

Naguib Mahfouz (December 11, 1911-August 30, 2006) is to date the only Arab writer to have been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature (1988). His global reach is magnified by the very fact that he had rarely travelled outside Egypt. He did not even appear at his own Nobel Award Ceremony. He seemed to have confined himself physically, emotionally and literarily to Cairo where he was born into a lower middle-class Muslim family and lived all his life. Al-Jamaliyya, the quarter of his birth in old Cairo, and al-‘Abbasiyya, the suburb in new Cairo to which his family moved in 1924, would remain at the heart of practically all his writings. This exclusive devotion to Cairo cannot hide the cosmopolitan outlook underpinning his works. For the city that shaped his thought and literary career was utterly cosmopolitan. Mahfouz never had to travel to acquaint himself with the world; the world came to him through education, translation, work opportunities and intellectual networks.

He was educated at a kuttab (Qur’anic school), then modern primary and secondary schools, and finally Cairo University, the re-named first modern University, King Fuad, founded in 1934. He then began an MA in philosophy only to abandon it two years later in order to devote himself to writing fiction. His education, a combination of traditional (Islamic) and modern, ensured his mastery of the Arabic language and literary tradition and at the same time afforded him the ability and opportunity to read widely in world classics and key contemporary works in translation and, on occasion, in the original language (he read English comfortably). His seemingly uneventful career as a civil servant in the Ministry of Culture in fact put him in close contact with one of the most exciting modern forms of expression: cinema. He was at some point, before his retirement in 1972, director of the film censorship office. However, this did not prevent him from contributing numerous film scripts, the income from which supplemented his earnings from his job. Crucially, more than thirty films were made from his novels, even though he himself refused to adapt his own work for the screen.

On retirement he joined a group of distinguished writers, such as Tawfiq al-Hakim, at Egypt’s leading newspaper *al-Ahram* and from then on his novels were first serialized in the newspaper before appearing in book form. He belonged to numerous intellectual networks, including the Harafish group ‘formed’ in 1943, named so by Ahmad Mazhar, one of Egypt’s leading actors, that included writers like Mustafa Mahmud, Ahmad Baha’ al-Din, Salah Jahin and Muhammad ‘Afifi, who are today considered important cultural figures in Egypt. Mahfouz was friends with, in addition to Tawfiq al-Hakim, Yahya Haqqi, Mahmud ‘Abbas al-‘Aqqad, Taha Husayn, Mustafa ‘Abd al-Raziq, Husayn Fawzi and Salama Musa, all of whom Mahfouz considered his ‘teachers’. These are all key architects of modern Egyptian culture and literature who, except for al-‘Aqqad, travelled to Europe and brought with them a kind of cosmopolitanism to Cairo. Through contacts with them (meeting them regularly at Casino Qasr al-Nil or Café Rish) and their prolific publications and activities, Mahfouz, as well as other intellectuals and writers of his generation, who came into maturity between the two most important anti-colonial revolutions (the 1919 revolution led by Sa’d Zaghlul and the 1952 revolution led by Gamal Abdel Nasser respectively) came to know the world and the ‘West’ in a particular way, and to interrogate the West’s mediating role in Egyptian modernization on their own terms.

This cosmopolitan Cairo, a world mapped by a multiplicity of overlapping and, on occasion, conflicting cultures, literary tastes and political ideologies, dominates the

