

The Function of Space in Najīb Mahfūz's *Bayn al-Qasrayn*

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Man uses space to fulfill as well as to protect himself. The author of *The Psychology of the House*, Olivier Marc, writes: "I was convinced of the existence of an inner space within myself, a sort of image of the exterior space around me, to which I was responsive."¹ Besides being a projection of the individual's inner space, exterior space must protect and comfort the social group that built it. In a novel, especially by a writer such as Najīb Mahfūz, who stresses so much the relation between his characters and their environment, space becomes part of a coherent fictional structure: many of Mahfūz's titles refer to Cairene neighborhoods and streets while his detailed descriptions of rooms, houses, streets, and shops remain a constant characteristic of his long and productive career. The three volumes of his best-known work, *The Trilogy*, are named after three Cairene locations: *Qasr al-Shawq*, *Bayn al-Qasrayn*, and *al-Sukkarīyah*. Narrating the history of Sayīd 'Abd al-Jawād's family from 1917 to 1944, they present a spatio-social vision of respectively the low, middle, and high middle class.² *The Trilogy* starts with *Bayn al-Qasrayn* which describes the family life in its original home during the political turmoil of 1917-1919.³ The present paper limits itself to the study of that home in these last two years of the First World War. It shows that Mahfūz uses space to define the individual in terms of his social class, and at the same time, makes that space appear as a psychological sign of how the individual defines himself and his spiritual direction. These two interdependent functions are not static but, with the movement from one generation to another, define the dynamics of historical change.

Women wore the veil for complex reasons. Nevertheless, to the consciousness of the middle class in general, it simply served to protect them from the looks of male strangers. A house like Sayīd 'Abd al-Jawād's extends this function. *Bayn al-Qasrayn* begins with Amīnah, Sayīd 'Abd al-Jawād's wife, late at night going to the "moucharaby," a "projecting oriel window with wooden latticework enclosure," to watch the streets below, the rooftops, and minarets.⁴ She regularly waits at this late hour for her husband to come home, and the

¹ (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977) 7.

² For its preoccupation with the destiny of the middle class, at least one critic, 'Abd al-Rahmān Yāghī, accuses Mahfūz's art in general of being exclusive. *Al-Juhūd al-Riwa'īyah: Min Salīm al-Bustānī ila Najīb Mahfūz* (Beirut: Dār al-'Awdah, 1972) 80-100. This fact emphasizes the centrality of *The Trilogy*'s exhaustive and unified description of that class.

³ *Bayn al-Qasrayn* (Cairo: Maktabat Misr, [1960?]).

⁴ "Shariba," *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 3rd ed.

outside view comforts and reassures her. The "moucharaby" offers an exceptional service to women because, through its latticework, they can inspect the outside world without themselves being seen.

Although having lived in this house since her marriage twenty-five years ago, Amīnah left it only on those rare occasions when, accompanied by her husband, she visited her mother. With him beside her, she did not dare glance at the passing scenes. She and her daughters, Khadijah and 'A'ishah, receive women visitors, but with the exception of these encounters, their experience of the outside world comes mainly from observing it through the "moucharaby." The house resembles a castle whose enclosed structure forces the dwellers to look to the inside. The women in particular rarely open the window shutters, and only just a crack. Although they resort to the "moucharaby" regularly, they have to come very close to its wooden latticework in order to perceive anything clearly. Thus, in practice, the outside view is blocked.

Most of the activities take place in an inward direction. The rooms have windows looking on an inner court, and on both floors, they lead to a central living room. A corridor connects the inside of the house with the outside. This design of the home inspires a feeling of privacy, intimacy, and independence.

Since they rarely venture outside, the women more than the men experience their home as a limiting and yet personal space, as if it were their own body. From the "moucharaby," Amīnah watches street scenes and may even overhear part of a joke or a song. However, she never dreams of taking part in the public spectacle: images and sounds reach her consciousness and are buried there.

Compared with other husbands and fathers of his age and class, Sayīd 'Abd al-Jawād imposes an unusually harsh control on his family. Mahfūz stresses this point. But Sayīd 'Abd al-Jawād is not an eccentric character. In fact, his exaggerated conservatism sharply demonstrates some representative traits of his generation. The middle class believes in the sanctity, *hurmah*, of the father's house. This sanctity determines what one may call the protocol of the house, the rules of behavior which the dweller must respect. Although society in general defines this protocol, families may enforce it differently. Hence, the forbidding of all singing in his house, even during his son's wedding celebration, exemplifies Sayīd 'Abd al-Jawād's too conservative understanding of the protocol. With such severe discipline, he is confident that his castle will not be disturbed. He spends his time in his room on the top floor, visiting the other sections only when required by a special occasion. As in chess, he, the king, moves in limited areas while his queen, Amīnah, moves around the house easily and regularly. Thus he who decides everything depends completely on her for his knowledge of the family's affairs.

