

Naguib Mahfouz's Task of Cultural Representation

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I. Introduction

In the first half of the twentieth century, many Arab writers were engaged in a long and difficult task aimed at achieving cultural independence and intellectual decolonization after years of inertia caused, if not imposed on them, by foreign domination. These writers were well aware of the fact that literature, amongst other types of artistic production, was a powerful medium for human expression, especially for those who look for better representation of their cultural identity. They observed, in particular, "the rise in the social power of the novel as an important form for expressing the collective imaginary" (Jacquemon, 2008: 221-2), and realized that we, the Arabs, are among those who have a very strong yearning for this kind of expression. Our cultural identity has for decades been under pressure and threat of fragmentation, ironically, "in an age of identity." (1) We have been worried about our identity and we need to affirm it; we need to show who we are.

In Egypt, that task has been carried out by a group of writers, among whom Naguib Mahfouz stands out. This Egyptian Nobel Prize laureate was not merely a novelist, but over and above that, a man of vision committed to reclaiming the rich heritage of Egypt, of every inch of it. This commitment, I have to state, was not a political devotion or a cultural trait absorbed as the writer matured; it developed in him from the time he was seven years old, when he experienced an early meaning of nationalist feeling (Enany, 2007: 3). As Mahfouz himself remembers, "I used to see the demonstrations of the 1919 revolution ... I often saw English soldiers firing at the

demonstrators. My mother used to pull me back from the window, but I wanted to see everything" (Ghitani, 1987: 16). He also remembers how he 'picked up' patriotism, the public spirit which dominated the country during his childhood, from his father: "My father always spoke enthusiastically about our national heroes ... I grew up in a home where the names of Mustafa Kamil, Muhammad Farid and Sa'd Zaghlul were truly sacred" (Mahfouz, 1977: pp. 80-1). Significantly, the impact of these events on his mind and soul was lasting and, thus, these events were recreated in many of his novels, notably *The Cairo Trilogy*. In this, "the values of nationalism ... were ones that he nurtured and upheld all his life" (Enany, 2007: 7).

Our readings of Mahfouz reveal the fact that he understood he should never distance his cultural settings from what Terry Eagleton calls 'social practices'; he should reduce the distance that separates him from reality in an "age of realism in literature" (Mondal, 2003: 5). The result was, therefore, tens of novels and short stories in which he could speak for his fellow Egyptians from within; he could represent their culture, their customs, their individual hopes and their collective concerns, and he could project their causes and express their thoughts and emotions. This extent of representation was only possible, I believe, due to his ability to share with his people their same dreams and their same frustrations. Mahfouz, in fact, believed in the fact that "literature ... gives voice to whatever is without a voice" and "gives a name to what as yet has no name" (Calvino, 1986: 98). He worked hard to integrate his vision into his people's social practices and produced unique writings that made him, as Edward Said says, not only "a Hugo and a Dickens," but also "a Galsworthy, a Mann, a Zola, and a Jules Romains" (Essam, 2007: 33).

This paper aims at analyzing and demonstrating how Naguib Mahfouz contributed in his writings, specifically in *The Cairo Trilogy*, to constructing the Egyptians' image of themselves through decades of social struggles and, subsequently, to articulating this image to the world in an attempt to shape an independent Egyptian cultural identity.

II. Literature and Representation

Constructing one's own identity can be realized, as many critics have theorized, in and through language and the representation of the culture of that language, and according to this suggestion, one can argue that a national identity may successfully emerge through a powerful articulation of the national culture. (2) This is, in fact, an extremely important assumption that can help me determine the mediums through which such articulation would be made. Here, the novel's legitimacy has been recognized, "even by the most traditionalist factions of the intellectual field" (Jacquemond 2008: 222), as the discourse that can frame a sense of national belonging, especially as literature in many previous experiences, examined by Anne-Marie Thiesse, has contributed to the construction of national identities in crucial ways. (3) At the very moment this sense of belonging is achieved, a simultaneous need for projecting it to the 'other' is born, and the call for creative channels of representation becomes louder than ever.

Drawing upon this, Egypt's writers have realized that any traditional representational forms would be considered, in the 'national' and 'cultural' contexts, insufficient and that there must be supplementation from other creative channels, especially fiction, the "dynamic force" that is capable of enabling "wider and perhaps more meaningful visions of reality" (Shaker, 2008: xiii), and which has contributed to national discourse "through refurbishing its content" with other tropes (Mondal, 2003; 6). They have understood that fiction, especially when solidly anchored in the Egyptian land, is well suited to keeping pace with the rich, yet complex, realities of their country's modern history, the period that Mustafa Badawi has called the "age of conflicting ideologies" (Badawi, 1993: 11). But their task, to achieve Egypt's cultural independence and "intellectual decolonization," to borrow Samia Mehrez terms (1994: 81), has never been easy.

Early in the twentieth century, the Egyptians had already set for themselves stringent paradigms; the majority of Egypt's leading writers and critics agreed upon certain 'codes' they have to adhere to.

