir of a wealthy industrialist. Later in the text, her laughter signals harmony between herself and her confederates in crime, and still later she proves adept at mixing with law-abiding citizens and ferreting out information to carry home to Said. A tiny but eloquent detail of her relations with society

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37 Radin 408

is that she pays her rent when it falls due. Indeed, the only relationship in which she consistently records defeat does not pertain to her work at all, but to Said. And because her relationship with him carries the utmost weight – Radin calls it a ‘primary relationship’ (412) – it follows that it is the definitive element as far as her personhood is concerned. Consequently, the distress created in her life by her work cannot match the distress created by Said’s behaviour, and the sense of failure emanating from being a harlot is not as acute as that emanating from his rebuffs. The narrative demonstrates repeatedly that he, and not her work, is the cardinal threat to her positive sense of self because her connection to him is paramount.

To evaluate Nur as a person purely on her occupation would be to assume that she is a prostitute, period. It would equally suggest that she could not function dutifully in a domestic set-up; a claim which Nur herself would vigorously refute. She sees no reason why husband and family cannot co-exist with marketing her favours, and despite the probable awkwardness of this arrangement the notion of contextuality accommodates it. Contextuality implies that the individual’s work is a fraction of her personhood, and prone to either amplification or relegation according to individual temperament. As Radin speculates: ‘to think … that the value of a person’s moral commitments is commensurate … with those of another or that the “same” person remains when her moral commitments are subtracted is to do violence to our deepest understanding of what it means to be human’.18 Moral commitments are supreme to Nur. Theoretically, she has the disposition to be an adequate, if imperfect, wife and mother.

It might amuse some readers to learn that whereas the transition from a pick-up to a legally wedded wife is a promotion in Nur’s thinking, it is the opposite in the minds of others. A case in point is Firdaus, famed courtesan and protagonist of Nawal El Saadawi’s novel, Woman at Point Zero. Firdaus declares caustically: ‘A woman’s life is always miserable. A prostitute, however, is a little better off.’19 Unlike Nur, Firdaus is educated, and she has made her own deductions about the supposed bliss of wedlock. They reflect solemn dialectics: ‘That men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife.’ Accordingly, a vocation she entered under duress she keeps by choice and on the grounds of logic: ‘Because I was intelligent, I preferred to be a free prostitute rather than an enslaved wife.’20

Firdaus’s stand is extreme, but it draws attention to a vital sphere in the dialogue on prostitution and personhood, which is that selling sexual services may not be the direst fate that can befall a woman. There are manifold ways in which a woman’s integrity can be infringed, and it is the woman – not the law, or ethics, or other patriarchal constructs – that determines the seriousness of the infringement. Again Radin makes a keen-sighted contribution to this point:

If we think respect for persons warrants prohibiting a mother from selling something personal [like her body] to obtain food for her starving children, we do not respect her personhood more by forcing her to let them starve instead … [Such prohibition] would be forcing the mother to endure a devastating loss in her

18 Radin 409.
20 El Saadawi 91.

primary relationship (with her children) rather than in the secondary one (with the personal thing) she is willing to sacrifice to protect the primary one.\textsuperscript{21}

As Radin makes plain, it is a question of which relationships hold sway in the individual’s self-constitution. We earlier mentioned that work is a subordinate element in Nur’s personhood, and that love is superordinate. Firdaus is close to the other polar axis since she has cast off love and finds fulfillment in her power over men. For Firdaus, a victim of wife-battering, prostitution is not self-negating. Rather, the trauma of the marital relationship is altogether more blighting to the female ego than walking the streets. She charges her customers up to three thousand pounds per encounter and asserts, ‘not for a single moment did I have any doubts about my own integrity and honour as a woman.’\textsuperscript{22} In opposition to Mahfouz’s trust in the redemptive influence of the marriage institution, Firdaus finds that it bears out the feminist description as ‘the claustrophobic and asphyxiating ambience of male dominance, dictatorship and terrorism.’\textsuperscript{23}

Mahfouz’s most discreet comment on Nur’s personhood is her name, ‘Nur.’ ‘Light’ reflects her unquenchable spirit, and the fact that she is Said’s last ray of hope in his otherwise hopeless predicament. In addition, it is the author’s verdict on the self-righteous pretensions of Egyptian society. He elects a prostitute as a beacon in a community where judges and gentlefolk abide, which says much about his attitude to both the prostitute and the community. And funnily enough, where prostitution is concerned, hoodlums are as guilty of self-righteousness as aristocrats. An object lesson is Said, whose contemptuous assessment of Nur was remarked in a prior section of this essay. His disdain is shared to a degree by Tarzan, a smuggler and arms-dealer, who announces the arrival of the ageing and ill-attired Nur in the following ironic manner: “As you can see,” Tarzan said for her with a smile, “she’s all light, like her name’” (61).