The house is divided into many specialized units that are used ritualistically: it has rooms for the father, mother, boys, girls, guests, and maid; living and dining rooms, a study, kitchen, storage room, and even a small garden on the roof. Looking at a clock, one could tell where the inhabitants are at any given time, and sometimes in detail: for instance, the boys eat breakfast with their father in the dining room, seated in a certain order. Although in his ab-

sence tension eases, the family still ritualistically comes together and separates in a significant manner: Amīnah, the two daughters, and the boys Yāsīn, Fahmī, and Kamāl meet every evening in the living room on the first floor to chat and drink tea; then, the daughters go to their bedroom to sleep; Yāsīn leaves the house for a bar and different adventures; Fahmī goes to the study; and the young boy Kamāl remains with his mother as long as he can.

Like a veil, the house protects the dwellers' privacy while discouraging the women from actively communicating with the world at large. However, as will be shown, this same veil will be turned by the young and pretty 'A'ishah into a most effective instrument of flirtation. Moreover, the house centralizes the family, helping it live as a group rather than as independent individuals. With the exception of Fahmī, who studies in a separate room, in almost all other cases when its members are at home (the father, of course, excluded) the family spends most of its waking time together. In such a setting, it is little wonder that Mahfūz gives many illustrations of the individual's obligation to agree with the group.

Yet individual self-expression is not absent. Amīnah builds on the roof a world of her own: there, she raises chickens and pigeons and even starts a garden. In the whole neighborhood, her creation is unique. But this self-expression does not actually violate the protocol of the house. Instead, it transcends its limitations: Amīnah has a profound joy in contemplating this world of birds and flowers which, in her imagination, she endows with human qualities. Moreover, from her roof, she scans the minarets and rooftops as far as her eyes can see: this perspective of height causes a feeling of peace and domination. But, especially when discerning the nearby al-Husayn mosque which she cannot visit considering the ban on leaving the house, a feeling of nostalgia prevails over Amīnah's initial joy. One day when her husband is out of town, and emboldened by the encouragement of her children, she visits this mosque with Kamāl; thus, religious piety helps her break the tradition of her class. This very act of leaving the house after so many years of accepted isolation reveals an intuitive doubt about the necessity of some protocols. Learning from her about the visit, Sayīd 'Abd al-Jawād sends her away to her mother as a punishment. When later he orders the boys to bring her home, she has repented. Being the exception, this episode reemphasizes Amīnah's regular attempts to fulfill the protocols of her home. Like her husband, she believes that the house *must be* a static world with immutable functions: it defines as it limits the individual.

In a great measure, the house has the function of suppressing the expression of love and sexual desire. Ironically, Sayīd 'Abd al-Jawād's children turn the restrictive spatial arrangement of their home into an instrument of this expression. 'A'ishah, the younger daughter, commits the terrible impropriety of opening the window shutters and showing herself to a young officer whom she likes. With the same shutters which are meant to protect women from the look of men, she communicates her feelings for one man: from her act, he realizes that she favors him. Yet, what she does cannot be described as a conscious revolt against authority—she waits for the officer in a state of excitement mixed with fear. Moreover, when Khadijah, who sees her before the officer, warns her that the neighbors may witness her act, 'A'ishah does not seem to have considered the danger to her reputation. She is awed to discover that, from her spatial

vantage point, her sister has judged the meaning of the scene. 'A'ishah does not admit her intention, which in the eyes of the witness, appears obvious. When she realizes how her hesitant act is inevitably interpreted as a transgression, she is greatly troubled.

Fahmî, in love with Maryam, also exploits space in order to communicate actively with her. Using the excuse that on the roof they can enjoy the fresh air, he takes his younger brother Kamâl there to teach him spelling. In reality, Fahmî hopes to see Maryam if she appears on her roof. He places Kamâl in front of him with his back to the wall separating their house from Maryam's. Mahfûz recounts a scene in which she appears: Fahmî in a clear voice asks his brother to spell the words "heart," "love," and "marriage" only to hear him protest these words are not in the book. As demonstrated by the complex situation which he creates, Fahmî manipulates space with more self-awareness than 'A'ishah. Yet, although excited to see his plan succeed, ironically he cannot stop wondering why Maryam remains on the roof instead of running away to hide when she discovers his presence. Like 'A'ishah, Fahmî cannot admit the meaning of his act: even if Maryam is more daring than his sisters, he certainly is no less guilty of breaking the protocol. Moreover, his ambiguous evaluation reveals the discrepancy with which the protocol is applied to both sexes. Fahmî judges Maryam not with his eyes but with those of society. Although 'A'ishah and Fahmî break the protocol for the same reason, courtship, they act separately—Fahmî, for example, does not suspect 'A'ishah of appearing in the window. So, mistakenly, he judges Maryam by comparing her with both his sisters. The meaning of 'A'ishah's and Fahmî's acts are not made explicit by a mature consciousness: the meaning is suppressed, vague, and in Fahmî's case, even inconsistent. Tradition and Sayîd 'Abd al-Jawâd define more or less clearly the protocol. His children break it, but hesitantly: they are testing new means of self-expression. In their separate acts, so daring at that time for such a conservative family, one foresees the birth of a new social and psychological order that will increasingly stress the importance of the individual.

