

Female Existence in Naguib Mahfouz's Tahwida: A Beauvoirian Perspective

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Histori Naskah:

Submit: 2025-10-20
Accepted: 2025-11-15
Published: 2025-11-17



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Abstrak:

This study examines the representation of women's existence through the character of Tawhida in Naguib Mahfouz's short story Tahwida using Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism perspective. This perspective views women not as objects of patriarchal culture, but as subjects who have awareness, freedom, and authenticity in determining their existence. Using a descriptive qualitative method and a literature review approach, this study focuses on collecting data and information from various written sources, such as books, scientific journals, articles, and documents relevant to this research. This study explores how the body, subjectivity, spirituality, and social relations of the character Tawhida represent women's struggles in facing social constructs that limit their freedom of movement. The results of the study show that Tawhida is not merely a symbol of beauty or domestication, but rather an autonomous, spiritual, and intellectual woman. She transcends the social boundaries that constrain her and demonstrates the ability to consciously interpret her life. In the context of modern Arabic literature, the representation of Tawhida marks a paradigm shift from passive women to active, critical, and empowered subjects. Thus, this study confirms that female characters in literary works can be a means of articulating women's authentic existence, as well as a form of resistance against the objectification and subordination attached to women's bodies and social roles.

Keywords: *Existential feminism; female existence; Modern Arabic literature; Naguib Mahfouz; Simone de Beauvoir; Mahfouz' Tawhida.*

Introduction

Hajir in (Ela et al. 2022) Women are social beings who play an important role in society, but their roles are often limited by patriarchal systems that place men in a dominant position. Traditional views that judge women solely on their biological abilities, such as bearing children and breastfeeding, often confine women to domestic roles. This condition has given rise to a long struggle for women to obtain their basic rights and recognition as full human beings. From this movement, feminism was born, an effort to oppose oppression and subordination of women in various aspects of life.

One important idea in feminism is existential feminism, which was initiated by Simone de Beauvoir. In her work *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir views women as "the Other," whose existence is determined by men and patriarchal culture. Through the concept of existentialism, Beauvoir asserts that women should be subjects who are free to consciously and authentically determine the meaning of their lives, rather than simply

following restrictive social constructs. This theory is relevant for examining how women struggle to overcome social, cultural, and spiritual boundaries in literary works (Azzahra, 2022).

A number of previous studies have discussed existential feminism in literary works, such as the study by Munarsi and Joko Setyo Nugroho (2021) which examined the novel *Drupadi* by Seno Gumira Ajidarma, as well as the study by Ridwan et al. (2024) on the novel *Lebih Senyap dari Bisikan* by Andina Dwifatma. Both highlight the forms of oppression and resistance of women in the face of patriarchal culture.

Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by examining how Beauvoir's concept of existentialism is applied in the Arab social and cultural context. Naguib Mahfouz's short story *Tahwida* is chosen as the research object for this research because it contains a complex representation of the existence of modern Arab women living between modernity and tradition. The character *Tawhida* displays strong existential dynamics: she transforms from a charming young woman into an elderly woman full of experience and wisdom. This short story describes how women negotiate their identity in a patriarchal social space without losing their authenticity.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the representation of the body, subjectivity, spirituality, and social relations of the character *Tawhida* through the perspective of Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism. However, most existing research focuses on Indonesian or Western literary works, while discussions on contemporary Arab narratives particularly short stories by Naguib Mahfouz are rarely found. This empirical scarcity further strengthens the gap that this study aims to address. This approach is expected to provide a new understanding of the position of women in modern Arabic literature, not merely as passive or traditional symbols, but as conscious, free, and empowered existential subjects.

Studi Literature

The research conducted by (Munaris and Joko Setyo Nugroho, 2021) titled "*Existential Feminism in the Novel Drupadi by Seno Gumira Ajidarma*" highlights forms of oppression and resistance of women as an expression of their existence. Through the character of *Drupadi*, the study emphasizes that women become "*the Other*" because of the dominance of the patriarchal system that places men as the main subjects. The main focus of this research is on the power relations in the household and social space that limit women's freedom, as well as how female protagonists resist by becoming intellectual and social agents.

Meanwhile, the research by (Ridwan and Nensilianti, 2024) titled "*The Existence of Women in the Novel Lebih Senyap dari Bisikan by Andina Dwifatma: Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Feminism*" emphasizes the dimensions of social and domestic discrimination experienced by modern women. The results show that marriage and the role of motherhood are still cultural instruments that confine women in subordinate positions. However, the women in the novel resist through self-awareness and rejection of the position of "*the Other*", as an attempt to find their autonomous existence.