landscape of Mahfouz's fiction (comprising thirty-six novels, fourteen collections of short stories, dozens of film scripts and round five plays). The main characters of his novels, short stories, film scripts and plays are caught in the web of conflicting desires born out of political and social forces that are in turn driven by and shaped in the meeting of tradition and modernity, religion and science, East and West. Freedom, Mahfouz tells us in his interview with *Paris Review* (Naguib Mahfouz, *The Art of Fiction* No. 129), comes to be his principal reoccupation: 'Freedom from colonization, freedom from absolute rule of a king, and basic human freedom in the context of society and family'. The novel, as an open form, is particularly suited to his interrogation of the ways in which religious authority, political despotism, and patriarchal tyranny intersect and affect individual psyche and destiny, whether of the powerful or powerless. This was already evident in his first three historical novels based in Pharoanic Egypt inspired by his readings of Sir Walter Scott: *Abath al-Aqdar* (1939, trans. Raymond Stock as *Khufu's Wisdom*, 2003); *Radubis* (1943, trans. Anthony Calderbank as *Rhadopis of Nubia*, 2003); and *Kifah Tiba* (1944, trans. Humphrey Davies as *Thebes at War*, 2003). Even though he abandoned his first ambitious project that would have included thirty historical romances, he never strayed far from the subject closest to his heart. From his first realist novel, *Khan al-Khalili* (1945) to his last autobiographical work, *Asda' al-Sira al-Dhatiyya* (1995, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies as *Echoes of An Autobiography*, 1997), he painstakingly wrote about individuals and communities in search of freedom, of all kinds, in a drastically changing world that is nearly always represented by Cairo.

Cairo Trilogy (1956-57), Mahfouz's claim to fame, is a stupendous family saga (in round 1500 pages) written in the realistic mode. It traces the waning fortunes of the family of al-Sayyid Ahmad 'Abd al-Jawad, a middle-class merchant residing and working in old Cairo, as it came face to face with the forces of modernization and revolution in the inter-revolution period (between 1919 and 1952). *Palace Walk* (*Bayn al-Qasrayn*, 1956, trans. William M. Hutchins and Olive Kenny, 1990) focuses 'Abd al-Jawad's eldest son, Fahmi, who goes against his father's wishes and takes part in political activities leading up to 1919 revolution only to die in the crossfire between the police and revolutionaries. *Palace of Desire* (*Qasr al-Shawq*, 1957, trans. William M. Hutchins, Lorne Kenny and Olive Kenny, 1991) turns attention to 'Abd al-Jawad's two sons, the eldest Yasin and youngest Kamal, and tells the story of a generation's political and social alienation through the vicissitudes of their love life. *Sugar Street* (*Al-Sukkariyya*, 1957, trans. William M. Hutchins and Angele Botros Samaan, 1992) surveys the political ideologies as represented by the positions and activities of 'Abd al-Jawad's grandchildren, the children of Yasin and his daughters Khadija and 'A'isha. In this panoramic history of Cairo, the figure of 'Abd al-Jawad, towering at the beginning and dwarfed in the end, is Mahfouz's portrait of tyranny, not only of a patriarch but also of the traditions (religious, superstitious and social) that garner and perpetuate the power of a tyrant.

'Abd al-Jawad's control over his family's every move and decision, including their sex life, is contrasted to his own licentious behaviour in order to expose the absoluteness, as well as hypocrisy of tyrannical authority. This is a recurring motif in Mahfouz's novels. '[W]hat has always fascinated him', Edward Said explains in 'Naguib Mahfouz and the Cruelty of Memory', 'is in fact the way the Absolute—which for a Muslim is of course God as the ultimate power—necessarily becomes material and irrecoverable simultaneously... What is felt and what is lived are made

manifest and concrete but they cannot readily be grasped while being painstakingly and minutely disclosed in Mahfouz's remarkable prose'. The abiding power of the physically shrivelling 'Abd al-Jawad at the end of *Cairo Trilogy* is reincarnated as the Jabalawi in the notorious episodic allegory, *Awlad haratina* (serialized in *Al-Ahram*, September to December 1959 then published in a book form in Beirut by Dar al-Adab, 1967, when it was banned in Egypt, trans. Philip Stewart as *Children of Gebelawi*, 1981, and Peter Theroux as *Children of the Alley*, 1996), who is now a Barthesian myth, and as such his authority mysteriously but omnisciently hovers over the horizon of humanity. This allegorical history told from the perspective of monotheism and its impact on humanity, down to religion's encounter with modern science, is complemented by another story, this time narrated from the perspective of the riffraff (harafish). *Malhamat al-harafish* (1977, trans. Catherine Cobham as *The Harafish*, 1994) reads like a secular version of *Awlad haratina*, very much in the style of Arabic popular epics (*al-sira al-sha'biyya*); it recounts the gradual iconization of the patriarch, 'Ashur al-Naji, in a story of a family's rise from rags to riches. By the end of the novel, 'Ashur acquires a divine halo and comes to resemble Jabalawi—enigmatic, inspirational and omnipresent.

