

# International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

ISSN: 2308-5460



## Enmeshed Beings: A Comparative Study of Ahmad Mahmoud's 'A Familiar Tale' and Woody Allen's 'The Kugelmass Episode'

[PP: 140-147]

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### ABSTRACT

Frankfurt School has introduced "critical theory" as the best way to challenge capitalist societies, and to question the conventional standards. Art and literature, in this respect, are convenient devices through which the true face of capitalism can be revealed. Capitalism has enthralled people to accept its rules as facts and it is the mission of art and literature to wake them up. However, Frankfurt School thinkers are not optimistic and think it is almost impossible to challenge capitalist notions and change the base effectively. This existentialist attitude is what is employed in both Ahmad Mahmoud's "A Familiar Tale" (1991) and Woody Allen's "The Kugelmass Episode" (1977). Although these writers are set in societies far apart, one in Iran and the other in USA, their characters, especially their protagonists share the same feelings and problems of modern life. At first glance, it seems the authors have portrayed modern man and his challenges of life objectively; however, a closer look at the texts reveals something else. Mahmoud and Allen have employed the same techniques in their texts to criticize capitalism, the very shadow of which clouds their societies. They have portrayed the plights of modern man in the modern world and have put the blame on the capitalist system.

In this respect, the parallelism drawn between these two short stories can be discussed in two ways; first, in the chosen style and second, in their depicted society and its influence on the characters. The writing techniques employed by both authors and the existing parallelism can be drawn in three respects: the choice of the medium of short story, third-limited viewpoint and open ending. These three techniques help the selected works to make the impact of their criticism significant. The second section clarifies how the two selected writers approach their aim through content. They criticize dehumanization of people in capitalist societies and its immediate consequences such as commodification and internalization.

**Keywords:** Commodification, Critical Theory, Fetishism, Frankfurt School, Identity, Internalization

ARTICLE INFO	The paper received on	Reviewed on	Accepted after revisions on
	17/02/2019	20/03/2019	05/04/2019

### Suggested citation:

Sehat, M. & Jahantigh, H. (2019). Enmeshed Beings: A Comparative Study of Ahmad Mahmoud's 'A Familiar Tale' and Woody Allen's 'The Kugelmass Episode'. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*. 7(1). 140-147.

### 1. Introduction

The groundbreaking theories of Frankfurt School took the center stage in academic discussions of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The bitter experience of Fascism and Communism, leading to the Second World War, admittedly asked for a rethinking of Marxism's key concepts. Although the rebellious spirit against capitalism does exist ceaselessly in Frankfurt School theorists' opinions, here, Marxism's optimism for a promising future gradually gives way to pessimism about human destiny. Having been forced to live in exile by Fascism, Frankfurt School scholars find liberalism of the United States in line with other totalitarian regimes. They

find it almost impossible for victimized people to free themselves from the iron cage of capitalism. For them, people are doomed to wander around the loop cycle of enforced life in capitalist societies. This is what makes the parallelism between the selected stories significant. Both Ahmad Mahmoud's "A Familiar Tale" and Woody Allen's "The Kugelmass Episode" depict the same atmosphere. The members of materialistic societies, including the two stories' protagonists, have to fulfill the societies' dictated duties by concealing their own identities.

Karim in "A Familiar Tale" assumes himself a talented poet and footballer; one who deserves the respect of all the people

around. Nevertheless, nobody understands him and he is forced to work as a simple clerk for a living. As a child, he is belittled both at home [by his father] and at school [by his teacher] and the same story goes on in his adulthood. Nobody respects him, neither his wife at home nor his boss at work. His peer group is the only driving force that keeps him going since they are the only ones who attest to his poetic talent. At the end of the story; however, he encounters a harsh reality. He finds his friends humiliating him in his absence. He understands that all these years, not only did they not respect him, they used to make a joke of him. He leaves them without any word and disappears into darkness.