They have to have "Egyptian literature," says Mahmud Taymur, "speaking our language, expressing our ethos and emotions, and drawing a true picture of our customs ... [a literature] which faithfully reflects our true image... More than that, it [should] represent us, body and soul" (Taymur, 1927: 10). When taken together, these paradigms should practically prepare the mind for a "[t]rue literature" that "can initiate the reform of society ... and contribute to the reform of [the] difficult situations [of the nation]." (4) In view of this understanding, those who ignore national questions, according to Yusuf Al-Qa'id, are to be blamed. (5)

III. Making Mahfouz's Frame of Mind

Naguib Mahfouz, having all these 'paradigms' in mind, realized the task assigned to him by his country; he understood that "the proper task of writers and men of letters, by virtue of their mission at the heart of the nation, was to explore the nation's depths and to sound out its conscience" (Shukri, 1983: 147). Being a son of two devout Muslims, with a "purely religious climate at home," (Mahfouz, 1977: 79) he studied the Holy Qur'an at the kuttab (a school for teaching Qur'an) (Ghitani, 1987: 49) and was profoundly influenced by its language and style. "You find me," he says, "influenced by the style of the Qur'an...This did not result from any artistic need, but from my desire to express myself in a beautiful style because I believe...that style is a value in itself" (Mahfouz, 1980: 22).(6)

The place where Mahfouz was born, Al-Jammaliyya, also had a significant role in his making. It gave him the space he needed for his writings. He observed in this old quarter of Cairo, which had then and still has a very unique traditional character, his neighbours, relatives and friends, listened to the beats of their hearts and portrayed the networks of their relationships. By so doing, he expressed their 'ethos and emotions' and depicted a true picture of their habits and traditions. His works, thus, constituted a 'mirror' that faithfully reflected their true image: his characters represented the Cairenes, 'body and soul.'

Mahfouz was, as well, an avid reader of works written in Arabic by Arab Egyptian writers. These include Mahmud Taymur's short stories, Mohammed Hussein Haikal's novel, *Zaynab*, and Mahmud Abbas Al-Aqqad's novel, *Sara*, all of which influenced Mahfouz in one way or another. The greatest impact, however, was that of Taha Hussein's novel, *Al-Ayyam* (The Days), which made a deep impression on Mahfouz: After reading the novel, he tried his hand at describing his childhood much in the style of Taha Hussein. The impact was especially strong in Mahfouz's use of an elevated literary Arabic. (7) Another significant impact is that of Tawfiq Al-Hakim. The influence is clear in Mahfouz's recognition that *Awdat Ar-Ruh* (known as the Return of the Spirit) holds a special place in the development of Egyptian literature.

In addition to his readings in Egyptian literary works, his classical Arabic sources also significantly contributed to developing his frame of mind. His novel, *Layali Alf Layla* seems to have evoked the Arabian Nights (The Thousand and One Nights) not only in its title and by borrowing several of its characters, but also in its narrative structure. His second novel, *Rihlat Ibn Fattuma* (The Journey of Ibn Fattuma), which was published in 1983, follows a similar strategy. It is obvious that it also evoked the title of another Arabic classic, *Rihlat Ibn Battuta* (The Journey of Ibn Battuta) which narrates the famous fourteenth century travels.

The influence these novels had on Naguib Mahfouz is an example of how olden Arabic narratives moved in the veins of modern Arabic fiction and consequently made one of the bases from which Mahfouz's endeavour for constructing the self set off.

IV. The Cairo Trilogy: Layers of Meaning

Critics have long recognized that Naguib Mahfouz, the author of the greatest body of modern Arabic fictional literature produced by a single individual, adopted various stylistic strategies for reading his country's realities. These strategies were all aimed at constructing an Egyptian identity through two major streams: representation of Egypt's ancient past, and reconstructing the 'present'. His interest in

his country's ancient history, which has been taken by many critics and historians in the context of a powerful national pride opposing foreign domination, can be traced back to his early childhood as he was raised by a mother who had a passion for the Pyramids, the Sphinx and for Cairo's Museum of Antiquities, especially the Mummies Room (Enany, 2007: 8). But his first obvious preoccupation with the history of ancient Egypt was articulated specifically in 1931 when he published a translation of James Baikie's *Ancient Egypt*. (8) This fondness for the richness of the Egyptian history profoundly impacted his consciousness and stayed with him until it found literary representation in his first three novels, *Khufu's Wisdom* (1939), *Rhadopis of Nubia* (1943), and *Thebes at War* (1944), which have contributed to Mahfouz's reputation as a leading figure in "the elaboration of the ongoing narrative on history" (Mehrez, 1994: 82).