However, both previous studies were conducted in the context of Indonesian literature, which is rooted in local cultural norms and domestic gender relations. None of them explicitly discuss how women's existence is constructed and negotiated within the framework of Arab culture where patriarchal traditions, religious values, and modernity intersect uniquely.

Meanwhile, Ramadhani (2025) and Azzahra (2022) extend the discussion of existential feminism into Middle Eastern literary settings "*Sayyidat al-Qamar*" and "*Jumhuriyyatu Ka'anna*", where women encounter stereotypes, subordination, and objectification. Both studies demonstrate that female characters

resist by working, intellectual engagement, rejecting imposed roles, and asserting influence in society. Although these works successfully identify forms of discrimination and resistance, they remain focused on describing the manifestations of gender inequality, without examining how differing cultural, historical, and ideological contexts shape the construction of women's existential struggles across texts. Moreover, these studies have not fully explored comparative patterns of resistance, nor how each protagonist negotiates agency within distinct socio-political landscapes.

Thus, the existing research provides valuable insights into women's oppression and resistance in separate literary works, yet a gap remains in understanding how existential feminism operates across diverse narratives, particularly in terms of how different societal systems produce different modes of Othering, and how women redefine their subjectivity beyond individual acts of resistance.

Unlike the previous studies, the present research focuses on modern Arabic literature, particularly on the short story "Tahwida" by Naguib Mahfouz. It examines how the female character's existence unfolds not only through social resistance but also through spiritual consciousness and intellectual autonomy. This perspective highlights that Arab women's existential struggles occur not merely in physical or social spheres, but also in transcendental and spiritual dimensions that reflect cultural hybridity between East and West.

Therefore, this research contributes new insight by extending the discourse of Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism into a different cultural and spiritual context. It shows that women's existence in modern Arabic literature cannot be fully understood through the same framework used in Indonesian literary studies; instead, it requires attention to the spiritual, intellectual, and cultural complexities unique to the Arab world. Thus, this study explicitly fills the gap in previous research by positioning spirituality as an integral dimension of women's existential freedom in Arab literary representation.

Method

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach. According to Sugiyono (2016), the qualitative research method is a research method used to examine natural object conditions (as opposed to experiments) in which the researcher is the key instrument. However, in literary studies, this approach is adapted not to observe empirical phenomena but to interpret textual meaning. The type of research used is library research because the object being studied is a literary text, namely the short story "Tawhida" from the collection *Hams al-Najim* by Naguib Mahfouz. This study focuses on interpreting meaning and the existential representation of the female character in the short story through the analytical framework of existential feminist theory developed by Simone de Beauvoir.

Methodologically, this research does not aim to test hypotheses but to provide an in-depth understanding of how women's representation emerges in the text and how existential values such as freedom, authenticity, and transcendence are articulated through the narrative. The analysis is carried out through close reading, thematic interpretation, and theoretical mapping between the text and Beauvoir's existential feminist concepts.

The hermeneutic approach was chosen because it is appropriate for literary works that are rich in symbols, implied meanings, and interpretive layers. Hermeneutics allows researchers to interpret texts in depth by considering the historical, social, and cultural contexts that underlie them. This approach is considered more appropriate than a purely structural or sociological approach, because the focus of the research is not only

on the form or structure of the story, but on the existential meaning and consciousness of female characters in the context of Arab culture.

In addition, the hermeneutic approach allows for a dialogical reading between the text and the reader, as explained by Gadamer (2004), that understanding is a process of fusion of horizons between the world of the text and the world of the interpreter. Thus, this method helps researchers discover the deeper meaning of women's existence, which is not only social but also spiritual and philosophical.

The data sources in this study are divided into two, namely primary data and secondary data. The primary data are the short story “Tawhida” by Naguib Mahfouz from the collection Hams al-Najim, which serves as the main source for analyzing the representation of the female character. The secondary data consist of books, scientific articles, and journals relevant to Simone de Beauvoir’s existential feminist theory, as well as other references that support the analysis of the character and the socio-cultural context in modern Arabic literary texts.

The data collection technique was carried out through documentation, namely reading and examining the literary text and supporting literature intensively. The text was analyzed by identifying key quotations that reveal the existential traits of the character Tawhida, such as her way of thinking, making choices, facing social judgment, and her relationship with the body and spirituality.