Yâsîn, Sayîd 'Abd al-Jawâd's older son from a different mother, accidentally and violently breaks the protocol. He sexually assaults two women sheltered in the same house: the first, a housemaid who could be his mother in age and who has served the family since she was a girl; the second, the maid of his newly wed wife. Yâsîn, the sexually overactive youth of the family, had no prior interest in these women: one night, on his way out to find his mistress and to face the danger of being stopped by foreign soldiers of occupation, he sees the housemaid sleeping in the court and decides that she is a surer adventure; months later, while walking back and forth on the roof at night to overcome his boredom and frustration at not being able to leave the house because of British soldiers camped in front of the door, he realizes that his wife's maid is sleeping nearby and again is broken by temptation. Sayîd 'Abd al-Jawâd divorced his first wife because she was difficult to control. Yâsîn, who spent his early childhood with her, remembers with disgust how she used him as a messenger to her lover. Mahfûz, careful about the effects of inherited traits on his characters, indicates that Yâsîn has his father's powerful sexual desires and his mother's unrestrained way of fulfilling hers. The means by which Yâsîn breaks the protocol implies his separation from the family as well as a moral judgment on his acts. He uses or tries to use the farthest space from the family and the

least public: the oven-room in the court and a room on the roof built with broken pieces of wood and filled with mosquitoes.

Khadījah, the older sister, does not break the protocol, though she feels tempted to leave the house with 'A'ishah to visit Maryam when their father leaves the city on a business trip. Khadījah resembles the mother in her maternal feelings for the family, and is second only to her in ability to care for it.

The boy Kamāl does break the protocol: he sings. In fact, the book ends with Kamāl's song as the father enters the house. As the Egyptian critic M.A. Al-'Alim explains, "Kamāl is singing for the future."⁵

The new generation redefines space: windows are used not only to get information but also to show oneself; the peaceful garden on the roof serves the anxious proposals of love; and isolated rooms of no special interest become requirements for forbidden sexual pleasures. The possibility of such functional transformation always existed; however, it needed a particular consciousness to be realized. One could not imagine Amīnah, before her marriage, appearing in a window to communicate her liking for a man, not only because she is Amīnah but because she represents a generation and class of Cairene women for whom such a situation would be highly improbable. The same can be said of what her husband would not do in comparison with Fahmī and Yāsīn. Although he seems to perform the same acts, only with more expertise and, of course, away from the home, he remains faithful to a completely different set of rules. The historical moment limits for every social group its possible kinds of actions—the individual can be creative only within these limits.

In choosing the function of his space, man invents its logic. Some spaces remain without apparent function but quickly acquire a *raison d'être* when needed to achieve a certain aim. Fiction, particularly the realism of Najīb Mahfūz, reduces the arbitrariness of space to a minimum. But the relationship between the spatial and psycho-social structure of the novel is complex. Upon first reading *Bayn al-Qasrayn*, one has the impression that it offers a random collection of psychological, social, and historical facts. But further study shows that the novel's different structures, as M.A. al-'Alim suggests, are interdependently related.⁶ Although Mahfūz describes his characters and the events that shape their life fragmentarily, these characters in *The Trilogy* fulfill their potential and complete their self-definition in time. In the process, the inanimate matter of space hesitantly but constantly metamorphoses because the consciousness perceiving it is changing. At first, the spatial transformations seem imperceptible and arbitrary. Only after surveying a long period of time can one realize the extent and constancy of change. In *Bayn al-Qasrayn*, the metamorphosis of space is associated with a change of attitude. A new generation tries to break long-held traditions and mostly fails: 'A'ishah has to marry

⁵ *Ta'ammulāt fi 'Alam Najīb Mahfūz* (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Misriyah al-'Ammah Lil-Ta'lif Wa-al-Nashr, 1970) 76.

⁶ Al-'Alim 66.

not the officer, but a different man; Fahmî is disappointed to learn that Maryam flirts from her window with a British soldier; Yâsîn's acts end in disgrace. Only Kamâl, who is a boy during this period, grows in the other books of *The Trilogy* to be a free individual who makes conscious choices. Exemplifying the graded transformation of psycho-social conditions in Egyptian culture, his brothers and sisters realized but imperfectly that somehow they could influence their own destiny. Without them, the existence of the new individual, Kamâl, would be improbable.