Mahfouz is equally interested in all forms of acquiescence and resistance to power. How is power to be grasped, managed and overcome? His novels are too about individuals who engage with power differently, dependent on their stance, understanding and character. In *Cairo Trilogy*, Fahmi goes against both colonial and parental authority and Yasin sneaks around while Kamal resorts to philosophical contemplation. The vast array of Mahfouz characters, from the early phase of realism through to experiments in Sufi allegory, magic realism, and re-writings of pre-modern Arabic texts and literary genres, are all susceptible to the allure of power, whether in the form of political clout, social standing, financial influence, psychological control, or symbolic dominance. *Al-Sarab* (1948, *Mirage*) tells the tale of a man unable to resist his mother's manipulations, *Bidaya wa nihaya* (1949, trans. Ramses Awad as *The Beginning and the End*, 1985) of social-climbing gone awry, *Al-liss wa l-kilab* (1962, trans. Mohamed Mustafa Badawi and Trevor Le Gassick as *The Thief and the Dogs*, 1984) of a man falling prey to the machinations of an idealist turned power hungry intellectual, *Al-karnak* (1974, trans. Saad el-Gabalawi in *Three Egyptian Novels*, 1979) of the impenetrable psychology of a torturer, to give but a few examples.

Mahfouz's portrayal and interrogation of power are varied and multidimensional. He has a knack for bringing out the dialectical and dialogical relationship between power and its subject, as well as the powerful and powerless. *Layali alf layla* (1978, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies as *Arabian Nights and Days*, 1995), Mahfouz's re-writing of *The Thousand and One Nights*, is arguably about the democratization of political authority seen from two complementary perspectives: Shahrayar's rehabilitation as blood-thirsty tyrant and his descent from his throne; and the people's initiation into the political process. This twined process of as yet incomplete democratization is necessarily mediated by a 'soul-searching' that involves re-evaluation of the entire intellectual tradition especially of the Arabic-Islamic world. *Rihlat Ibn Fattuma* (1983, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies as *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*, 1992) takes stock of the epistemological structures underpinning the major political-social-economical systems operative in the world at one time or another. He does not spare the land of Islam his critical scrutiny. Despite the promises of Allah to the Muslim

community of faithfuls—the Qur'an as divine revelation—Islam in practice has failed to deliver justice to Muslims.