Result

The results of a study of Naguib Mahfouz's short story Tahwida reveal a complex representation of women that transcends normative social constructs. The character of Tawhida is portrayed not only as a beautiful woman who comes from abroad and attracts the attention of the village community, but also as an individual with intellectual depth, spirituality, and authentic existential experiences. In the text, Mahfouz presents a female character who lives between the two cultural poles of East and West and strives to maintain her autonomy amid social pressure and patriarchal views.

Analysis Category	Linguistic/Conceptual Focus	Main Findings	Narrative	Relation to Beauvoir Feminism
Body and Age	Description of physical change, imagery, contrast between youth and old age.	<p>Data 2</p> <p>وظلت محتفظاً لها بصورة الشباب والمرح والجمال والسحر الجامع كل شيء.</p> <p>Data 3</p> <p>ورأيت عجوزاً تجلس إلى جانب السائق... وجه يمكن أن يعتبر نموذجاً للشيوخوخة. وجه ضامر جداً شديد البياض عميق الشحوب غارق في التجاعيد</p>	The contrast between youthful beauty and aged frailty creates emotional dissonance and exposes society's fixation on women's bodies. The narrative shifts recognition from	Demonstrates how women are objectified as “the Other” through the body. Tawhida transcends bodily immanence when her existence is recognized through memory, voice, and subjectivity rather than physical form.

			<i>appearance to essence.</i>	
Female Subjectivity and Intellectual Agency	Dialogue, intellect markers (language, philosophy, art), characterization beyond physical traits.	<p>Data 5:</p> <p>اليوم أصبحت تقيم معنا بكل ما ترطن به من فرنسية وإيطالية، مرتدية أحدث الموضات وتردد أفكاراً لديكارت وأشعاراً لبودلير وتعزف على البيانو بالنوطة مقطوعة لببيتهوفن</p> <p>Data 4:</p> <p>عند سماع نغمة الصوت انفجر الماضي بغتة كأنه....قارورة عطر تحطمت</p>	Highlights Tawhida as a thinking, speaking, intellectual subject. Her knowledge, language ability, and voice give her narrative authority and internal depth.	Represents transcendence through intellect. Woman becomes “subject-for-itself” rather than object-for-others. Beauvoir emphasizes women’s liberation through intellectual agency, which Tawhida embodies.
Spiritual and Inner Autonomy	Expressions of spiritual practice, religious devotion, cultural duality.	<p>Data 6:</p> <p>وما غطى على ذلك كله أنها كانت تحافظ على الصلاة، والصيام في رمضان وتحرص على سماع التلاوة للقراء المشهورين مثل علي محمود وندا</p>	Blends Eastern spirituality with Western intellectual life, portraying Tawhida as a unified autonomous self. Spirituality becomes a private space of freedom and self-determination.	Extends Beauvoir’s concept of female transcendence into a spiritual dimension, showing that women assert subjectivity not only socially and intellectually, but also spiritually.
Social Relations and Cultural Mobility	Spatial markers, movement across places, social interaction, identity negotiation.	<p>Data 1:</p> <p>قالت الحارة إن البنت تفرنجت، والمتفرنج شيء جديد ومثير ومستفز وجدير أيضاً بالزهو</p> <p>Data 7:</p> <p>وقد فرقت الأيام بين فروع الشجرة الواحدة من أسرتنا، فذهب كل إلى المكان</p>	Movement between village, city, and abroad symbolizes fluid identity and existential journey. Social labels (foreigner, modern	Shows woman’s ability to redefine identity within and against social structures. Her movement from objectification toward autonomy echoes

		الذي يناسبه. وانتقلت هي إلى الزمالك، وعاشت فترة في الخارج ثم رجعت إليها.	woman) reveal cultural biases, while her autonomy reshapes them.	Beauvoir's call for women to claim existential freedom through lived experience
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Source: Researcher (2025)

Discussion

The following discussion systematically elaborates several important aspects of the short story Tahwida that are relevant to the ideas of existential feminism, such as the body and age, female subjectivity, spiritual experience as a space of autonomy, and the role of symbols and the narrator in shaping perceptions of women.

1. Tawhida as “The Other” in the Social Space

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* states that women are often not seen as subjects but as “the Other” in the patriarchal system. In the short story Tahwida, the figure of Tawhida is constructed as a woman who comes from outside the community, a “foreigner,” and therefore positioned in a different category from the local village women.

Data 1

"قالت الحارة إن البنت تفرنجت، والمتفرنج شيء جديد ومثير ومستفز وجدير أيضاً بالزهو."

"The villagers said that the girl was European, and Europeans were something new, interesting, attractive, and also known for their beauty." (Mahfouz, n.d.)

