

Naguib Mahfouz: A Profile

Salih J. Altoma, Indiana University

When Naguib Mahfouz (Najīb Mahfūz; Cairo, 1911-, B.A. in Philosophy, Cairo University, 1934) was declared the 1988 Nobel Laureate for Literature, few in the West beyond his audience of Middle-East specialists had heard of him or read his works. As Mahfouz himself observed in his Nobel speech, "the moment my name was mentioned in connection with the prize silence fell, and many wondered who I was."¹ His main publisher in the United States, Donald Herdeck (Three Continents Press, Washington, D.C.) summed up his experience in marketing Mahfouz, by declaring: "Mahfouz, who is a writer of the caliber of Thomas Mann, has been resolutely ignored in America," and by suggesting "Western snobbery and perhaps even racism" as factors operating not only against Mahfouz but also against many other Third World writers Herdeck has been publishing in the U.S.²

It is relevant to cite in this context three important facts. First, modern Arabic literature has a history of more than fourteen centuries, "a longer period of continuous literary activity than any living European language can boast," as noted by the late eminent Orientalist H.A.R. Gibb.³ Second, as a national literature of about 170 million Arabic-speaking people, it has been enriched in recent decades by the contributions of numerous leading poets, novelists, and playwrights who, like Mahfouz, deserve to reach a wider international audience. Finally, since the 1920s, literary critics, first in Egypt and later elsewhere, have promoted, perhaps prematurely at the beginning, one or more of the leading Arab writers as candidates worthy of the Nobel Prize.

To be ignored or overlooked whenever the Nobel Prize for literature is awarded inevitably raises serious questions about the West's attitude towards Arabic literature. Irrespective of the rationale one may wish to offer for the West's indifference, the fact that an Arab writer was awarded the Nobel Prize for the first time in its long history represents a significant development in Arabic-Western literary relations. It serves not only as an act of recognition, though long overdue, of the position that Arabic literature occupies among other world literatures, but also as a turning point leading hopefully to its wider circulation in the West or elsewhere.

Mahfouz's literary career began as early as 1932 when he published a translation of a book on ancient Egypt. Since then he has diligently pursued his creative efforts, with the exception of a prolonged silence (1952-1959) he imposed on himself following the Egyptian revolution of 1952. Having felt that he said all that he had to say about pre-1952 Egypt, he waited, during his self-im-

¹ Naguib Mahfouz, *The Nobel Lecture*, trans. Mohammed Salmawy, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1988).

² *Publishers Weekly* 28 Oct. 1988: 14.

³ H.A.R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, ed. Stanford J. Shaw and William R. Polk (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962) 246.

posed silence, to see, with hopeful expectation, the outcome of the radical transformation promised by the revolution. It was after this silence that he began in 1959 to serialize in *Al-Ahram* (between Sept. 11 and Dec. 25, 1959) his celebrated metaphysical novel *Awlad Haratina* (The Children of Our Quarter, translated as *Children of Gebelawi*). This work represents a radical shift from his realistic treatment of contemporary social issues to an allegorical reflection on seemingly similar but perennially unresolved problems since Adam's fall. Set within the context of the great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) the novel traces, in a broad outline, the heroic efforts of the Prophets (according to Islamic tradition) Jabal/Gabal (= Moses), Riffaa'ah (= Jesus) and Qasim (= Muhammad) to uplift man's condition, followed by the rise of the new secular prophet Arafah (= the scientist). It seems to underline, among other central issues, man's perpetual struggle, marred by his equally perpetual failure, to overcome evil, though it closes, as it has done in each section of the book, with a reassuring note. The people of the quarter have the last word expressing their faith: "Oppression must cease as night yields to day. We shall see the end of tyranny and the dawn of miracles."⁴ As the noted theologian Kenneth Cragg suggests in this connection, "hope is precisely what the alleys of long suffering humanity continue solidly to cherish—a hope however fragile, surviving even the demise of Gabalawi and the receding memories of Gabal, Riffaa'ah and Qasim, his celebrated messengers."⁵

Mahfouz has published thus far (up to 1988) fifty works of fiction: thirty-eight novels or novellas and twelve collections of short stories, which include several one-act plays. With the exception of his latest works, all have gone through a number of editions (numbering fourteen in some cases), and many have been adapted for the stage, and turned into at least twenty-six motion pictures, not to mention innumerable TV adaptations.

