

A Note on Mahfouz's Effort to Strike a Balance Between East and West

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Long before the Nobel prize for literature was awarded to Naguib Mahfouz in 1988, a large number of his fifty or so novels and short stories (published from 1938 to the present) had created a stir in Arabic literary and religious circles upon publication, ranging from high praise to death threats for allegedly blasphemous writings.¹ The most recurring criticism of Mahfouz, however, concerns what some scholars have labeled as "a total Westernization of thought . . . seen in the far-from-Eastern elements which he has forced upon the Arabic novel."² Others have gone as far as to criticize "the excessive reliance of Mahfouz and his generation on Western fictional models."³ The validity of such accusations can be determined by a literary, social, and cultural study of Mahfouz's use of language, setting, atmosphere, and characters in his novels. The result will show that though the laureate, by his own admission, employs Western forms and techniques in his writings, his works have not only successfully managed to retain a distinctly Egyptian flavor, but have also made numerous contributions to the growth of Arabic literature as a whole.

Although Mahfouz's works have gone through major changes through the years, ranging from historical novels in the 1930s to the current stage of impressionistic realism, one constant seems to be his love for his homeland and for the city of his birth, Cairo. His remarkable ability to set a scene in his novels therefore springs from a description of his actual surroundings and daily life. For example, Mahfouz is a master at emphasizing the charm of a crowded city such as Cairo while purposely creating a feeling of loss that one often feels in cities. In *The Search*⁴, he describes a Cairene train station and the neighborhood around it by pointing to "the cars, buses, pedestrians, street vendors, noise, wide streets, noise." Yet his description is not limited to the city itself, since his intention is to emphasize what he sees as "contradiction and contrasts everywhere." He therefore goes on to describe "the hot rays of the sun struggling to the last before setting, and a pleasant cool breeze waiting to take over after the struggle was inevitably finished." These paradoxical conditions are then accentuated by "an arcaded street in front of the 'Cairo Hotel,'" a beggar "sitting cross-legged near the doorway chanting a religious song," a street that "was crowded with shops on both sides," and "piles of merchandise . . . strewn all over the sidewalks" (11-12). Such descriptions should not be seen by the Western reader in a negative light, but instead as a heartfelt emphasis on those traits that are unique to Arab cities, and whose charms may escape a

¹ Patrick E. Tyler, "Egypt Is Said to Guard Nobel Prize After Threat," *Washington Post* May 4, 1989: A29.

² Muhammad Qutub, "Qā'idat Naguib Mahfouz al-lati yantaliq minhā lā tattajeh nahwa al-Islām," *Al-Liwa'* 2 Feb. 1989: 6. My translation.

³ Muhammad Siddiq, "Taking the Measure of Egypt's Nobel Laureate," *Los Angeles Times Book Review* 12 Nov. 1989: 11.

⁴ Naguib Mahfouz, *The Search*, trans. M. Islam, ed. M. Wahba (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1987). Subsequent references refer to this edition.

Westerner's mind. In most of Mahfouz's novels, such scenes proudly represent a natural part of the contradictions that exist within Arab societies, instead of daily occurrences that should be ignored, shunned, or purposely hidden.

Mahfouz's ability to set a specific scene is not limited to descriptions of cities, as can be seen in the short story "Al Khalâ'," translated as "The Wilderness,"⁵ where emptiness, vacancy, the open country, and the open air are emphasized. The description of *Al Khalâ'* is also purposely ambiguous and symbolic, combining "sightedly realistic" elements with "evocatively ambiguous" ones.⁶ The combination of these seemingly opposite poles (nature and civilization) exists in many of Mahfouz's novels, and may be a reflection of many Arabic residential quarters that are, unlike Western suburbs, often surrounded and merged with the wilderness, making nature a familiar sight, even to city dwellers.

Mahfouz's characters, not unlike their surroundings, are also often drawn from middle-class Egyptian society, and their struggles are representative of the wider social picture in Egypt. Consequently, if the reader is to understand the social, political, or economic conditions of a certain group in Egyptian society, then he or she must look beyond the characters and into the social/political struggle of Egyptian society at a certain period⁷. The intellectuals who, for instance, found themselves frustrated in Egypt as a result of censorship and political turmoil in the early 1960s are often represented as a dissatisfied class of Egyptian society. In his introduction to *The Thief and the Dogs*, Trevor Le Gassick reaffirms this last point by stating that "[Mahfouz details] with delicacy and great courage the crises of identity and conscience suffered by Egyptian intellectuals in a period of pervasive malaise."⁸ This last statement is equally applicable to Mahfouz's *Trilogy* in which three generations of a Cairene family are portrayed along with many of their daily activities and customs.

Although Mahfouz denies being influenced by any one Western writer, he freely acknowledges borrowings from Western literary currents. For example, being one of the first Arabic writers to introduce the stream of consciousness technique to the Arabic novel, Mahfouz nevertheless insists that the way he uses interior monologue differs from the way this technique is used by such Western writers as Joyce and Woolf.⁹ His psychological novels do not sway from the social and political realities that surround his characters, as demonstrated in *The Thief and the Dogs*,¹⁰ where these issues are emphasized by the use of the interior monologue.

Mahfouz's negative criticism often seems to be triggered not only by his political stands and powerful position within the Arab literary world, but also by

⁵ Naguib Mahfouz, "The Wilderness," in his *God's World*, trans. Akef Abadir and Roger Allen (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1973).

⁶ "Mahfouz: Clarity Is Good, But So Is Ambiguity," *New York Times* 14 Oct. 1988: C32.

⁷ "Naguib Mahfouz," *Current Biography* 50, May 1989: 35.

⁸ Trevor Le Gassick, introduction, *The Thief and the Dogs*, by Naguib Mahfouz (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1984) ii.

⁹ For exact quotes by the laureate, see "A Nobel's Inspiration," *World Press Review* Jan. 1989: 61.

¹⁰ See note 8.

the author's secular outlook. Long before Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, for example, led to a price on his head by Muslim fundamentalists, Naguib Mahfouz had shaken the Arab world with his allegorical novel *Awlād Haritna* (translated as *Children of Gebelawi*). It was immediately condemned by al-Azhar, the seat of Muslim learning, and triggered threats against the author's life.¹¹

The final, and perhaps the most important, contribution that Mahfouz has made to Arabic literature has been a linguistic one. The Arabic language, being highly stylized, does not lend itself easily to a modern subject matter, yet Mahfouz is credited with the "creation of a style that combines the narrative manner of classic texts such as *The Thousand and One Nights* with contemporary subject matter."¹² His novels are therefore easily accessible to all Arabic readers.

For the past decade or so, Arab scholars have witnessed an invasion of Western elements into Arabic literature, and an alleged waning of those elements that characterized it when it was at its peak during the eighteenth or the early nineteenth centuries. As a result, some writers have absolutely refused to look to the West, while others sought to blindly imitate Western elements. The result has been a literature that is either too classical or too Westernized. Naguib Mahfouz remains one of those exceptional Arab novelists who have successfully Arabized Western elements while developing Eastern ones. His Nobel prize, coupled with recent interest in the literature of the Arab world as a whole, may just provide the recognition that modern Arabic literature deserves and needs.

¹¹ See S. El-Gabalawy, "The Allegorical Significance of Naguib Mahfouz's *Children of Our Alley*," *International Fiction Review* 16.2 (1989): 91-97.

¹² R.Z. Sheppard, "A Dickens of the Cairo Cafés," *Time* 24 Oct. 1988: 75.