

# The Tragic Vision in Najib Mahfouz's "The Tavern of the Black Cat"

SAAD EL-GABALAWY, *University of Calgary*

Najib Mahfouz is probably the most remarkable novelist in the Arab world today. His early career starts with historical novels dealing with ancient Egypt.<sup>1</sup> In his later works,<sup>2</sup> while exploring universal and timeless aspects of the human condition, he concentrates on the intellectual, social, and political climate of modern Egypt before and after Nasser's *coup d'état* in 1952. Mahfouz excels in the art of the novel, with its possibilities of expansion in terms of character and plot, rather than in the art of the short story which requires a good deal of selection and compression to shed light on a particular moment of significance. His short stories<sup>3</sup> have received very little attention from contemporary critics.

Many of the pieces in the collection *Khamāret al-Qitt al-Aswad* (The Tavern of the Black Cat)<sup>4</sup> indicate that the writer has an exquisite taste for uncommon and mysterious events. In his code of thought, the story must be exceptional enough to provide its *raison d'être*. Therefore, he introduces extraordinary incidents freely into his stories, regardless of the objective representation of reality which approaches the scientific method. In order to assimilate the irrational and mysterious elements, the reader should attempt to suspend disbelief, for he is witnessing another world bound by its own logic and necessities.

Perhaps the best example in this regard is the first story in the collection, "A Vague Word," where a gangster has a strange dream of the enemy he had murdered many years before, echoing his last words before death: "I shall kill you from my grave." This evokes recollections of the day the man was buried and his wife raised her baby over the grave, making a solemn oath that the infant would one day take revenge on his father's murderer. Nurtured upon local tradition and superstition, the gangster's mind is totally preoccupied with interpretations of the dream. Most of the old women, who claim to be knowledgeable in the art of dream-reading, agree that the ghost of the father might urge his son to seek revenge.

With intolerable premonitions dominating his mind and heart, the gangster starts the agonizing search for the son to destroy him, or rather to destroy his own fear. Guided by rumors about the place of the young man, all the tough members of the gang follow their leader to a remote area in the desert. "They walked slowly and cautiously along the way, which was full of stones and rubbish, almost suffocated by ugly and rotten smells as if coming out of corpses in a state of decay. The darkness became increasingly thicker until they reached a narrow footpath with ruined walls of old houses on both sides. Everything died in the darkness, even their shadows . . . And in the far distance they glimpsed a faint light."<sup>5</sup>

The journey follows a labyrinthine pattern of striving towards a goal across a difficult and dangerous terrain. Mahfouz vividly represents the imminent doom through the strangeness, the adventurousness, and the sinous forward movement of this fatal pilgrimage. Eventually when the men almost reach

their destination, there is suddenly a piercing cry of pain in the heart of darkness and the gangster falls down groaning with the agony of death, his blood "oozing slowly among the stones" (p. 16). They "have never felt such humiliating helplessness . . . The man was slain amidst them. Where is the killer, where is his house? Instead of the house, they found a tomb in the wilderness. Nobody felt or saw the murderer when he came and escaped stealthily. He vanished like thin air in the darkness, without a sound or trace" (p. 16). Thus ironically comes the catastrophic realization of the dream which is the chief focus of the story.

In terms of modern psychology, the dream may be regarded as an expression of suppressed fears, but this does not explain the mysterious end of a man rushing irrevocably to his destiny. The pivotal character in attempting to avoid his fate, acts in such a way as to seal it inexorably. Mahfouz seems to believe in the existence of an actively malign power in the universe. The forces of fate in some of his stories appear to be hostile, vicious, and whimsical. The essence of man's tragic plight lies in the notion that he is lifted up only to be dashed down. His self-made threads of aspiration finally serve to entangle him in the recognition of his helplessness. He sees himself doomed to be perpetually cheated of his aims and mocked by a superior power which takes no heed of his hopes and fears.