Kugelmass experiences the same feeling. Fed up with the mundane life of the modern world, he is after new pleasures in life. A magician named Percy provides him with this opportunity. With the help of his magic machine, Kugelmass goes to the French novel, *Madame Bovary*, and has a series of affairs with the titular character, Emma Bovary. Emma gets familiar with the modern lifestyle through Kugelmass's clothes, behavior and words. Utterly fascinated with modern world and its auxiliaries, she asks to keep him company and see the glamor of this different life in person. In the real modern world, things do not work out well. The magic machine breaks down and Emma is unable to go back to the novel. This means Emma is to stay more than her welcome, the cause for Kugelmass's irritation as he is to pay for the hotel and other expenses equated hyperbolically to America's defense budget. Next week the machine is fixed and after Emma's return, Kugelmass promises himself not to do such ridiculous things again. Much to his chagrin, mundane life does not let him fulfill his promise, though. In the next attempt, the machine sends him to a Spanish grammar book when the magician gets a heart attack and dies before bringing him back, leaving Kugelmass in havoc.

Both Karim and Kugelmass are trapped in the modern life, like other members of their societies. It seems almost impossible for them to get rid of this calamity since they lack any sense of identity. Capitalism enforces its desirable identity on them through culture industry; therefore, their thoughts and tastes are what it dictates. Frankfurt School takes it upon itself to bring people face to face with this reality. It celebrates various identities and prescribes subjective approach to deal with

social issues. Closer scrutiny of "A Familiar Tale" and "The Kugelmass Episode" proves that Mahmoud and Allen share the same opinion. Both of them try their best to show that capitalism and its consequences are liable for emptiness of modern life. Their attempt can be traced in two ways: as writers, they have chosen a suitable medium, viewpoint and ending for these selected works to emphasize the influence of capitalism, what this paper also zooms in on in its first part; and as social critics, they have highlighted the liability of capitalism for the calamity of modern life in their contents, as well. Concurrently internalized its materialistic taste, capitalism commodifies all values through culture industry. This will be under consideration in the second part of the paper.

## 2. Literature Review

Woody Allen and his works have proven to be good subjects of study in the academy. Some researchers have focused on his writing and filmmaking and many others have tried to analyze his philosophy and way of thinking. Aeon J. Skoble and Mark T. Conard in their 2011 book entitled *Woody Allen and Philosophy* have gathered several articles discussing Allen's viewpoint about different concepts. Among all articles of this book, David Detmer's "Inauthenticity and personal Identity" has elaborated on the effect of society on its members in Allen's *Zelig*. The present study attempts to follow Detmer in its own reading of "The Kugelmass Episode." In *A Companion to Woody Allen* (2013), San B. Girgas and Peter J. Bailey have compared Benjamin and Adorno's opinions about art with Allen's. They all hold that "art is reduced to a commodity, an exchange of value;" however, they think of art as the solution of this problem, as well. Iris Bruce (2014) has analyzed commodification through comparing Allen and Kafka, in the same fashion. He has discussed that both these authors' characters want to escape from commodification of their society to melancholy, an attempt, which has ended in nothing for them. In addition, this paper has found *The Woody Allen Encyclopedia* (2018) by Thomas S. Hirschak, helpful for its comparative study, too. This book has collected and enlisted different Allen's works and their key concepts in alphabetical order.

Preceding this research, many comparative studies have chosen Woody Allen as part of their analyses. Two examples of which are *Martin Scorsese*,



Woody Allen, Spike Lee: *Ethnicity, Race and Identity in American Independent Film* by James F. Scott and *Woody Allen and Charlie Chaplin: Little Men, Big Auteurs* by Jill Franks, both written in 2019. The former one tends to ponder over these directors' movies and the influence of American culture on them as a "melting pot." The author tries to see "how ethno-racial categories increasingly blur into categories of class and culture" (Scott, 2019, 2). The latter one, however, highlights the congruous concepts and elements in Chaplin and Allen's masterpieces. Since these studies have thought of Allen as a cinematic figure, this paper cannot be entertained with their arguments very much. In contrast, it tries to focus on his style of writing in one of his short stories and its similarities to the selected Persian short story by Ahmad Mahmoud.

