

## BRIEF MENTIONS

KAMALA MARKANDAYA

*Two Virgins*

London: Chatto & Windus, 1974. Pp. 250. £2.75.

Miss Markandaya's eighth novel is one of those unpretentious books which require a little time to make their impact: their unique perfume, as it were, is of the slow-release variety. *Two Virgins* is deceptively simple, but its author is an experienced South Indian writer, now living in London, and there is nothing provincial or naive about the book. I would guess that, apart from native influences on her writing which the Westerner can only guess at, she has learned something from the art of understatement as practised by the great American novelists of the middle decades of this century. The book opens on a rather low key, and very gradually rises to a climax; the only exciting action is reserved for the last fifty pages. But the slow climb of the dramatic interest is very skilfully managed, and the beginning linked to the end with a deftness that can only have come with long practice.

"Chingleput ran the only sweetshop in the village" is the sentence with which Miss Markandaya chooses to start her narrative. It is only on the third page that one of the two virgins of the title, Saroja, is introduced in her capacity as one of Chingleput's customers; but on the second we read this: ". . . the sugar he drew up on the ends of his tin prongs came up as fine, people said, as maiden's hair" (p. 4). The subtle patterning of the novel's imagery is discreetly launched in this unobtrusive sentence. Saroja, ferocious but uneasy virgin to the last, sees her maidenhood gently tried by Chingleput (who is otherwise a minor character in the story) on the last page.

The other virgin of the title is Saroja's elder and more beautiful sister Lalitha, but she does not remain a virgin for long. She runs away to the big city with a film director, returns pregnant, is carried back to the city by her indignant parents who insist that the father extricate her from the trouble he has got her into. Saroja, who is dragged everywhere by the family

in case she falls in the same way, is far more distressed by the abortion than Lalitha, who on the whole is pleased to be rid of a nuisance. But even the trauma Saroja undergoes is not one that permanently damages her. After Chingleput has "nuzzled her body" with his "hard organ" (p. 250) she draws away. She "wasn't afraid," we are told, "she knew too much, she had gone through too much to be afraid of anything." As she rides away, girlishly, on her "bike," she feels the tears "cascading down her face," but she does not know for whom they are falling, "for her, or Chingleput, or for what was ended" (p. 250). And "after a while she didn't try. She thought instead of when she was older, felt the wind in her face and the tears drying as she skimmed down the path that led past the fields to the house" (p. 250). Lalitha has disappeared, has blended in with the wicked city she cannot part from, and (at least in terms of the morality according to which she was raised) is a lost creature. Perhaps she will make good, as a film star or a model; perhaps she will drift into prostitution, though the author implies that she is too canny for that. But Saroja has learned from her sister's experiences, and she, we feel, will turn out all right. When she is ready she will give herself up to the sexual whirlwind that has swept her sister away and has already wafted Saroja herself with its torrid breath; but she will master its force and grow into a mature woman who knows and who controls.

This penetrating study of the awakening of sexuality in a young girl (who, like Ernestina in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, had "seen animals couple, and the violence haunted her mind" p. 30) is also a sensitive account of the impact on a rural community of city mores. Mr. Gupta, the "Western punk" who "dishonours" Lalitha, drives around in a big car in a village more familiar with the bicycle and bullock cart as a mode of transportation. The girls' father, who lives on the legend of his activities as a terrorist in the

struggle for independence from Britain, is intimidated and overawed by the city and Mr. Gupta's imposing domestic establishment. All the tensions Satyajit Ray explores in his more recent films, such as *Company Limited*, are discreetly in evidence in this book. How can India develop her economy and raise the standard of living of her people without compromising on the standards which give her traditional ways of life their honor and dignity? Saroja would seem to point the way. It is possible, Miss Markandaya suggests, to be a woman, to be Indian, to fulfill oneself sexually and personally, without sacrificing all that is good and decent in one's upbringing. It is true we leave Saroja on the threshold of this adventure; but a more positive assertion would be out of place in a novel of understatement and muted rhetoric such as this.

John Fletcher

### NAJIB MAHFOUZ

*al-Karnak*

Cairo: Maktabet Misr, 1974. Pp. 109.  
Piaster 25.

In his novel *Hob taht al-Matar*, Najib Mahfouz has dealt narratively with the dilemma of young intellectuals in Egypt after the military defeat of 1967 (see *IFR*, 1 [1974], 68); in *al-Karnak*, he returns to the same subject matter, to the situation before and after this defeat, shedding more light on the political and moral bankruptcy of Egypt's "glorious revolution." Once again his heroes are the "true children of the revolution" (p. 45).

The narrator, an uncommitted and objective middle-aged man, spends most of his time in "al Karnak" (a café in downtown Cairo), watching the customers and the owner of the café, a retired belly dancer. He is mainly interested in a group of university students who come to the café, from time to time, to chat and discuss the political and social problems of

their country. For no apparent reason, the vicious secret police incarcerate and chastise them; Zainab, the only girl among them, is raped in prison in front of the chief of police. Nevertheless, these patriotic young people do not lose faith in the cause of the revolution, simply because they believe, like most people, that the "suffering of the masses is the price of great revolutions" (p. 78). But when Egypt is defeated and humiliated during the six-day war, they, like the rest of the people, find no justification for what they have endured.

In spite of the many similarities between this novel and *Hob taht al-Matar*, it is obvious that Najib Mahfouz is now preoccupied with many ideological aspects of his society in a way that makes him neglect the development of a coherent plot and the creation of engaging and radiant characters. These two qualities, incidentally, established his reputation as an accomplished novelist and a beguiling storyteller. For instance, the love affair between Qronfola, the owner of the café, and one of the students, and the relationship between Zainab and Ismail—her playmate, colleague, and lover—are kept far in the background, so that the writer can devote himself both to the impact of certain political incidents on the younger generation and to the way in which this generation is driven to disenchantment, alienation, and moral corruption. Due to this uneven blending of enlightening and entertaining elements, readers who usually appreciate coherent plots and exciting incidents will be disappointed by this heavy political novel.

Never, in his more than twenty novels, has Najib Mahfouz been so committed to a specific ideology, and very seldom has he expressed his opinion about the Egyptian Revolution so openly—and so unpoetically—as in this novel. Undoubtedly, the freedom which the new regime in Egypt granted writers and intellectuals has made it possible for them to express their views and voice their criticism more openly than before. But, ironically, this newly acquired freedom could lure even gifted writers away from poetic forms and allusive styles, and lead them to more direct modes and less imaginative manners, as it has done in the case of Najib Mahfouz.

S. Elkhadem