In recognition of his achievements, Mahfouz has received, prior to the Nobel Prize, several awards including the Ministry of Education's prize (1944), the Arabic Language Academy's award (1946), the State Prizes (1957 and 1970), and the 1985 prize of the French-Arab Friendship Society. These facts and the fact that extensive literature has been written about him in Arabic and other foreign languages, and that numerous translations of his works have appeared in English, French, German, Hebrew, Japanese, Russian, and others, testify to his stature and his contribution to the development of the novel in the Arab world.

Apart from the earlier phase (1938-1944) during which he chose ancient Egypt as a setting for three historical novels, Mahfouz will perhaps be remembered most for his neighborhood novels, which offer a richly detailed portrayal of Cairo during the first half of the century. Among his widely known works of this group are *Midaq Alley* (1947) and his *Trilogy* (1956/57). The former focuses on the inhabitants of an ancient alley caught between conformity to traditions and the uncertainties of impending changes. The alley, in a sense, serves as a collective hero weathering the tribulations that Cairo witnessed during the

⁴ Naguib Mahfouz, *Children of Gebelawi*, trans. Philip Stewart (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1961) 355.

⁵ Kenneth Cragg, *The Pen and the Faith: Eight Modern Muslim Writers and the Qur'an* (London: George Allen, 1965) 157.

World War II years. The *Trilogy*, often compared to Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* or Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*, is of a broader scope in both spatial and temporal terms. As a family saga unfolding in the old quarter of Jamaliyya where the author was born, the work spans about thirty years and three generations of a middle-class family, and mirrors through them the disintegration of traditional values and shifting orientations which Cairo experienced between the end of WW I and the closing years of WW II. Partly autobiographical, the novel stands out as a masterpiece of unusual literary merit, which favorably influenced the Swedish Academy in its deliberations on the basis of a French translation. An English translation is underway in the U.S. sponsored by the American University in Cairo Press,⁶ but earlier translations have appeared in other languages, including Hebrew and Japanese.

Mahfouz's works of the post-revolution period tend to deal with individuals rather than with groups or places, e.g., *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961), *The Road* (translated as *The Search*) (1964), and *The Beggar* (1965). In such works Mahfouz seems to abandon the detailed realistic description characteristic of the pre-revolution period, concentrating instead on the inner tension of his characters: their feeling of alienation, disillusionment, and helplessness. Justifying this shift in technique and approach, Mahfouz stated in 1964: ". . . when ideas and my feeling about them began to occupy my attention neither the environment nor the characters nor the events became necessary. Characters appear like symbols, environment like a modern decor, and events are selected on the basis of their contribution to the central ideas."⁷ It is in this period that Mahfouz places greater emphasis on symbolism, stream of consciousness, and highly poetic and suggestive language. These devices, along with his empathic treatment of his characters, enabled Mahfouz to tackle, with remarkable subtlety, some of the most sensitive issues of the day, including the shortcomings of the new revolutionary order.

In spite of the wide acclaim he has received as one of the greatest Arab writers, Mahfouz has had his detractors who question his occasionally ambiguous approach, or his views or treatment of certain political and religious issues. One of his most controversial works, *Children of Gebelawi*, for example, has been criticized, and its publication as a book in Egypt banned, because of its "heretical views on God and His great prophets." A commentator writing recently under the headline "Nobel Prize--For Literature or Secularism?" raised the pertinent question: "How could he [Mahfouz] have, except by being ambiguous, expressed doubts about the divine books, including the Holy Qur'an?"⁸ Expressing a similar concern, Kenneth Cragg detects in Mahfouz's religious stories "a haunting dimension of 'surmise,'" contrary to basic Islamic teachings. "It is as if he meant to catechize all the familiar Qur'anic areas of connection as to God, His sovereignty, His attributes, His spokesmen and His ways."⁹ Such views are undoubtedly relevant and unavoidable given the fact