Ahmad Mahmoud's oeuvre, though, has received not much consideration in the academy. In 2014, Javad Eshaghian allotted one book of his series entitled *The Story of Knowing Iran* to Mahmoud. He has applied different literary theories to several Mahmoud's works, none of which is of help to this paper and its discussion. Khatere Darabi (2016) in "Social Realism in the Works of Ahmad Mahmoud" and Sareh Zirak and Masoomeh Bashokouh in "The Function of 'Time' in Realistic Novels on analyzing Two Novels *Neighbor* of Ahmad Mahmoud and *Midiaq Alley* of Naghib Mafouz" have reread several of Mahmoud's works from a formalistic approach. These articles are not in line with this paper's discussion, either, signifying the importance of a new study from the perspective of this paper to fill the gap in the existing literature on Mahmoud's oeuvre.

Many pieces of research have zoomed on different Frankfurt School concepts in Allen's works. However, none of them puts "The Kugelmass Episode" under consideration. The same is true about Mahmoud's "A Familiar Tale." The present study tries to fill this gap by focusing on the existing parallelism between the two selected short stories through Frankfurt School lens.

The viewpoint through which Frankfurt school scholars analyze capitalism and its consequences on modern man can be traced in these two short stories. This paper benefits from different sources in this respect. *The Sane Society* written by Eric Fromm in 1956 provides us with the ideas of

this scholar about the influence of group in identity construction of its members. Peter Mayo has studied Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony in educational institutions in his book entitled *Gramsci and Educational Thought* in 2010. In addition to this book, Frankfurt theories of Lukacs in *The Reification of Consciousness* written by Weterman in 2010, and those of Theodor Adorno and Benjamin in *Benjamin and Adorno on Art and Art Criticism: Critique of Art* written by Lijster in 2017 are also drawn upon. Additionally Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer, Axel Honneth (2018) have reread different theories of Frankfurt school eyeing the modern concerns. They have gathered their related articles in *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, which is another beneficial source for this paper.

### 3. Form at Author's Service to Criticize Capitalism

The medium and the style chosen by any author to tell his story are significant. It can convey unwritten meanings or unexpressed feelings. The two selected stories have employed the medium of short story and third-person limited narrator. Additionally, they have both employed open ending to highlight the impact of capitalism in their stories in a similar fashion.

Short story is a rather brief and pointed work of fiction concentrating on "a certain unique or single effect" (Cuddon, 2013, 653). Modern short story is supposed to narrate a limited part of everyday life, or as in Chekhov's words: "a slice of life" presented suggestively (Fatma, 2010, 2). Moreover "short story is considered as one man's story" (Fatma, 2010, 6) where we are "zooming in on a part of [his] life and personality and exploring it in depth" (Guillan, 2015, 8). It means, firstly, the number of characters in short story is very limited and secondly, no heroic figure is involved. These characteristics make short story a suitable medium for Mahmoud and Allen through which they can reach their targets. These authors want to criticize modern society and the impact of capitalism in dehumanizing individuals. When it is added to other elements employed by these two stories, the significance can be more highlighted. Using the word "Familiar" by Mahmoud and "Episode" by Allen in the title of their short stories respectively is one of these elements, connoting iteration. They allude to something repetitive, which is rarely shocking. In other words, the feeling of ennui is implicated in these words'

meanings, a reminiscent of Frankfurt School, and its criticism of modern life. To this school of thought, modern society has captivated its members, who are doomed to fulfill their duties like automatons.

Another element used by the stories in question to harass capitalism can be their narrative style. Both stories have employed limited omniscient narrator as their point of view, which is defined hence: "They take readers into a particular character's mind just as a first person narrator does" (Kirszner & Mandell, 2017, 313). Placing himself at the elbow of his character, the author looks at the world through his eyes and through his mind. It means the limited third-person viewpoint lets the authors share their stories subjectively. According to Frankfurt School, sociological issues cannot be told objectively, since each person filters his experiences through his preceding knowledge.

Frankfurt School's opinion about the problematic status of modern man can also be traced in the type of ending employed by the authors in question. Having enjoyed the sense of humor to challenge the status quo, the selected writers choose open ending to make their readers aware of the emptiness of their modern life. Like Frankfurt School thinkers, both these two writers in their selected works render a pessimistic approach toward capitalism.