The theme of fate in Mahfouz's work is closely related to the limits of vision in man. There is an important aspect in the actual page-by-page experience of reading the stories: the uneasiness or confusion of the reader, his sense of being afloat on a troubled conceptual and ethical sea. Much of the reader's bewilderment is due to the pervasive and obvious shortsightedness of most characters. In fact, these myopic characters are very similar to us, with our limited vision and incomplete knowledge of the truth. Many of the stories present the spectacle of several limited and inadequate points of view at indecisive war with each other. The writer addresses himself less to vision than to blindness: to man's refusal to overlook his prejudices, and his inability to discern what lies beyond his limitations. In different ways, Mahfouz seems to insist upon the relativity and shortcomings of his characters' perceptions and of their codes of judgement which often cancel each other.

"A Miracle" accentuates poignantly the wide gap between illusions and reality. At the beginning of the story, the central character is sitting alone in a tavern and, out of boredom, thinks of a strange game to while away the time. He fabricates a very uncommon name of a fictitious man and asks the waiter if that person is one of his customers. As might be expected, the waiter has never heard the name before. To the utter surprise of the protagonist, a few minutes later he hears the manager of the tavern shouting the same name to answer a telephone call. This, for him, could not be mere coincidence, since the man has no real existence except in his own fancy; he is the creator of the name. The experience gradually leads him to a vague feeling that he possesses some innate power of superhuman vision, of extra sensory perception. Baffled by the "miracle," he decides to test his newly-discovered gift by repeating the experiment. When he coins another very strange name and asks the waiter about it, there is a similar telephone call. "He left the tavern staggering with amazement and bewilderment, fear and joy. In the next few days, the 'miracle' became the centre of his contemplation and conversation. Some said it was nothing more than an extraordinary coincidence . . . whereas others believed it was really a strange phenomenon which could nevertheless be interpreted in terms of the natural law of existence" (p. 132 f).

But he aspired to a new metaphysical interpretation beyond nature, an interpretation that would raise him above other humans, that would change his life. In effect, he tried to build a false world for himself, an illusory shelter where he expected to exorcise life's suffering. The experience gradually isolated him from his family and friends, when he became obsessed by this inner light which might change his barren life and transform him into a transparent being with a miraculous power. The fixed idea caused him to delve deeper and deeper into studies of occult and mystical phenomena of spiritual illumination. After months of reading and meditation, he decided to test his power again. Moving from one café to another, he played the same game, but to no end. Eventually he went to the tavern where he had the first revelation of this "extra sensory perception." There, he was approached by a boisterous drunken man who gave him the most unexpected interpretation of the "miracle." He told him how in that first night, a group of drunks were sitting next to his table and heard him asking the waiter about the strange names. As a practical joke, they sent one of them twice to the nearest shop in order to make the telephone calls. While listening to this cheap and mundane explanation of his mysterious power, the protagonist felt his soul disintegrating with grief and despair. His infantile harmony was cruelly shattered by the discovery. In the tempestuous fury of disillusionment, he stabbed the drunk's neck with the fork on his table, then collapsed completely.

In symbolic terms, the drunk represents the ugliness of reality, reversing all the protagonist's expectations. The latter's fantasy world is a mental phenomenon which reveals the irrationality and absurdity of man's attempts to create his own version of reality, to change the facts of life and defeat suffering. Mahfouz repeatedly suggests that human vision is illusory, fragmented, and negative. The mind tends to accept what it expects, which is often conditioned by needs and desires, hopes and fears, weaknesses and follies, preconceptions and prejudices. The writer is not perplexing his characters out of mere whimsy, or playing a hoax on his reader. In my view, he renders the reader less rather than more ready to speculate about the true nature of situations or to anticipate the frustration of the fanciful by the actual. Instead of providing him with a back door, so to speak, he presents him with a veritable labyrinth of alternatives which lie beyond human visibility. The reader sees too much blindness and confusion in all, including himself, to trust the views of anyone. The situational irony in many of Mahfouz's stories is used in the sense given currency by T. S. Eliot, namely a strong awareness of alternative possibilities and points of view. Far from pretending to see beyond the sight of other men, the author stresses the faults and limited scope of all human vision.