This statement shows that Tawhida's existence is not understood based on her humanity or individuality, but rather on the cultural representations attached to her body and background. She is made into an object of admiration and exoticism, not an autonomous subject.

However, interestingly, Tawhida is not passive in this position. She moves through the social spaces of the village not as “an outsider” but as an individual capable of building relationships: marrying into the narrator's family, interacting actively, and even delving into local spiritual life. In this way, Tawhida begins to blur the boundary between subject and object, between “I” and “the Other.”

2. The Female Body, Age, and Identity

One of the main issues in existential feminism is how the female body often becomes a source of objectification. In this short story, Tawhida's body becomes the center of attention, both in memories of her youth and in her old age.

Data 2

"وظللت محتفظاً لها بصورة الشباب والمرح والجمال والسحر الجامع كل شيء"

"She always looked young, cheerful, beautiful, and captivating.." (Mahfouz, n.d.)

Data 3

"ورأيت عجوزاً تجلس إلى جانب السائق... وجه يمكن أن يعتبر نموذجاً للشيخوخة. وجه ضامر جداً شديد البياض عميق الشحوب غارق في التجاعيد."

"I saw an old woman... a very thin face, extremely pale, sunken, and covered with wrinkles."
(Mahfouz, n.d.)

The two quotations above illustrate that Tawhida's body is assessed according to specific aesthetic standards imposed upon women. In her youth, she is admired for her physical allure; however, when she appears as an elderly woman, she is scarcely recognized. Here, we see how a woman's body is used by society as a parameter for determining value and identity.

But de Beauvoir rejects the idea that women are merely bodies, and Tawhida represents a subtle rebellion against that view. Although her body changes, her essence remains recognizable through her voice, memory, and intellect.

Data 4

"عند سماع نغمة الصوت انفجر الماضي بغتة كأنه قارورة عطر تحطمت...."

"When I heard the tone of her voice, suddenly my past exploded like a perfume bottle that had shattered..." (Mahfouz, n.d.)

The voice becomes a marker of existential identity that transcends the changes of the body. Here, the narrator begins to recognize Tawhida not through her physical appearance but through her presence as a whole subject.

3. Female Subjectivity and Authenticity

According to Beauvoir, women must strive for their existence as autonomous subjects, not be trapped within the construction of "female nature." Tawhida is an example of a woman who is not only beautiful but also intelligent, spiritual, and expressive.

Data 5

"اليوم أصبحت تقيم معنا بكل ما ترطن به من فرنسية وإيطالية، مرتدية أحدث الموضات وتردد أفكاراً لديكارت وأشعاراً لبودلير وتعزف على البيانو بالنوطة مقطوعة لبيتهوفن."

"She talked with us in French and Italian, wore the latest fashion, exchanged ideas about Descartes and Baudelaire's poetry, and played piano pieces by the great composer Beethoven." (Mahfouz, n.d.)

Data 6

"وما غطى على ذلك كله أنها كانت تحافظ على الصلاة، والصيام في رمضان وتحرص على سماع التلاوة للقراء المشهورين مثل علي محمود وندا."

"She maintained her prayers, fasted during Ramadan, and enjoyed listening to recitations by famous Qur'an readers such as Ali Mahmoud." (Mahfouz, n.d.)

Tawhida combines Western intellectualism with Eastern spirituality. She does not submit to one cultural framework, nor is she trapped in the definition of an ideal woman from only one

perspective. In existential feminism, this is the form of true freedom: when a woman chooses her own path, creates meaning for her own existence, and lives authentically as herself.

4. Social Transformation: Women as Historical Subjects

The narrator's line mentioning Tawhida's move

Data 7

"وقد فرقت الأيام بين فروع الشجرة الواحدة من أسرتنا، فذهب كل إلى المكان الذي يناسبه. وانتقلت هي إلى الزمالك، وعاشت فترة في الخارج ثم رجعت إليها."

"Day by day passed separating the branches of our family tree... Tawhida moved to Zamalek, stayed abroad for a while, and then returned to Zamalek." (Mahfouz, n.d.)

It is not merely biographical information; symbolically, this geographical shift serves as a metaphor for an existential journey. Zamalek (an urban area associated with Cairo's cosmopolitanism) and the experience of "living abroad" become signs of another space that allows Tawhida to accumulate experiences, knowledge, and practices of life that are different from the customs of the village where she first became known. Narratologically, this migration functions as a motif of journey/ritual transition from an "object" admired for her appearance to a "subject" with intellectual and spiritual capacity. This interpretation also aligns with modern Arab cultural theory, which argues that urban mobility and transnational experience shape women's identities in contemporary Arab societies.