Mahfouz, raised a devout Muslim, has never shied away from tackling controversial issues. He has managed to evade censure through camouflage. He is a master of subterfuge. He writes allegories and parables, especially in his post realism career, and, more importantly, he strikes a fine balance between concealing and revealing, theory and practice. *Tharthara fawq al-nil* (1966, trans. Liardet as *Adrift on the Nile*, 1993) is a veiled critique of Nasser's regime at the root of an entire generation's political alienation and decadent lifestyle. *Amam al-'arsh* (1983), *Yawma qutil az-za'im* (1985, trans. Malak Hashem as *The Day the Leader Was Killed*, 1989) and *Al-'a'ish fi l-haqiqqa* (1985, trans. Tagreid Abu-Hassabo as *Akhenaten, Dweller of Truth*, 2001) are invariably allegories of Sadat and Mubarak's rule. *Awlad haratina* and *Rihlat Ibn Fattuma*, though written more than two decades apart, are similarly allegories of Islam as a flawed cultural institution. Both target the mythification of the past, or the canonization of tradition, whether in the form of historical memory in the former—how the history of Islam is narrated, or moral authority in the latter—how Islam is reified as a body of texts, both of which determine political and social practices. He is, however, always careful to maintain Islam as a perfect religion. This kind of balancing act was at work in his simultaneous condemnation of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* as insulting to Islam, and of Khomeini's 1989 death *fatwa* as un-Islamic. His care did not prevent Islamic extremists from attempting to assassinate him in 1994. He survived but the nerves of his right hand were seriously damaged and as a result he was no longer able to write at length. Instead, he had to write in small doses. This, combined with his poor eyesight, perhaps explains why his output almost came to a standstill after 1989. *Qushtumur* (1989) would be his last novel written in sustained long narrative form. *Asda' al-sira al-dhatiyya* (1995, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies as *Echoes of An Autobiography*, 1997) comprises very short chapters, each no more than one printed page.

Mahfouz is today considered by many the 'father of the Arabic novel' not only for the longevity of his career and the global recognition of his art but also for his pioneering role in establishing the centrality of the novel as a literary form in Arab culture. 'The experience of Najib Mahfuz', Elias Khoury suggests in 'The Unfolding of Modern Fiction and Arab Memory', 'most readily lends itself to this discussion' (5) of how the Arabic novel, a new literary form in Arabic culture, emerged at the hand of Mahfouz from a formless prose that combined 'the language of the past and the experience of the present' in the marginal activities of the writers at the turn of the twentieth century, such as Taha Husayn's *Al-ayyam* and Jubran Khalil Jubran's *Khalil al-Kafer* (4). '... While he [Mahfouz] offered a social document on the development of Egyptian society, he reintegrated his writings, the novel, into the historical understanding of the European novelistic form... [H]e gave the Arabic novel the history it did not have before... From Walter Scott to Balzac, Mahfuz created the form with the two means he had; the knowledge of Egyptian society and a naturalistic then realistic perspective which permitted him to create a form which is Egyptian in content and European in form... The turning point created by Mahfuzian experience... is this long voyage toward a national image through the mirror of the other. As if this mirror will later allow for the possibility of liberation from it' (5).

In his homage Khoury allude to Mahfouz's life-long commitment to innovation in his portrayal of Cairo and Cairenes. Cairo is a labyrinth of conflicting forces of change, modern, cosmopolitan and complex. Cairenes, caught in the web of Cairo's overlapping networks of power (old Cairo and new Cairo, the state and the underworld), are varied and nuanced in their responses. God-like political tyrants, hegemonic patriarchs, benevolent or 'wily' matriarchs, out-of-touch religious figures, iconized heroes from the past, innocuous instruments of government control, traditional merchants, petit bourgeois, nouveaux riches, underworld thugs and sex workers, café owners, labourers and thugs, Wafidsts, Nasserists, opportunists and fundamentalists, ambitious, submissive or contemplative individual men and women, all these characters together provide us with a rich psychic canvas of Cairenes. Khoury also draws attention to the quality of Mahfouz's writing, of the integration of classical Arabic poetics and prosaics into Arabic storytelling not limited to his recasting pre-modern Arabic genres in the novel form, such as his explicit rewriting of *The Thousand and One Nights*, The *rihla* (travel) genre, the popular epic, or classical biography (in *Hadith al-sabah wa'l-masa'* (1987, trans. Christina Phillips as *Morning and Evening Talk*, 2008) but extends to minute details of language and interstices of thinking and feeling. This quality of his writing, what Michael calls the 'unclassifiable' (97) 'Mahfouzian Sublime', is what gives the Arabic novel its distinct identity and trajectory according to Khoury, and paves the way for a new generation of Arab novelists to embark on new adventures in search of form, subject and language.

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