The essence of the truth is again hidden by misleading appearances in "The Defendant," where a man finds himself unjustly accused of a crime, without any hope of proving his innocence. A young villager is hit by a truck on the highway, but the driver runs away to escape from responsibility. Another driver, who has witnessed the accident, stops out of compassion to help the dying youth. At that moment, the fellaheens rush from their fields and, judging by appearances, jump to the conclusion that he is the guilty one. The class conflict is poignantly depicted in the confrontation, charged with hatred and hostility, between the barefooted peasants and the owner of the car. The reader becomes keenly aware of the plight of the man, trapped by circumstances beyond his control, so that he suddenly and inevitably declines from happiness to misery. On his way to prison, the accused clings to the faint hope that the injured man may survive and reveal the facts. This, however, cruelly comes to an end through the irony of fate, when the villager

dies without uttering a word. Although the plot lacks originality and complexity, the story is redeemed by the subtle moment of illumination at the end, where the peasants and the investigating officer derive a morbid pleasure from the victim's death, since it serves to confirm the man's guilt. Out of sheer perversity and prejudice, they refuse to transcend the limitations of vision and never try to explore the truth.

The problem of the limited vision assumes a different form in the story entitled "The Tavern of the Black Cat," where the writer adopts the allegorical mode to set his symbols in motion. The tavern is full of riotous drunkards when a stranger arrives and starts to intimidate them: "His unexpected presence charged the atmosphere and all of them felt it. The singing stopped. Laughs were stifled and faces drawn. Some stared at him openly while others eyed him stealthily. But it did not last long for they soon recovered from the shock of the awesome spectacle. They would not let the stranger spoil their evening" (p. 158). In spite of their attempt to resume merrymaking, they become gradually convinced that there is no point in staying any longer. The stranger, however, prevents him forcibly from leaving the tavern and insists they must know his story. "The minutes ticked away in the strained atmosphere. Their low spirits sobered them after the intoxicating effect of the wine" (p. 163). To escape from the stranger's oppression, they ignore him completely, drinking and singing, unrestrained and uninhibited. "The present gradually receded into the realm of forgetfulness and the memory disintegrated, released its hidden treasures so that each could not tell who his companion was" (p. 167). Finally, the stranger, sadly and tearfully, walks away, leaving the drunkards with a deep sense of wonder: "When and where have [we] seen that man?" (p. 168).

In sustaining the literal dimension of his narrative, Mahfouz gives the story the hard convincing texture of authenticated fact. Through its dramatic movement, it has the potentialities of an actual experience. Through close attention to vivid and minute details, the writer creates an air of verisimilitude. This is not only the effect of the sober tone; it springs also from the sensitive and subtle movement. But the literal surface is not transparent enough for the reader to establish immediately a definite relationship between the two levels of meaning. The tavern, with its oppressive darkness and iron-barred window, seems to signify the world as a prison of the soul. The stranger can be regarded as a personification of the truth from which the customers of the tavern try to escape for fear of pain. Although they are momentarily shocked into awareness and sobriety, these men prefer the lethargy of oblivion.

It is also possible to assume that the stranger typifies death, coming suddenly and stealthily to shock human beings who indulge in earthly pleasures and ignore the ultimate moment of truth. Perhaps the greatest strength of the story lies in its ambiguity. The more we explore its dynamic images, the more they expand in the mind. Simultaneously, we become increasingly aware of our failure to grasp the full significance of the personified abstractions which stand for a system of ideas. Presumably, the writer is deliberately attempting to accentuate the lack of meaning, which is the great dilemma of man.

