

THE LIFE AND WORKS

of

NAJIB MAHFOUZ

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NAJIB MAHFOUZ

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THE AUTHOR'S LIFE

Najib Mahfouz was born in Cairo in 1911, two years or so before the beginning of the first World War. While he was still a young boy, the family moved from the Al-Husain quarter of Cairo to Abbasiyya, a quiet suburb at the time. But even though Mahfouz lived an appreciable distance from the center of Cairo, he still witnessed the political activity and the uprising against foreign occupation in 1919.<sup>1</sup> Najib Mahfouz began writing at the age of 17. He was an avid reader and was greatly influenced by many western writers such as Flaubert, Balzac, Zola, Camus, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and above all, Proust.<sup>2</sup>

He entered the University of Cairo during the years of economic depression as a student of philosophy and graduated with a degree in philosophy in 1934. After this, he worked on the staff of the periodical Ar-Risala and translated a book on ancient Egypt which was later to become his first published book.<sup>3</sup>

During these years he met Salama Muse who was one of the leading figures in the development of socialist ideas in Egypt and a proponent of Darwin's theories in the Arab world.<sup>4</sup> It was Musa who encouraged Mahfouz to write for his journal Al-Majallat al-Jadida and helped the author to publish his first collection of short stories, Hams al-Junun, in 1938.

Taha Hussein & Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad influenced him as well.

The war years were followed by a period of great political turmoil and the decade of the 1940's proved to be one of considerable writing activity for Mahfouz. The 1952 revolution resulted in major changes for Egyptian society and for several years, Mahfouz wrote nothing.

The publication of his Trilogy in 1956 and 1957 brought him fame throughout the Arab world. One of the volumes of this huge work was awarded the State Prize for Literature in Egypt in 1956.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1960's Najib Mahfouz became director of the Cinema and Theatre Organization and shortly afterwards, adviser to the Ministry of Culture. He retired in 1971.

Between 1958 and 1973 Mahfouz produced a succession of novels, collections of short stories and plays. His more than 30 novels range from the earliest which were historical romances to his later works which were more in the form of experimental novels such as Hubb Tahta l-Matar which was published in 1973.<sup>6</sup>

In 1988, Mr. Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In 1989 an attempt was made on his life on the premise that his writings contained criticisms against Islam.<sup>7</sup> Today, Mr. Mahfouz is a writer for Al-Ahram and continues to publish his short stories and plays within its pages. Najib Mahfouz lives in Cairo in the suburb of Agouza with his wife and their two daughters.<sup>8</sup>

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THE WORKS OF NAJIB MAHFOUZ

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THE NOVELS - THEMES AND GENRES

Najib Mahfouz's first novel was published in 1939. Entitled 'Abath al-Adqar, it was a historical novel set in ancient Egypt and was full of action and coincidence. Two more novels in this same genre followed in 1943 and 1944, Radubis and Kifah Tiba.<sup>9</sup>

While the latter novel, Kifah Tiba, is probably the most successful in its structure and characterization, it is Radubis which is the more outstanding work since Mahfouz uses the character of King Menenra to criticize the "less savoury antics" of King Farouk in Egypt during the 1940's.<sup>10</sup>

His realistic phase genre can be seen in certain earlier novels written between 1945 and 1949. Set in ancient Egypt as well, the characters and life in the older quarters of the city of Cairo are depicted with great accuracy and careful attention to detail. One of these novels was called Zugag al-Midaqq. It was written in 1947. Novels in this genre appeared at the rate of about one per year until 1949.

The first novel which introduced the author's "realistic phase" and portrayed the structure of Egyptian society and the social conditions of its various classes was Al-Qahirat al-Jadida.<sup>11</sup> The hero of the work is Mahgub, a poor student, who upon graduation, is unable to find a job. With the help of a friend an "arrangement" is made for him to marry the mistress of a senior official and he

is given a civil servant post in exchange. His "opportunistic rise" arouses his friends resentment, the arrangement is revealed and the situation ends in a scandal.<sup>12</sup> This first novel focuses on the widespread dominance of the old political parties in Egyptian society.

Yet another successful novel in this same genre is Bidaya wa-Nihaya published in 1949. Once again, the characters are portrayed in vivid detail and equal importance is given to the description of the quarter in which the work is set. The lives of the characters blend in with their surroundings and their own personal tragedies may be compared to the effects and tragedies in Egypt as a result of World War II.<sup>13</sup>

The series of novels that culminated in The Trilogy, a work which won for its author the State Prize for Literature in Egypt and the esteem of the entire Arabic world (aforementioned in the Life of the Author) paints a picture of Egypt during the years 1918-1944 through the eyes of a single family over the course of three generations. In volume one, the head of the household, Abd al-Gawwad, rules his family with an iron hand although his restrictions regarding wine and women do not seem to apply to himself. Volume two is set in a different quarter of Cairo and focuses on one of Abd al-Gawwad's sons, Kamal. Kamal is suffering from a crisis of belief and has a terrible argument with his father. He begins to identify his own crisis with that of the old party system which becomes for him, nothing more than a false concept of democracy. In the last volume, set in a third quarter of Cairo, attention is devoted to two grandsons. Unlike Kamal, their beliefs are very positive and assertive. Both belong to reactionary groups. At the end of the volume, both are thrown into jail for their views. The fate of the two young men clearly is a reflection of Egypt's confusion prior to the revolution.<sup>14</sup>