#### **4. Content at Author's Service to Highlight Capitalism's Impression**

Besides the form, the main concerns of Frankfurt School thinkers can also be traced in the content of these two stories. In other words, the capitalist society and its influence on the people seems to be an issue of great significance to both authors. Capitalism is predominant in these two societies through the spirit of consumerism. In both societies, people act like passive agents who follow what market dictates. Similar to Gramsci's notion of hegemony, they are adhering to the capitalist principles inanely. Gramsci believes that members of different societies act alike since they are mesmerized by the dominant hegemony. For Gramsci, hegemony came to mean "cultural, moral, and ideological leadership over allied and subordinate groups" (Brosio, 1994, 48). When it comes to capitalism, it attempts to change people's taste of life and, accordingly, force them to consume more. Therefore, capitalism would not fight to change people's taste; instead, it seeks this target through changing its members' minds subconsciously, for instance, with

subliminal advertising. As a result, moral principles gradually become pointless and people typically prefer to evaluate everything based on the preplanned materialistic ethics of the system. Furthermore, each individual "exercises a special authority over himself" in capitalist society; therefore, he follows the rules of capitalism on his own (Finlayson, 2018, 425). It means capitalism does not need to control its members. Each member plays a significant role in furtherance of capitalist interests.

What went on above is ubiquitously accepted as a norm by all members of society in both "A Familiar Tale" and "The Kugelmass Episode." Appearance is of utmost importance to all characters, which refers to the fact that modern man rarely surpasses the surface. Mina goes for a nose job and Karim likes to dye his hair to look younger. In different occasions, Karim recalls his past by describing people's clothes and appearances. Moreover, he spends a long time to choose suitable clothes for the gathering he has been invited to:

Ok. What should I put on?... What to wear? This orange tie? No, it is not suitable for my age. Certainly, I must have bought it nearly twenty years ago. How about this one? Good. Dark and suitable but too slim. Its tie is smaller than a knuckle (Mahmoud, 1991, 45).

Likewise, having been introduced by his physical features by the author, Kugelmass categorizes people based on their appearances. "As she folded some linen" (Allen, 1991, 5) are the first words to describe Madam Bovary. She is portrayed as an object ready to be taken as a gift. Madam Bovary, on the other hand, is genuinely surprised that she can see the modern world:

There's F. A. O. Schwarz. And there's Central Park, and the Sherry is which one? Oh, there-I see. It's too divine." On the bed there were boxes from Halston and Saint Laurent. Emma unwrapped a package and held up a pair of black velvet pants against her perfect body. "The slacks suit is by Ralph Lauren," Kugelmass said. "You'll look like a million bucks in it. Come on, sugar, give us a kiss." (Allen, 1991, 10)

The surface of life is what she finds amazing. The same is true about seeing Kugelmass for the first time. Madame Bovary admires his outfit instead of himself: "I love what you have on," she murmured. "I've never seen anything like it around. It's so... so modern." "It's called a leisure suit," he said romantically. "It was marked down"



(Allen, 1991, 6). At the most romantic moment, they praise each other superficially, glorifying the outfit, as if their identity and true sense is defined just by their appearances.

This materialistic attitude toward life has some side effects, among which commodification is one of the most significant ones. It is defined by Eric Fromm as a state in which “Nothing has value in itself but only as goods to buy” (xxxii). This is a key concept for Frankfurt School scholars in their study of the mal-effects of capitalism. The focus of Adorno and Horkheimer in their “Culture Industry” was “on criticism of the commodification of art and its reproduction to create repetitive cultural products for mass consumption” (Getz & Page, 2016 61).

Under capitalism, all values are redefined and accordingly commodified. A very significant issue as love is no longer considered a heroic feature. No man in capitalist society dares to sacrifice himself for the sake of love. In contrast, one wants to enjoy love in favor of his or her interests. Love is admirable since it can provide a better life based on capitalist standards. Additionally, patriarchal society treats women like objects for reproduction and “late capitalist society ... massively commodifies women as sex objects” (Tao & Huang, 2011, 143). In the eyes of both Karim and Kugelmass, a good woman is a beautiful one. Kugelmass “calls his fat wife troglodyte” (Allen, 1991, 1) while calling his beloved, Madame Bovary, as “sugar” and “cupcake” (Allen, 1991, 10). He compares them as: “She is beautiful, Kugelmass thought. What a contrast with the troglodyte who shared his bed! He felt a sudden impulse to take this vision into his arms and tell her she was the kind of woman he had dreamed of all his life” (Allen, 1991, 6). When Madame Bovary warns her lover with these words “get me back to the novel or marry me” (Allen 13), however, the beautiful epithets used for her like “sugar” and “cupcake” are replaced by “little mouse.” Kugelmass changes his mind about her since he cannot afford the expenses of her new lifestyle.

