

Obituary: Naguib Mahfouz, novelist of Egypt and humanity

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“There are many kinds of heroes in ancient Arabic literature, all of them horsemen, knights. But a hero today would for me be one who adheres to a certain set of principles and stands by them in the face of opposition”—Naguib Mahfouz, *Paris Review* interview

On August 30, the world lost one of its most profound artists, the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz, who died at the age of 94. Mahfouz demonstrated that in our time a writer’s immersion in the historical and social issues of his own time could give rise to an art of more universal human meaning, transcending national limitations and perhaps even epochs.

Naguib Mahfouz was the son of a civil servant, born in 1911 in an Egypt dominated by British imperialism, during the last stage of the colonial division of Asia and Africa by the European Great Powers.

The young Mahfouz imbibed a spirit of social discontent. In 1919 the first Arab Nationalist movement came into prominence; the Wafd (Arabic: “delegation”) gained a majority in the Legislative Assembly, which had been formed by the British suzerain Lord Kitchener in 1913. The British refused to recognize the party, which demanded autonomy, and a widespread popular uprising occurred in Egypt, the first of many attempts in the Arab world throughout the twentieth century to resolve the problem of foreign domination.

The revolution had a profound impact on the seven-year-old Mahfouz. From the window of his house in al-Abbasiya, a newly built Cairo suburb, he saw British soldiers shooting at demonstrators. He later said, “You could say that the one thing which most shook the security of my childhood was the 1919 revolution.” As a boy he read a good deal. His mother took him to museums of ancient Egyptian history, which were later to figure so centrally in his work.

He became a civil servant in 1936 (a job that he would hold until 1972) and began writing short stories. His first published work was a translation of James Baikie’s history of ancient Egypt. He worked as a journalist for *Al-Ahram* and other newspapers and decided to be a creative writer at about this time.

In the preceding decade, Egypt had felt a fresh cultural breeze as writers such as Taha Hussein, known as the first Arab novelist, helped form circles of artists devoted to secular ideas. A major goal of Hussein’s group, which included the young Mahfouz, was the creation an Egyptian national identity that stretched back to Pharaonic times. Another influence on Mahfouz was Salama Musa, the Egyptian intellectual and Fabian socialist, who championed the fight against class oppression and the uplifting values of a scientific world outlook.

Mahfouz’s first novels, published during the Second World War, were set in the Egypt of the Pharaohs. But after the war a hope for social change was in the political atmosphere, and Mahfouz began writing about contemporary themes and produced his powerful *Midaq*

Alley (1947).

The characters of *Midaq Alley*, neighbors on one street, constitute a microcosm of popular life in Cairo during the war. One character, Hamida, is a working-class woman who envies the freedom of the factory girls and seeks to imitate them. A boyfriend is madly in love with her, but the free-spending British soldiers also tempt her. Mahfouz is unrelentingly honest in his depiction of people’s hopes amidst hashish smoking, licit and illicit love, and politics!

The reader gets a feeling for the aspirations of Egyptians and the way that so many things in official and traditional life thwart them. There is a dynamic relationship between the sexes, partly conditioned by the growing self-esteem of women: “She refused to submit passively to her ill fortune ...” Individual characters, one senses, reflect the social and emotional gestures of millions.

A number of social and artistic forces were at work after the war. One critic has remarked that the great creative wave of European literature from 1910 to 1935 only began to reach Egypt in the postwar period, and that the literary air was filled with such new ideas as surrealism, the social novel and new poetic forms [1].

Mass social movements of a left-wing character began to emerge in Egypt, as in many oppressed nations, in the postwar period. The regime of King Farouk was hated and corrupt and soon lost prestige completely with its military debacle in Palestine in 1948. The Wafd, for its part, had collaborated with the British during the war and had long since lost the allegiance of the working class.

In 1946 there were large demonstrations of workers in Cairo led by left-wing groups. British soldiers fired into the crowds, and thousands were imprisoned.

But the Stalinists of the official Communist movement and its front groups refused to fight for the independent mobilization of the working class. Instead, they adhered to the “two-stage” theory of revolution: a bourgeois-democratic revolution today and a socialist revolution sometime in the future, though actually, never.

The Egyptian Stalinists put the foreign policy needs of the Soviet bureaucracy ahead of a common struggle against imperialism by the workers of the region. In 1948 they upheld the establishment of the Zionist state in Palestine.

But at the time, the future trajectory of the Egyptian society was not predestined. Millions of the Egyptian oppressed wanted a social overturn, and there was an intense focus by artists and intellectuals on the potential for social change from ordinary people.

An anticipation of freedom, democracy and genuine national independence caused an artistic ferment among Egyptian writers. The first fruit of this had been *Midaq Alley*, but Mahfouz was able to give an even more penetrating view of the lives of the lower middle class

through his famous Cairo Trilogy, *Palace Walk*, *Palace of Desire* and *Sugar Street*.