This enormous work manages to portray the familial lives of Abd al-Gawwad as well as incorporate political events and intellectual movements which took place in Egypt during the timespan of the work. In a sense it is really Time who is the hero of this monumental work. Despite what happens to the family or in the family, Time carries on.<sup>15</sup>

The Trilogy was completed in 1952 and the revolution occurred that same year. King Farouk was banished, a new regime was in power and Mahfouz published nothing for the next several years.

A version of mankind's religious history in an allegorical style was a new genre which appeared in Mahfouz' new work, Awlad Haritna published in 1959. It proved to be extremely controversial but not because it reflected the new Egyptian society. The work was presented in a serial type form in a daily newspaper. Its major figures were given thinly disguised names. Adam, for example, was named Adham. Mahfouz' implications and personifications aroused the intense opposition of the religious conservative establishment in Egypt. The result was that the book was not published in Cairo although it has since appeared in Lebanon.<sup>16</sup>

A whole series of novels was published during the 1960's which reflected the changing nature of Egyptian society in post-revolutionary times and displayed concern for the individual and his role in society. These novels are characterized by considerably less description and employ the stream of consciousness technique. The Thief and the Dogs (1961) and Chatter on the Nile (1966) are two examples of this genre.

As the June war of 1967 proceeded to devastate the Arab world both physically and mentally, Mahfouz again stopped writing novels and turned his attention to short stories and plays.

In 1972-3 Mahfouz published two works under the general rubric of riwaya. The first entitled Al-Maraya is in the nature of a fictional intellectual and political history of Egypt during the author's lifetime. It portrays 54 characters who mirror various walks of life. Al-Hubb Tahta l-Matar reflects the current malaise in Egypt. Set in Cairo it also encompasses the Suez Canal front where there is fighting and killing. Comments are voiced by some of its characters about the stark contrast between life at the front and indifference of the city population. It paints an accurate picture of the situation of Egypt at that time.

In writing his novels Mahfouz made use of various techniques and patterns from many literary schools. His prose fiction works show clearly the stages of his development. This is one of the major differences which distinguish his works from those of European writers such as Camus.

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THE SHORT STORIES

In his short stories, Najib Mahfouz writes in a style frequently termed "litterature des idees."<sup>17</sup> His characters tend to emerge in an abstract form as compared to his novels where they are depicted in detail.

God's World is a collection of short stories which have been grouped together by theme. Theme one touches on the setting of man and his world in which pure reason is not always sufficient for understanding. Blame is placed on God, the government or some hidden force. Explanation is hopeless.

The Happy Man is another example from group one and reflects the opposite reaction. Despite frustrations, anxieties, state of the world, war, there is still, inexplicably, happiness.

Group two reflects the anxiety of living in God's World and man's searches for consolation to do so through religion, alcohol, sex or drugs. Questions are avoided, a state is achieved whereby worries no longer bother one. Success or fame are not wanted because one's fate is controlled by irrational forces. The agitation following this discovery is what drives man to his search for consolation in religion, drugs, alcohol and sex.<sup>18</sup>

The characters in group three resemble "l'homme engage."<sup>19</sup> Like the first two groups they find a lot of rationality in God's World and are also anxious about living in such a world. They too, seek consolation in sex, religion, alcohol and drugs. However, they move on to a further stage. They resort to "intellectual consolation."<sup>20</sup> This is what the old man in The Window is searching for. Ultimately he realizes that one cannot simply withdraw from society. One is a part of the wider human community. His mode of life has not brought him happiness. Seeing that it is

too late for him to change he commits suicide which is always an escapist answer where revolution is not.

The Black Cat Tavern illustrates man's endless capacity and that in spite of his consolations and intellectual palliatives, he will succeed in the end. With the exception of The Black Cat Tavern all the stories in the third group were written after the June war of 1967. Both this event and the July 1952 revolution had a profound effect on Mahfouz.

Under the Bus Shelter is the title story of another collection of short stories which was written between October and December of 1967. The title story introduces a terrifying world in which extraordinary events are taking place. No explanation for them is given or sought.

Characteristic of much of Mahfouz' latest writings in this genre is The Heart Doctor's Ghost. A long story, it is divided up into sections in which the basic structure is repeated with subtle changes to the wording and situations.

