

## NAGUIB MAHFUZ: THE VOICE OF EGYPT

*"The Origins of Modern Arabic fiction"*, Matti Musa, Lynne Rienner, London, 1997.

Among the major figures in the development of modern Arabic fiction, none has received higher international acclaim than Naguib Mahfuz (1911-2006), who in 1988 became the first Arab writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature. He was already known in the west through translations of his work. His output includes over thirty novels and a number of short story anthologies and plays. He began his career as an essayist. He gained some fame with the publication of 3 historical novels, of these "Radobis" brought him the Qut al-Qulub prize, and "Kifah Tiba" the Ministry of Education prize. But what won him undisputed literary renown was a series of realistic contemporary novels in which he portrayed various aspects of life in Cairo. The "Thulathiyya", published in 1956-57, was the crowning achievement of his career and brought him wide recognition in literary circles outside Egypt.

Mahfuz's first philosophical article, "Intidar Mu'taqadat wa Tawallud Mu'taqadat", appeared in Salama Musa's periodical "al-Majalla al-Jadida" in October, 1930. In it he points out that life is subject to constant change and evolution, which man must accept as the inevitable result of civilization. His early articles on philosophy reveal him as an intelligent young muslim trying to reconcile various western concepts with his traditional beliefs. He wrote on religion, science, psychology, music and literature. In 1938, his first short story anthology, "**Hams al-Junun**" appeared.

With encouragement and help from Salama Musa, Mahfuz published 3 historical novels before deciding that he was more interested in social realism. He called the first novel "Hikmat Khufu" but Salama Musa renamed it "Abath al-Aqdar" and printed it as a separate issue of his magazine in September, 1939. In writing the historical novels, Mahfuz was continuing the tradition of Salim al-Bustani and Jurji zaydan, later carried to greater heights by Ibrahim Ramzi, Muhammad Said al-Uryan and others.

- "**Abath al-Aqdar**" (1939) revolves around the struggle between a strong-willed Pharaoh and indomitable fate. Khufu, disturbed by a prophecy that his throne will pass not to one of his sons but to Dedaf, the new born son of the high priest of the temple of Re, seeks to destroy the future king. The novel ends with Pharaoh on his death bed, acknowledging that though he declared war on fate, it has at last humbled him. Apparently based on a legend in James Blake's book "Ancient Egypt" which Mahfuz translated into Arabic as "Misr al-Qadima", the novel marked the end of his obscurity as a novelist.

- "**Radobis**" (1943), Mahfuz's second historical novel, focuses on a love which is totally subject to fate. Pharaoh Mernere fell in love with Radobis, a beautiful courtesan. The Pharaoh died in a revolt in the arms of his beloved Radobis, who then takes her own life to avoid falling into the hands of queen Nitocris. The novel seems appropriate to label 'romance' rather than a historical novel, since it takes considerable liberties with the history of ancient Egypt.

- "**Kifah Tiba**" (1944), the last of his historical series, portrays the struggle of Thebes against Hyksos ( a north western Semitic people who entered Egypt between 1720 and 1710 BC) whose expulsion in 1550 BC, by Ahmose I set Egypt on the way back to independence. It also picturizes the love story of Ahmose and Amenerdis, daughter of the Hyksos king. Historical events constitute the central theme of the novel than the love story. Egyptians' struggle to overthrow the British, who had occupied the country since 1882, was the main concern of Mahfuz to write this novel.

After completing "Kifah Tiba", Mahfuz abandoned historical themes to focus on contemporary life in his native Cairo. Between 1945 and 1951, he published 5 novels dealing with social themes drawn from Cairo life.

- "**al-Qahira al-Jadida**" (1945), examines the lives of 4 university seniors from December 1933 to September 1934, Mahjub abd al-Dayim, a cynical opportunist, Mamun Ridwan, a true muslim, Ali Taha, believer of socialism and science and Ahmad Badir, a journalism student. Mahjub's aim is to attain pleasure and power through any means, and he blames his inability to do so on his poverty. He attends a charity event and eventually secures an appointment as secretary to the cabinet minister Qasim Bey Fahmi, provided he will marry Fahmi's mistress and allow the lovers to continue their relationship. Mahjub and the bride-to-be Ihsan satisfy their ambition to join the corrupt upper class, but at a price- he by becoming a pimp, she a whore. But a surprising sequence of events shatters their dreams. Mahfuz's here contrasts the upper and lower middle classes in the 1930s, confronting us with the absolute dichotomy between them.

