

At the end of each of the first seven chapters the voice of E.T.A. Hoffmann is sounded from Limbo. The italicized type of these brief sections (called "ETAH IN LIMBO") alerts us to the differences between these soliloquies and the rest of the novel. (They recall occasionally the italicized interchapters of Hemingway's *In Our Time* and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*.) These monologues from the dead perform a choral function as they pass judgment, sometimes ironically, on the goings-on in Davies's crowded narrative.

When the Cornish Foundation held its meetings, "the five members sat at the Round Table, upon which was the Platter of Plenty, heaped high with the fruits of late August" (76). *The Lyre of Orpheus* is Davies's Platter of Plenty, which overflows with literary echoes, clever dialogue, and Keatsian "continual allegory."

Naguib Mahfouz

*QUSHTUMUR*

Cairo: Maktabat Misr, 1988. Pp. 147. 200 piasters

Reviewed by Saad El-Gabalawy

As a master of social realism, the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, winner of the 1988 Nobel Prize for literature, has been described aptly as "a Dickens of the Cairo cafés." Throughout his life, he has had a coterie of friends—journalists, writers, and artists—who would meet regularly at certain cafés to play backgammon, exchange gossip, discuss politics, and explore questions of art and literature. Presumably, such gatherings have provided the setting for his recent novel, *Qushtumur*, the name of a popular café in an old district of Cairo, where five intimate friends have met almost daily from the days of youth in the 1920s to the days of decline in the 1980s. They are, so to speak, soul mates blended together with a bond of "spiritual harmony," which has stood the test of time, in spite of disparities among them in terms of fortune, temperament, and social status.

These men, who represent the upper class, the bourgeoisie, and the intelligentsia, epitomize the "marriage of true minds" as they approach each other with total devotion which verges on perfect identification. Unlike many of Mahfouz's other novels, which abound with elements of violence and betrayal, *Qushtumur* focuses on communion and compassion, profound affection and ideal friendship. It seems that the novelist, now in his late seventies, has reached a stage of serenity. With his remarkable virtuosity and craftsmanship as a raconteur, he traces the experiences, fortunes, beliefs, loves, and tragedies of his characters over seventy years, ranging from the vitality of blooming childhood through the maturity of middle age to the decay of tottering old age. The pattern of the novel is strongly reminiscent of the natural cycle of the seasons. Within this narrative framework, the reader observes the striking manifestations of human destiny, subject to the formidable triangle of time, mutability, and death, which are in fact the real protagonists of the work.

*Qushtumur* is a realistic novel par excellence. It gives the air of complete authenticity and truth to life characteristic of Mahfouz's early works such as *Khan al-Khalili* (1945), *Midaq Alley* (1947) and the *Trilogy* (1956-57). With its mimetic representation and linguistic transparency, it is an important political document, providing precise and unromanticized topical allusions to momentous and irretrievable events in Egyptian life from the days of resistance against the British occupation in the early decades of the century to the death of Sadat and beyond. Mainly through dialogue among the pivotal characters at "Qushtumur," the reader revisits the 1919 Egyptian revolution, the violent demonstrations against imperialism, the oppression of foreign domination, the process of social polarization, the decadence of the monarchy, the rise of fascism and religious fundamentalism, the corruption of political parties, the raids on Cairo during the Second World War, the imminent danger of a Nazi invasion, the downfall of King Farouk, the turmoil of Nasser's coup d'état, the atrocities of military dictatorship, the staggering defeat of the six-day war in 1967, and Sadat's peace treaty with Israel, which ultimately led to his assassination. As is common in historical narrative, *Qushtumur* takes up some position at a point in the scale between the general and the particular. The political events and their concomitant influences are depicted in close relation to the personal experiences of the central figures, who reflects crosscurrents of thought and sensibility, ranging from conservatism to liberalism and socialism.

Besides, Mahfouz meticulously records the transformations in social patterns over the century, which parallel the physical changes in the old district and in the café itself, accentuating the dynamic conflict between the "good old days" and the "brave new world." Through suggestive strokes here and there, he portrays, as it were, a schizophrenic nation wavering between Eastern and Western cultures. This is particularly manifest in the liberation of women, who gradually discard the veil, receive university education, embark on professional careers, and attain relative freedom of choice. The women in the novel can be regarded as cultural symbols of change, pointing up the breakdown of traditional values and the emergence of new social norms. In relation to this aspect of transformation, Mahfouz delineates the clash between the scientific trends of the West and the religious truths of the East. The book as a whole paints vivid pictures of the Egyptians in their quest for an independent identity rooted in the cultural heritage, while assimilating elements from Western civilization.

in *Qushtumur*, Mahfouz plays variations on the sociopolitical issues explored in many of his earlier novels, especially the *Trilogy*, which focuses on three generations of a middle-class family in the period between 1917 and 1944. It might be posited that he is starting to rest on his laurels and to recycle hackneyed material. But in my view, he approaches such traditional material with great finesse and sophistication, so that it acquires the freshness and uniqueness of something never heard before. It is also important to stress that *Qushtumur* is not a political or sociological or historical study. Above all, it is an enjoyable novel which demonstrates that the old master has not lost his magic touch.