⁶ The first part was recently published under the title *Palace Walk*, trans. William M. Hutchins and Olive E. Kenny (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

⁷ Najib Mahfouz, "Itijāh al-Jadīd wa Mustaqbal al-Riyāyah" *Al-Katib*, Cairo 35 (1964): 22-23; my translation. See also Salih J. Altoma, "Socio-political Themes in the Contemporary Arabic Novel: 1950-1970," in *The Cry of Home: Cultural Nationalism and the Modern Writer*, ed. H.E. Lewald (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1972) 353.

⁸ *Kahyan International* 12 Nov. 1988: 6.

⁹ Cragg 146.

that Mahfouz is, in a way, a chronicler of Egypt's modern history, recording all of its phases: social, political, and religious. His works reflect not only the complexity of his vision, but also, and perhaps more frequently, the various points of view held by his diverse characters or the events they represent. However, his quest for God or his reverence for spiritual values remains central at the core of his vision, as suggested in numerous instances including *Children of the Quarter* and his moving short story "Zaabalawi." The latter can be viewed as a dynamic and hopeful quest for what the hero regards as indispensable religious faith, in contrast to Beckett's static *Waiting for Godot*. Mahfouz himself sought to defend his *Children* as a work about "man's search for spiritual values" and "not against spiritual values in any way."¹⁰ Out of his characteristically respectful understanding of the religious audience in his country, he refused as recently as last January (1989) to contest the negative decision made by Al-Azhar, the highest Islamic institution in the country, banning the publication of *Children* in Egypt. "It is foolish," he declared, "to alienate Al-Azhar. We need this powerful institution behind us to stand against the other medieval form of Islam."¹¹ Mahfouz continues to hold the same view he expressed to this writer in Cairo in 1972 by stating that he does not want to add a literary problem to the many problems Egypt faces.¹² It may be of interest to note that Mahfouz's list of publications appended to his works, even the latest, excludes *Children*, the only novel he has not published in Egypt. In so doing, he seems to strike a balance between his right to free expression and his responsibility towards the feeling of his community on matters as sensitive as their religious faith.

Mahfouz's long career as a government employee (1934-1971) has served him well as a source of inspiration by providing him with firsthand experience about the bureaucracy at different levels, and under different regimes, and the preoccupations, both private and national, of his fictional characters. The positions he occupied include: a clerk at Cairo University, a parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Religious Endowments, an administrator in charge of the government interest free loans project, office manager to the Minister of National Guidance, the head of the Cinema and Theater Censorship office, director of the film production organization, and advisor to the Minister of Culture. Following his retirement in 1971, he joined the editorial staff of the leading daily *Al-Ahram*, with which he is still associated. Mahfouz's preoccupation with what he calls "the experience of political emotion" has profoundly influenced his writings to the extent that, as he himself admits, none of his books is without political dimension.¹³ He identifies three poles around which his works revolve: politics, faith, and love. But according to him, politics "is by all odds the most essential."¹⁴ The fact that his works have managed to provide us with a rich portrayal of highly sensitive issues under politically restrictive conditions is a measure of his great artistic skills and accomplishments. Asked

¹⁰ *Cairo Today* Jan. 1989: 33; my translation.

¹¹ *Economist* 11 March 1989: 93.

¹² *Cairo Today* Jan. 1989: 33.

¹³ "Mahfouz, Naguib," trans. Roger Allen, in *World Authors 1975-1980*, ed. Vineta Colby (New York: Wilson, 1985) 479.

¹⁴ *World Authors* 479.

whether he has ever been arrested or threatened with arrest because of his writings, Mahfouz responded, "No . . . no one touched me. Articles have been confiscated, but not more than that. You see, I do not speak for any particular group."¹⁵

¹⁵ *Cairo Today* 1989: 33.