In the first three groups of this particular collection, the fellahin and oppressed person are not represented. In the final group a few stories do represent such people. Two examples are The Prisoner of War's Uniform and The Wilderness. In the first story The Prisoner is depicted as a man of meagre intelligence with aspirations as low as his social status. All his energy is used to survive. This is his hope and his one ambition. The tragedy of WWII passes before him but he has absolutely no concern about who is fighting or why his own country is occupied.

The Wilderness reflects the depth of petty concern. The main character is forced to divorce his new bride on their wedding night and spends the rest of his life on a stupid quest motivated by hate, jealousy and revenge.<sup>21</sup> Both stories represent absurd situations but at the same time do bring a true Egyptian flavour to the genre.

### THE PLAYS

Najib Mahfouz also wrote plays. In The Legacy the plot follows the same kind of theme as group three of the collection of short stories entitled God's World. The main character tells the saint's son when he learns that the latter owns a tavern that visiting a tavern is a means of consolation, too. "People are looking for peace of mind when they head for a tavern as well." <sup>22</sup> Like sex, he rationalizes, visiting a tavern and partaking of alcohol acts as a tranquilizer.

### CONTRIBUTION, COMPARISONS, CRITICISMS OF THE AUTHOR'S WORKS

Mahfouz' major contribution to modern Arabic literature has been through his novels. There have been many articles devoted to this genre in particular but no analysis in detail has as yet been made of his short stories or plays. His works have attracted a good deal of attention and without doubt they will continue to be read and studied both in the Arab world and the west. <sup>23</sup>

To many Western writers, literature has a function and a message to convey, in that it should offer some kind of explanation for life and the secret motivations for what makes man function in this Universe. Most of these writers have had their own ideas which they proceeded to explain through their novels and plays, thus following in the footsteps of the ancient philosophers. <sup>24</sup>

Mahfouz has not done any of this nor has he ever attempted to explain his own writing even though there are critics who have not been slow in doing so for him and writers in the Arab world who are prepared to elaborate on their own personal philosophies and ideas such as Taufiq al-Hakim, the great dramatist. <sup>25</sup>

For the critics, new writing should reflect the relationship of an individual with the experience of his society. Literature should adequately express the struggle with the "octopus of imperialism"<sup>25(a)</sup> which is a basic fact of Egyptian life and should mirror the life of the working class. Forms of expression therefore become very important. As far as the critics are concerned, any gap between expression and content immediately suggests a "flight from reality."<sup>26</sup>

One of the main criticisms of the works of Najib Mahfouz is that while he reflects popular life he avoids the use of colloquial Arabic. This absence in their opinion indicates a certain alienation from real life by Mahfouz and a literary experience that is perhaps "empty."<sup>27</sup>

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It is the personal opinion of this writer that the few works available for perusal by Najib Mahfouz express a refreshing verismo and exude a realism and naturalism that is far from alienation of life. The style, presented in English is not obtuse nor incomprehensible, neither does it attempt to portray life as some kind of glorification which it is not, in any case. The human experience on many levels is evident in his writings and is sincere.

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*He wrote about politics, women & Islam  
and he contributes to each topic tremendously*

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

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London: Doubleday, 1990.

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Islamica, 1973.

Hourani, Albert.

A History of the Arab Peoples.  
New York: The Belknap Press  
of Harvard University Press,  
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NB: Professor Obeid, please note that there are no commentaries on the life or works of Najib Mahfouz in either the Encyclopedia Islamica or the Oxford Encyclopedia Islamica. The other book you suggested, Modern Arabic Literature by Roger Allen, will not be available until March 29, 1996. At that time, I shall take a look at it to see if it may contain information that may be useful and of interest to both of us and if so, I shall add it to this paper. Thank you for your help, it has been an interesting project.

Barbara Solis

Submitted March 18/96

AC 2102 - Prof. A. Obeid

F O O T N O T E S

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- <sup>1</sup> Najib Mahfuz, God's World. (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1973), no page.  
(Translated by Akef Abadir and Roger Allen)
- <sup>2</sup> Naguib Mahfouz, Palace Walk. ( London: Doubleday, 1990), no page.  
(Translated by William M. Hutchins and Olive E. Kenny)
- <sup>3</sup> Najib Mahfuz, God's World. (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1973), no page.  
(Translated by Akef Abadir and Roger Allen)
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid
- <sup>6</sup> Naguib Mahfouz, Palace Walk. (London: Doubleday, 1990), no page.  
(Translated by William M. Hutchins and Olive E. Kenny)
- <sup>7</sup> Professor A. Obeid. Arabic Culture Studies, University of Ottawa.
- <sup>8</sup> Naguib Mahfouz, Palace Walk. (London: Doubleday, 1990), no page.  
(Translated by William M. Hutchins and Olive E. Kenny)
- <sup>9</sup> Najib Mahfuz, God's World. (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1973), no page.  
(Translated by Akef Abadir and Roger Allen)
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid
- 13-25, Ibid
- <sup>25(a)</sup> Albert Hourani, A History of the Arab Peoples. (New York: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), page 402.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid, page 402.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid, page 402.