

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.

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