The Cairo Trilogy takes place in the period from 1917 to 1944. It relates the fortunes of three generations of the al-Jawad family as their most personal desires are molded by the social development of Egypt, especially the struggle to free the country from British imperialism. Other aspects of social life are meticulously interwoven, including the changing status of women and the arrival of an urban working-class on the scene in a largely pre-capitalist economy.

On the one hand, the sons of the patriarch, al-Sayyid Ahmad, are pulled back and forth by the development of science, by Marxism, and on the other, by the sanctity of religion and tradition, including the rising fundamentalism of the Muslim Brotherhood. Ideas destined to play a crucial role in the future of Egypt figure in the daily lives of the characters.

These novels are subversive. There is a yearning in everyone for something different, even when it is suppressed in the most obedient and passive characters. Mahfouz accurately depicts the impact of social life on the feelings, consciousness and behavior of his characters. He shows how contradictory and uneven it is. But Mahfouz's genius can show us the interrelations of the historical activity of human beings and their most private desires. Mahfouz's view of love especially strikes one as a historically conditioned complex of feelings.

It has been pointed out that the Cairo Trilogy deals with "universal" themes such as authority within the family and society, and it is true that one learns a good deal about authority. But this accomplishment results from Mahfouz's expert portrait of the concrete social-historical underpinnings of authority. It is not abstract.

Again in 1951 workers led by various left-wing groups staged strikes and demonstrations. But the development of a revolutionary situation was suffocated by the coup of the Free Officers' Movement in July 1952, led by Gamel Abdul Nasser.

The Stalinists again played a disorienting role. They already had a record of support for the Wafd in 1928 and, initially, had no problem supporting Nasser, until he illegalized the party. Eventually, the Stalinists liquidated themselves into Nasser's Arab Socialist Union in 1965.

Mahfouz, like many Egyptians, at first welcomed Nasser; his Free Officers Movement spoke in the name of socialism as well as nationalism, and challenged the British and French over control of the Suez Canal. But disillusionment set in when the dictatorial nature of the regime became clear. Mahfouz looked to religion, although he never embraced it as a world-view or abandoned his democratic views.

Within the conditions of censorship imposed by Nasser and his inheritors, Anwar Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak, Mahfouz continued to write discordant books. In 1959 he published *Children of Gebelawi*, serialized in *Al-Ahram*, which turned Biblical and Koranic figures such as Adam, Jesus and Mohammed into historical human beings. This was an effort to compromise religion and secularism. The government banned it. Islamic fundamentalists never forgave Mahfouz. Two fundamentalists stabbed him in the neck in 1994. He survived but was incapacitated for the rest of his life.

The novella *The Day the Leader Was Killed* (1985) is an indictment of the regime of Anwar Sadat (assassinated by Islamists in 1981), particularly his economic policies. The narrator, shedding light on life in Egypt at this period, says of the Sadat character: "his victory constituted a challenge which gave rise to new feelings, emotions for

which we were quite unprepared." The book points to the exhaustion of the older generation and the confusion of the younger generation.

Mahfouz found it difficult to come to a new analysis of Egyptian life after the 1950s. He continued to write on contemporary themes, but also returned to ancient settings. A feeling for the great panorama of life in which history shapes people's innermost selves seems to have slipped away from his grasp.

Mahfouz still wrote with a social consciousness and was able to see many truths about Egyptian life. *Miramar* (1967), a novella about a grand hotel of colonial times in Alexandria that has become a rooming house, is a successful, though somewhat grim, work.

There is also something that stimulates the imagination in *The Journey of Ibn Fatouma* (1983), set in the Caliphate period of Arab history, about a merchant who travels, like Gulliver, to several other societies, searching for the best conditions of life, but finding them all unsatisfactory.

Mahfouz has been accused of being a censor when he worked for the Egyptian state film industry. He also censored—and justified censoring—his own work. He was widely criticized, with justification, for supporting the 1978 Camp David Accords. Still, an element of discontent and subversion remained in his fiction to the end of his life.

The complex history of the postwar ex-colonial world was disorienting for many writers and intellectuals in the Arab world and elsewhere. Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism were incapable of attending to the needs of ordinary people for national liberation and social equality. After all was said and done, these movements accommodated themselves to imperialism. The people of the Middle East have passed through a bitter and often tragic period as a result. This made it difficult for Mahfouz and many other Egyptian writers to move beyond the confines of nationalism.

It is probably no accident that Naguib Mahfouz produced his best work in the freshest, most hopeful moment of mass struggle against colonialism as it was becoming genuinely popular and increasingly socialist-minded.

Note:

1. Jabra Jabra, "Modern Arabic Literature and the West" in Boullata, Issa J. (ed.). *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*, Three Continents Press, 1980.



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