Many of Mahfouz's characters are exiles, suffering from alienation and psychic homelessness. They are often outcasts who have failed to find their spiritual home in society: drunkards, drug addicts, gangsters, prostitutes, and the like. Man is isolated from man by unsurmountable barriers of religion, illusion, apathy, prejudice, preconception, irrational hostility, and spiritual blindness. Again and again, the writer reveals the failure of communion and the almost complete absence of compassion.

Significantly, the genuine feeling of human brotherhood can be perceived in Mahfouz's "Paradise of Children," which is cast in the form of a dialogue between a young girl and her father. The child wonders why she and her closest friend go to different classes in religious lessons; this artificial separation does not make any sense to her. The father tries in vain to explain the difference between Islam and Christianity, and fails pathetically to give adequate answers to the girl's questions about the nature of God and eternity, or about the duality of heaven and hell, good and evil, life and death. Mahfouz communicates in the simplest terms the child's magnificent vision of the universal man, uncorrupted and unrestrained by the complications of formal religion. There are no obstacles of preconceptions to mar her spirit of real sympathy and communion. The reader clearly hears the voices of innocence and experience, the spontaneous intuition of the child versus the sophisticated mind of the adult. Apparently, the more we grow up, the more we progress backwards in terms of vision. The father is totally conditioned by years of indoctrination, which inevitably create barriers of fanaticism and intolerance. Until challenged by his daughter's questions, he has not given any serious thought to abstract issues of doctrine and faith, blindly accepting the fact of isolation.

Generally speaking, this collection of short stories clearly reflects the writer's basic pessimism and tragic view of life. He is more inclined to protest against the inadequacy of human existence than to extol its fulness. Instead of a balanced and benign order in man and society, Mahfouz finds maladjustment, disillusionment, cruelty, perversity, and frustration. Love is absent from his world. Men approach each other to destroy and to be destroyed, never to attain plenitude of being. For the author, the earth is not paradise, life is not a theme for rapture. The tragic nature of his characters stems mainly from their inability to alter their condition. The universe he sees as a place of blind necessity and inexorable law, ruled by a capricious power which takes no account of human aims.

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, *Radoubis* (1943) and *Sira Tiba'* (The Struggle of Thebes), 1944.

<sup>2</sup>The novels include *al-Qāhira al-Jadīdah* (The New Cairo), 1945; *Khan al-Khalīf*, 1946; *Zouqāq al-Medaq*, 1947; *al-Sarāb* (The Mirage), 1948; *Bida'iah wa Nihā'iah* (Beginning and End), 1949; the trilogy of *Bein al-Qasrain*, 1956; *Qasr al-Shoq*, 1957; and *al-Soukaria*, 1957. Mahfouz's most recent novels, *Hob Taht al-Matar* (Love in the Rain), 1973, and *al-Karnak*, 1974, are reviewed by Saad Elkhadem in the *International Fiction Review* 1 (1974), 68; 2 (1975), 81 respectively. For a complete bibliography see *al-Jadīd*, No. 24, January 1973, pp. 41-43.

<sup>3</sup>The collections of short stories include *Hams al-Jonoun* (The Whisper of Madness), 1938; *Donia Allah* (The World of God), 1963; *Beit Sai' al-Som'ah* (A House of Ill Repute), 1965; *Khamāret al-Qūt al-Aswad* (The Tavern of the Black Cat), 1968; *Taht al-Mizallah* (Under the Umbrella), 1969; *Hikā'iah Bila Bida'iah walā Nihā'iah* (A Story of No Beginning and No End), 1971; *Shahr al-'Asal* (The Honeymoon), 1971; *Hikāyat Harītha* (Tales of our Lane), 1975.

<sup>4</sup>Najib Mahfouz, *Khamāret al-Qūt al-Aswad* (Cairo: Maktabet Mist, 1968).

<sup>5</sup>This translation and subsequent ones are mine. The only exception is "The Tavern of the Black Cat," trans., A. F. Cassis, *Contemporary Literature in Translation*, 19 (1974), 5-8.