Symbolically, the journey reads Tawhida's body as a cultural palimpsest: layers of identity (Western, Eastern, religious, intellectual) are written on top of each other without erasing the previous layers. Mahfouz does not describe her mobility merely as social mobility; he makes space (Zamalek, abroad, the village) a scene where different values are tested and processed. Thus, the act of leaving and returning becomes a rhetorical style that communicates conscious choice and the ability to transcend, as emphasized by Beauvoir: Tawhida moves out of domestic "immanence" towards a condition where she can "create meaning" (transcendence) and returns as an agent of history, not merely an object of nostalgia. This view is reinforced by gender sociology, which argues that spatial transition enables women to negotiate patriarchal structures in ways that are impossible within traditional domestic spheres (Connell, 2009).

Linguistically, Mahfouz's concise depiction of this mobility is economical but dense with symbolic meaning: few words, but enough to prompt readers to reconstruct the character's life trajectory. Such narratives reflect Mahfouz's writing technique, which often utilizes lexical economy to convey a broad life history a strategy that emphasizes that women's history is not a single incident but a long process of subjectivity formation.

5. Nostalgia and the Recognition of Existence

The narrator in this short story also undergoes transformation. At first, he does not recognize Tawhida because her body has changed. However, her voice and their memories reopen the existential connection between them.

Data 8

"تبادلنا كلمات مألوفة وأنا غارق في تأملات بعيدة."

"We talked warmly, and I sank deeply into my thoughts." (Mahfouz, n.d.)

Data 9

"وضحكت العجوز وقالت: إذا كنت لم تعرفني، فليس الذنب ذنبي!"

"The old woman laughed and said, 'It is not my fault if you do not recognize me!'" (Mahfouz, n.d.)

Tawhida's statement implies a subtle critique of how women are often recognized only through their physical appearance. She demands acknowledgment of her existence beyond appearance; she remains herself even though the world sees her differently. This resonates with gender embodiment theory, which highlights that women's bodies are frequently used as social markers while their subjective and historical identities are overshadowed by the male gaze (Mulvey, 2016).

6. Existential Synthesis: Women in Dual Spaces

When viewed through Beauvoir's lens, the actions and symbols presented by Mahfouz confirm that the existence of women in this text moves from a state of "being considered" to a state of "admitting": from objects of nostalgia to subjects of history. The symbolic analysis above shows that Mahfouz does not merely reject objectification; he also describes the cultural mechanisms (space, language, memory, ritual) that enable women to achieve transcendence. Therefore, the depiction of Tawhida shifts the traditional feminist debate about mere representation of the body towards a reading that values spirituality, cultural mobility, and memory work as domains of existential struggle. This aligns with contemporary cultural identity theories in Arab women's studies, which emphasize that female subjectivity is constructed through the interplay of social space, cultural memory, and lived experience (Abu-Lughod, 1999).

Conclusion

The character Tawhida in Naguib Mahfouz's short story represents a woman who transcends the symbolic and structural boundaries that have long confined women's existence in Arab patriarchal society. Tawhida appears not merely as an object of admiration for her beauty but as an existential subject who possesses thought, spirituality, and authenticity in living her life. She harmoniously combines Western intellectualism and Eastern spirituality, showing that women can embrace the complexity of their identities without losing their sense of self. Through Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminist perspective, this study reveals that women can negotiate their positions in social spaces with full awareness of their existence, making the female character a representation of a living voice no longer confined by traditional imagery.

This research contributes to the study of modern Arabic literature by offering an existential-feminist reading that highlights how Mahfouz constructs women's subjectivity not only in social or domestic spheres but also through intellectual and spiritual autonomy. Rather than focusing solely on forms of resistance, this study brings attention to deeper dimensions of self-awareness and transcendence that emerge within the unique intersection of Arab cultural and spiritual values. By foregrounding these dimensions, the research broadens the critical understanding of how modern Arabic narratives position women as historical and philosophical agents, thereby reinforcing the relevance of existential feminism as an interpretive framework.

Acknowledgments

With great gratitude, the author expresses his deepest gratitude to his beloved parents who have always been a source of strength, prayer, and infinite love in every step of this academic journey. Especially, the writer expresses his prayers and deep gratitude to his **late father**, who even though he has now passed away, his spirit and sincerity are still alive in every breath of the writer's struggle. All his advice, example, and love became the guiding light until this research could be completed.

The author also expresses his gratitude to the entire family who always provide moral support, motivation, and affirming warmth during the process of preparing this research. Without their prayers and love, this manuscript may never find its final form.

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