No true love is involved in the selected protagonists’ marital relationship, either. Both are disappointed with their wives and want to get rid of them. They are not anymore the desirable objects, though they once used to be. Their wives, on the other hand, look at them like moneymakers. They

do not love each other since they are not able to fulfill each other’s desires anymore. As Fromm declares, “family is an agency of society” (1956, xxvi), therefore by the same token one can claim that the same is true about the society as a whole; love does not seem commendable to modern man. Accustomed to consuming more and more, modern man wishes to use what he wants without paying the costs. Capitalism manipulates its members with enforcing this ideology: the more, the merrier.

Love is no longer venerable in capitalist society and art bears the same condition. It is, also, commodified, and is used by capitalism just to render profit. Based on Frankfurt School, art has two façades or in Lijster’s words, “two ends, first, the imminent dissolution of the semblance of the work of art and, second, the proliferation of the aesthetic brought about by technological reproduction” (2017, 16). In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno mentions that art and its products of culture industry share a certain detachment from the so-called “seriousness of life” (Rebentisch & Trautmann, 2018, 21). In other words, art misses its real function in the capitalist society. Allen and Mahmoud have borne both meanings in their mind while writing these short stories. They prefer challenge conventional standards which make art forget its mission.

Karim and his art are always ignored since his talent has no value based on capitalistic standards. His father does not support him financially to buy the stuff he needs to paint and says, “I do not like him to paint in million years” (Mahmoud, 1991, 28). Nagging all the time about his poetry, his wife, eventually, rinses his books. Moreover, his friends tease him because of his talents in poetry. “Don’t ruin our pleasure with your poems” (Mahmoud, 1991, 24) and “business is far from poetry” (Mahmoud, 1991, 50). These words indicate their beliefs about Karim’s art. Ordinary people, such as the dancer in the casino, are not competent enough to have a good appraisal of his art. Therefore, it is doomed to be criticized bluntly. The dancer addresses Karim after his reading a poem: “you are definitely out of your mind” (Mahmoud, 1991, 26). In addition, the narrator also describes his way of composing poetry sarcastically. Karim himself explicates his opinion about the quality of his poetry thus: “This poem is so sophisticated that unfit alliteration is

negligible" (Mahmoud, 1991, 19). The fixed standards of composing a poem, by putting so many bounds on the poet, make it forget its true function. In Adorno's words "Today the dignity of art is measured not according to whether or not it evades this antinomy through lack or skill, but in terms of how it bears it" (Rebentisch & Trautmann, 2018, 22).

In "*The Kugelmass Episode*", on the other hand, artists and professors of literature are attacked sarcastically. After Kugelmass's journey in and out of the world of the novel, a professor declares: "I cannot get my mind around this ... First, a strange character named Kugelmass, and now she's gone from the book. Well, I guess the mark of a classic is that you can reread it a thousand times and always find something new" (Allen, 1991, 10). Allen attempts to bring his readers face to face with the reality that commodified art and literature have forgotten their real function, i.e. enlightening people. Not only love and art but man also has fixed definitions in capitalist societies, where there is no respect for heterogeneity.

While both protagonists feel unique, their wives treat them like ordinary men. In both societies, men are considered as money-makers. They are supposed to ignore their own desires for the sake of this responsibility. Mina thinks Karim is good-for-nothing since he cannot afford to provide her with her desirable life. Kugelmass has a similar dire fate in his family. He does not get separated from Daphne just because he cannot "afford another divorce."