- "**Khan al-Khalili**" (1946) is named for an old quarter of Cairo, filled with small shops and people of diverse origin, lies next to the famous al-Azhar mosque. The novel appears to focus on the love of two brothers, Ahmad Akif and Rushdi Akif, for the same young woman, Nawal, but is really about the quarter where they live. Ahmad has an inferiority complex and psychological and sexual problems which have been compounded by his upbringing. Ahmad's world of dreams collapses when his brother announces his intention to marry the girl whom Ahmad loves. But within a few weeks, Rushdi dies and the shocked family leaves Khan al-Khalili and its memories. It is ironic that Rushdi, who wins Nawal's love, loses his life. Mahfuz says that his characters appreciate life and strive to enjoy it, but often find themselves beaten down by circumstances they cannot control.
- In "**Zuqaq al-Midaq**" (1947), Mahfuz portrays the moral decay of Egyptian society due to the impact of II world war. The alley becomes the protagonist, defiant and changeless, while its inhabitants hate it, leave it, and return. The novel has no formal plot. Hamida, a twenty year old girl, rebellious and resentful of her poverty, desires material things and marriage, but sees no prospective husband. Abbas al-Hulu, a young barber loved her. In his absence, Hamida is enticed into prostitution. When he returns to find her a fallen woman, Abbas goes to the night club where she works and attacks Hamida in the midst of a gang of British soldiers. But Abbas is beaten and kicked to death by the British soldiers she is entertaining. The novel is filled with pessimism and misfortune, on finishing it, the reader sees Mahfuz as a pessimist, obsessed with portraying the dark side of life.
- "**al-Sarab**" (1948) examines the Oedipus complex of its protagonist, Kamil Ruba Laz, modeled after a real person. Mahfuz experiments here with a first person narrative, letting the protagonist describe his own actions without comment. Kamil who has an erotic attachment to his mother finds her as the source of his problems. The dichotomy between beauty and ugliness, personified by his mother and a house maid, drove him to Schizophrenia. He felt aroused by only ugly women. But he married a beautiful woman, Rabab. However, he was unable to achieve physical union with Rabab, in whom he saw the image of his mother, an untouchable sacred symbol. Soon he became involved with an older woman, Inayat, who unleashed his sex drive. Meanwhile Rabab pregnant by another man, died during an abortion, and soon after his mother died. However Kamil finally overcame his psychological problems. A careful reading of the novel shows that it is a serious exploration of male-female relationships, family ties, and the social gap between the Turkish aristocracy and common Egyptians.
- "**Bidaya wa Nihaya**" (1949) presents the hopes and fears of a lower-middle class family struggling against the hardships caused by the death of its sole bread winner, Kamil Ali. Left with three sons and a daughter, his widow tries with patience, but fails. The elder son Hasan became a gangster when his sister Nafisa turned to prostitution. Husayn was gentle and idealistic. But Hasnayn was ambitious and totally selfish. He uses others to achieve his own ends. He used his relationship with Bahiyya, a fifteen year old neighbour and the daughter of a prominent government official for his interests and he became an officer. When Nafisa is arrested in a brothel, he incites her to commit suicide. Watching her body pulled from the Nile, he ultimately accepts his guilt and ends his own life the same way. The Egyptian woman writer Fatima Musa justifies Mahfuz's pessimism on the grounds that he is a realist who would not distort his vision by portraying a bright future for characters like Hasnayn and Nafisa.
- "**al-Thulathiyya**" (1956-57) is undoubtedly Mahfuz's most important work and one of his personal favorites. It was a 'generations novel'. The novel was acclaimed through Egypt, earning Mahfuz the state prize for literature in 1957. The saga of 3 generations of Cairo family, it offers a comprehensive view of major social and political events from 1917 to 1944, as seen by the Egyptian lower middle class, which was caught in the clash between traditional Islamic ideals and western doctrines.
- The first volume "**Bayn al-Qasrain**", 1956, (Palace Walk), focuses on the family of Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad from 1917 to the outbreak of the 1919 nationalist revolution led by Za'd Zaghul. The Sayyid, a merchant in his mid-forties, has a 21 year old son, Yasin, by a prior marriage, he and his wife Amina have two more sons, Fahmi and Kamal, and two daughters, Khadija and A'isha. The family is conservative and cohesive, ruled by the Sayyid's patriarchal authority. Amina appears utterly subservient. Sayyid has a multi-faceted personality. He cherishes wine, women and song, enjoying sexual relationships with several women. He is also faithful muslim. Umm Maryam, Zubayda and Jalila are his sex partners. His son Yasin justifies his sins, he distrusts all women, yet pursues them. Even after his marriage with Zaynab, Yasin returns to seeking pleasure. When Zaynab