Tarzan is being patronizing, but Mahfouz is making a statement and, as before, he underlines it by comparison with Said. Nur’s symbolic affinity to light is contrasted with Said’s affinity to darkness, and her victory in upholding social relationships is accentuated by his incompetence.

In the aspect of contextuality, Said’s personhood is founded on the lonely and unpleasant particular of his work. Banditry is the isolated context in which he relates to the social and natural world. When, in his dream, the Sheikh asks him for his identity card, Said hands him a gun. The gesture signifies that his work is his self, and that any affront to this specific relationship is an affront to his total being. The excessive weight he places on his figure as a thief is the root of his vendetta against Ilish and Rauf, formerly his accomplices in crime. Between the two of them, Ilish and Rauf have robbed Said of his wife, his daughter, his loot, his place in the criminal kingdom, his moral justification for stealing, and four precious years of freedom. This is severe provocation on its own, but for Said, who conceives of himself as a robber among robbers, it is like drawing blood. He responds to the agony in a fashion corresponding to the value he attaches to his relationship with his work – by destroying every other relationship in a bid to protect the primary one. Love, family, politics, moral commitments, wisdom, and ultimately life itself, go down the drain as he battles to re-assert his personhood in the

\textsuperscript{21} Radin 412.
\textsuperscript{22} El Saadawi 91.
only realm that he feels makes him a person. The narrative reiterates over and over that his aspiration to uniqueness lies in his vocation.

Conclusion
Nur retains her personhood in the dual areas of identity and contextuality. She acknowledges both what she was and what she is, and, ignoring the tension, strives to keep the two in some sort of relevancy. This is the secret of her moderate success in the aspect of identity. Her success in the aspect of contextuality flows indirectly from this. Because she relates to the world as much more than a prostitute, her work cannot obliterate her sense of distinctiveness or prevent her from pursuing viable goals. Her work hinges on her physical features – on the fact that she is a woman – but her distinctiveness is not in her womanhood, but in her personhood. The difference is straightforward in her mind, and there is no ambiguity as to the things that are integral to her personhood and the things that are external to it. Love is integral and sex is external, hence her love is always a precious gift but her body is open to hire. This may not be ideal, but it is the way it works for Nur. And it goes to show that factors conventionally reckoned to have a tremendous impact upon the woman’s abstract self, such as physical intimacy, may not actually carry undue weight. Those of Radin’s persuasion, stretching the argument to its limit, would claim that since sex is alienable to Nur’s self it can also be legitimately monetised.

Nur is an assimilation of paradoxes which are summed up in the two pictures that so vividly represent her: on the exterior, a creature visibly giving way at the seams, but underneath an unexpectedly whole and steady individual. Her antithesis is Said, who is compact in appearance but fragmented within. She is a call-girl, he is a burglar: they are one in felony but emblematic of two very different personalities. Obviously, Nur elicits the greater sympathy. Mahfouz does not advocate her lifestyle or the legalising of sexual services, but in his scale of accountability a woman who sells her body is no more guilty of an aberration than a politician, like Rauf, who sells his conscience. It is the woman’s ill luck that society judges her on harsher premises. The Thief and the Dogs causes the reader to give a second thought to the contention that it is society’s condemnation of prostitution, as against the act of prostitution itself, that is the real enemy of the woman’s emotional and psychological well-being. In Nur’s case, paradoxically, her profession proves to be the acid test of the very character that some would insist she lacks. Nur is among the lowest in Mahfouz’s caste of fictional call-girls, and yet among the most memorable in terms of personality. We take her as evidence of his conviction that prostitution and probity are not always mutually exclusive.