Along with commodification, capitalism requires obedient people without identity; the ones pursuing no personal interests and ready to serve the system. Fromm refers to this fact as the role of internalization. He believes that haunted by their social duties, people under capitalism are role-oriented. It means they have lost their identity and creativity in order to satisfy capitalism's desires; both as a means of production and consumption. "Man does not experience himself as the active bearer of his own powers and richness but as an impoverished thing" (Fromm, 1956, 121). Karim and Kugelmass do not like to face this fact. As Kugelmass says: "he has emotion" (Allen, 1991, 1). It is actually part of capitalism's plan, individuals "feel that they can assert their authority;" however, in practice, they find it a wrong assumption, not really viable (Kebede, 2010, 134). They want to surpass conventional institutions and

experience new pleasures in their life. Nevertheless, they are too weak and their dream would never come true in such a "totally administrated society." Critical theorists believe that consumer society and identity formation have a forged relationship, therefore, individuals are not allowed to enjoy a creative fashion of identity (Kebede, 2010, 134).

In this respect, the role of mass media is highlighted. Like a puppeteer, it imposes its favorite way of life and thought on society. Through mass culture, celebrities, including artists, especially actors and athletes like footballers serve as role models. This is what Frankfurt School scholars refer to as fetishism, which means mystifying some people to dictate a special lifestyle. In "*The Kugelmass Episode*," Madame Bovary finds Broadway and its actors fascinating after having heard about them a lot from Kugelmass. Karim of "A Familiar Tale" assumes himself as a famous footballer and a talented poet. The former one likes to be famous and the latter one is seeking respect, both haunted by the idea of commodified fetishism.

Allen portrays fetishism in his depicted society by describing Emma's feeling after coming to the modern world thus:

She had been starved for excitement, and his tales of Broadway nightlife, of fast cars and Hollywood and TV stars, enthralled the young French beauty. "Tell me again about O. J. Simpson," she implored that evening, as she and Kugelmass strolled past Abbe Bournisien's church. "What can I say? The man is great. He sets all kinds of rushing records. Such moves. They can't touch him." "And the Academy Awards?" Emma said wistfully. "I'd give anything to win one." "First you've got to be nominated." "I know. You explained it. But I'm convinced I can act. Of course, I'd want to take a class or two. With Strasberg maybe. Then, if I had the right agent." (Allen, 1991, 8-9)

Madam Bovary is mesmerized soon after encountering the glamor of modern life.

Mahmoud shows fetishism in Karim's words several times. Karim lives in the illusion of being a famous poet and footballer who deserves others' respect. Once addressing his wife who was complaining about their financial problem, Karim says that nobody dares to spread gossips about a popular champion and poet [referring to himself] (Mahmoud, 1991, 16). Another time is when he expects a stranger to recognize him:

Karim: I'm Karim.



Stranger: Glad to meet you.

Karim: Glad? You mean, you don't know me?!!

Stranger: I'm afraid not.

Karim: Don't speak as if you don't know me. How come? You can't remember the champion of your city?! (Mahmoud, 1991, 17).

The shadow of fetishism clouds the atmosphere in both societies. It influences the people's way of thinking and consequently their lifestyle, effectively.

Unlike Adorno's passive form of existence, Fromm believes that mental health depends, to a small extent, on individual factors, but is largely a question of what a society makes possible (1956, xxvi). In the case of this study, as discussed, both societies are seemingly responsible since they oppressed the protagonists' true identities severely.

### 5. Conclusion

The comparative study of "A Familiar Tale" and "The Kugelmass Episode" through the lens of Critical Theory shows that Mahmoud and Allen have used the same techniques of writing to elaborate on the same problems of modern man in capitalist societies. The medium of short story, limited third person narrator and open ending, hand in hand with the content of their stories, let them emphasize the impact of capitalism on the individuals. The protagonists share the same feelings, in completely different settings, though. They both feel as if they are trapped in the iron cage of capitalism, where their identities and creativity are ignored. The only accepted values in their societies are the materialistic ones. Such attitudes toward life have inevitable side effect, hard to escape from. Capitalism backs such attitudes up and abuses people by victimizing them. Therefore, it is to blame for the emptiness of modern life. These are the foci of the Frankfurt School in order to free people from the loop cycle of an enforced lifestyle and to regain their true identities.

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