discovers Yasin having sex with her black maid, she leaves the house. Much attention is given to the Sayyid's third son, ten-year-old Kamal, who appears to some extent modeled after Mahfuz himself. He has a fertile imagination, aroused by the presence of the British troupes in Cairo. In sharp contrast to Yasin stands Fahmi, a bright, idealistic and virtual stranger in his family. The Sayyid's daughters are uneducated and engaged in jealous conflict. Mahfuz uses the novel to portray the Egyptian national struggle against British domination. Though all the family members support the cause, Fahmi is the only one actively involved. The young Kamal sympathizes with the revolution. Mahfuz, preparing for Kamal's role in the second part of the trilogy, portrays him as a romantic idealist, deeply sensitive to the human condition. While taking part in a peaceful demonstration after Sa'd Zaghlul's release, Fahmi is shot dead by British soldiers.

- The second volume of the trilogy, "**Qasr al-Shawq**", 1957, translated in to English with the title "Palace of Desire", covers the period from 1924 to Sa'd Zaghlul's death in August, 1927. In it Mahfuz depicts the deterioration of the national movement in to petty squabbling between the politicians and the palace, and shows the clash of traditional values and concepts with those imported from the west, especially as it affects Kamal. Sayyid Ahmad, deeply affected by Fahmi's death selected the way of pleasure once again. He was eager to resume his relationship with Zannuba, but amazed when he finds out that his son Yasin is the new partner of Zannuba. Yasin, like his father, is preoccupied with sex. His conduct is influenced by his father's hypocrisy and his lack of a mother's compassion. The Sayyid objects to Yasin's marriage with Maryam, daughter of Umm Maryam, alleging Maryam has a tarnished past, though the real reason is his own earlier affair with her mother. However, Yasin married Maryam. But he divorced her to have relationship with Zannuba. Kamal is now 17 years old with a bright future, interested more in intellectual pursuits. He appears to be an immature adolescent, who seems to be a rationalist, and something of a dreamer. Mahfuz contrasts the idealistic Kamal with the pragmatic Fuad al-Hamzawi. He is also a romantic, as is clear from his obsessive love of Aida, the sister of his classmate Husayn Shaddad. But when she chooses to marry Hasan Salim, who is her social equal, Kamal is left with a broken heart. Realizing he cannot live in a non-sensuous world of romantic idealism, Kamal turns to drinking and wenching and says that science is the only true religion. He represents the mental paralysis of the petty bourgeoisie. When he and Yasin meet by chance in a brothel, Kamal declares they were born to be like their father seeking sensual pleasure. The second volume of the trilogy says little about politics, except to reveal the divergent attitudes of the lower and upper middle classes. The novel ends with Sa'd Zaghlul's death.

- "**al-Sukariyya**", 1957, ("Sugar Street"), the third and final volume of the trilogy, covers the period from January 1935 to the summer of 1944. In it Mahfuz looks closely at political upheavals, the conflict between western and traditional Islamic ideologies, and the cultural and social changes brought by modern civilization and World War II. The family and friends of Ahmad Abd al-Jawad have experienced many changes. The Sayyid still yearns for bygone pleasures, though by the end of the novel he is dead. Yasin has risen to administrative post in government with the help of his son Ridwan and a shady politician. The mother Amina remains faithful to the Sayyid to the end. A'isha has deteriorated for her daughter Naima dies in child birth. Her sister Khadija credits the success of her sons, Abd al-Mun'im and Ahmad to her sound upbringing. Zannuba becomes a respectable wife of Yasin. Kamal and his 3 nephews, Ridwan, Abd al-Munim and Ahmad, dominate "al-Sukariyya". Kamal teaches English at a school and writes articles on philosophy. Ridwan and Abd al-Munim are working in the ministry of education, when Ahmad writes for the journal "al-Insan al-Jadid". Kamal appears as a complex personality. He is a compassionate and effective teacher. He suffers because of his inability to harmonize new ideas with his old traditional values. He is lost between east and west. Apart from writing, he finds relief in a brothel operated by Jalila, one of his father's mistress. But Abd al-Munim and Ahmad have showed the will and determination to pursue their goals in life. When rejected by his lover, Ahmad loved and married another woman better suited to him. Ridwan helped Kamal to save his job through his homosexual relations with a cabinet minister, in a decadent society where intellectual strength count for nothing. "al-Sukariyya" focuses to unite all Egyptians under the banner of nationalism. British authorities used both the king and the politicians to control Egypt. Towards the end of the novel, Mahfuz describes the restoration of Mustafa al-Nahas, Zaghlul's successor, to power in 1942. Mahfuz devotes much of the novel to the third generation, using Ridwan and his cousins to illustrate the changes in Egyptian society between the two world wars. After Zaghlul's death, the nationalists faced competition from extremists groups like communists. Their rivalry is revealed in the thoughts and actions of Abd al-Munim and Ahmad. Abd al-Munim was a

member of the ultra-conservative Muslim Brotherhood when Ahmad believed in Marxism. Both were arrested under anti-governmental charges. As the novel ends, Kamal and Yasin await Amina's passing. Life has passed them by, now it is the turn of a new generation to push Egypt toward a better future.

Mahfuz had completed his trilogy in 1952. After the silence of 7 long years, disillusioned by the outcome of the Free Officers' Revolution in July 1952, Mahfuz wrote his allegorical "**Awlad Haratina**", (1959, published in English as "Children of Gebelawi", to comment specifically on the Egyptian situation, with in the more general context of the human condition. Divided in to five chapters, each named for its central figure. The first chapter retells the disguised story of Adam and Eve, the next three parallel the lives of Moses, Jesus and Muhammed, and the last, most important chapter introduces Arafa, who symbolizes modern science. The characters dwell in the 'hara' (alley) of history, which is dominated by the nearby house of the powerful, enigmatic Gebelawi. They experience history as an endless cycle of hope and despair. Mahfuz is interested here not in religious questions, but in social and political issues and the role of science plays in settling them. There is some ambivalence throughout the work concerning the nature of Gebelawi, the idea of God which exists in the minds of men. Arafa sees himself as having a sort of messianic mission. He does not deny God's existence. Arafa sets out to see, hear and identify Gebelawi when he unintentionally kills a frail old servant, the alley buzzes with the news that Gebelawi is dead, from shock and grief at the loss of his servant. The trustee of Gebelawi's estate pressures Arafa for his magic bottles i.e. modern weapons and uses them to disposes his enemies and subdue the people. Eventually the trustee killed Arafa. Mahfuz seems to think that religion if free from fanaticism and superstition, could lead men's rulers to use science for the good of all. The novel aroused big conflicts. It did not appear in book form in Egypt until October 1994, even though it was published in Beirut in 1967. In 1989, Shaykh Umar Abd al-Rahman, member of an Islamic fundamentalist group issued a fatwa condemning Mahfuz as a blasphemer, who should be repent or be killed. On October 14, 1994, Mahmud Naji Mustafa, a muslim militant, stabbed Mahfuz twice in the neck while he was in a car waiting to be taken to Qasr al-Nile. Fortunately, Mahfuz survived the attack and Naji was sentenced to death along with an accomplice.

Mahfuz published 6 novels and 2 collections of short stories between 1961 and 1969, in an astonishing burst of literary productivity. This was all the more remarkable because of his increasing distress at the direction Egypt was taking under President Jamal Abd al-Nasir. Most worthy among them are "**al-Liss wa al-Kilab**" (1961), the story of an ex-convict hunted down after he accidentally kills innocent people in his quest for revenge, and "**al-Samman wa al-Kharif**" (1962), which realistically examines the 'reforms' effected after the 1952 revolution.

In the last stage of his career, beginning with the publication of "Miramar" in 1967, Mahfuz appears to have synthesized the social realism of the contemporary novels and the trilogy with the allegory of "Awlad haratina". After 1969, he published several more novels and anthologies of short fiction, constantly experimenting with new forms and techniques as he moved further from conventional realism. "Miramar", one of his warmest novels, brings together people of diverse backgrounds in an Alexandrian boarding house run by a Greek woman.

Since 1972, when he retired from his position in the ministry of culture, Mahfuz continued to turn out popular novels and short fiction, in addition to working on film adaptations of several of his novels and producing a weekly column for the Cairo news paper "al-Ahram". A further return to his early days is evidenced in his "**Hikayat haratina**" (1988) and several works dealing with bureaucracy. Even when he was publicly criticized for his political and religious positions, he attracted many readers through out the Arab world. He may be considered the modern Egyptian novelist *par excellence*. Though some times called the 'Dickens' or 'Balzac' of Egypt, he is really the 'Mahfuz of Egypt'. He deserves to be claimed by all Arabs, because his works reflect Arab and Islamic traditions, common sense, and sympathy for the confused and the oppressed.