Handling the 'present' in Mahfouz's fictional works, specifically the period with which *The Cairo Trilogy* is concerned, is certainly made through the author's immersion in the Cairenes' affairs. Because of this, the work has sometimes been read as a historical record documenting the social changes witnessed at that critical period in Egyptian history. In itself, Mahfouz's insightful reflection on the events that dominated the modern Egyptian scene contributed to showing the vitality of a nation engaged in a process of remaking and reframing the national identity. Examining the main focuses of the work reveals the man's choices, which should be taken in the context of his vision as a true Egyptian, proud of his Egyptness. However, this did not tempt Mahfouz to remain ceremonial in demonstrating his sense of belonging; he acted from within the 'loving' ranks of his people, glorifying their successes, but, more importantly, criticizing their failures. We find *The Cairo Trilogy*, therefore, heavily pregnant with more than one layer of meaning. On one level, it deals with a family saga, observing how it and its members, as individuals and collectively, grow and how their attitudes evolve. On the second level, however, it is not merely a description of history. The value of the work resides here: at the time when we remind ourselves of the fact that all novels are imaginative (re)constructions which represent some

aspects of real life, we should also remember the fact that they can not be total representations. The novelists, all novelists, should select from real life the features that, they know, would best represent their visions. In view of this, Mahfouz did not write, say, a dry sociological account, or even a philosophical analysis of his country's history (although he studied philosophy). That would not have been as effective as the work of fiction he chose, for a novel, he genuinely knew, is about people, about their feelings, their emotions, and their depths, not about their appearances. It is about the people whom he grew to know and with whom he was involved, mind and heart. This is *The Cairo Trilogy's* second layer, then. It is its allegorical dimension that makes it move beyond the ordinary, to the level that most moves readers.

However, *The Cairo Trilogy's* success as a work of fictional 'realism' has possibly prompted some critics to suggest that "its allegorical dimension has been missed," and that its "hidden level of meaning may escape detection altogether" (Milson, 1998: 133). Undoubtedly, the validity of this suggestion invites skeptical reactions. Besides the fact that the era was rich in political and ideological upheavals, the Egyptians' reading strategies have never missed Mahfouz's subtle narrative techniques by which he could creatively merge the real and the symbolic. The Egyptian readership has always drawn upon their collective awareness of the subtleties of their society's visible and invisible phenomena, and critics, therefore, should trust the public's faculties and their ability to capture the symbolic even when it is submerged in the temporal. In view of this, it becomes incumbent upon critics that the text of *The Cairo Trilogy* be examined in the context of decoding the implications of the real events of the time. Allegory was, perhaps, the only means by which one could mount a serious and critical challenge on the established notions of social and political authority and thereby articulate alternatives.

V. Realist and Symbolic Representation: *Palace Walk*

The Cairo Trilogy, with its brilliant handlings of the era's crisis from a realist perspective, is a particularly appropriate pattern that can accommodate such allegorical representations. Mahfouz was capable of weaving "the public space and the temporalities of the historical narrative into the fabric of a narrative in which the main (or surface) concern is the private space and diurnal temporality of a family," which means that the Trilogy's allegory "operates in the sense of marking the personal as a signifier of the political" (Mondal, 2003: 205).

In the first volume of the Trilogy, *Palace Walk*, the Abdul-Jawwad family represents the 'traditional' order which, it is implied, has changed little over the preceding centuries. This sense of changelessness is introduced on the very first page of the novel as Amina awakes to attend to her husband on his return from a night of carousing:

Habit woke her at this hour. It was an old habit she had developed when young and it had stayed with her as she matured. She had learned it along with the other rules of married life. She woke up at midnight to await her husband's return from his evening's entertainment. Then she would serve him until he went to sleep (PW, p. 1).

We are then told that the Abdul-Jawwad household is located in an 'old quarter', Al-Jamaliyya, and that the neighbourhood is 'ancient'. Within this 'traditional' space, the family itself and its house is also presented as reflecting the social and political order of 'traditional' Egypt. Al-Sayyid Ahmad Abul-Jawwad, the powerful patriarch of the household, rules his family with an absolute will:

Amina ...was ready to cast the whole burden on the shoulders of her husband and felt relieved, despite the apprehension that swept through her every time she was about to bring up a topic she feared might upset him.

She waited until he finished his coffee. Then she said in her soft voice clearly intended to be polite and submissive, "Sir ..."

From his place on the sofa he looked down at her on her pallet not far from his feet ...

...he said, "I decided a long time ago which order to follow" (PW, pp. 154-5).

Another example of how the household represents a traditional order is its spatial organization (Allen, Kilpartrick, and Moor, 1995: 97-8). The house is hierarchically organized with al-Sayyid's quarters on the top floor, the children on the first floor, and the maids on the ground floor (PW, pp. 14-8); by the second volume, *Palace of Desire*, after the irruption of history following the revolution, and reflecting the relative diminution of Al-Sayyid's authority, all the family sleep on the top floor, with the first floor vacated for the entertainment of guests:

A new regime had been established in the house five years before, when – except for the reception room and the adjacent sitting room furnished with simple furniture as a vestibule – everything from the lower floor had been moved upstairs. Although Yasin and Kamal had hardly welcomed the notion of sharing a floor with their father, they were forced to comply with his wish to vacate the lower level, where no one set foot, except to entertain a visitor (PoD, p. 12).

Finally, in the third volume of the Trilogy, *Sugar Street*, a weak Al-Sayyid had to sleep on the first floor:

Kamal left the room with a heavy heart. It was sad to watch a family age. It was hard to see his father, who had been so forceful and mighty, grow weak. His mother was wasting away and disappearing into old age (SS, p.9).

The top floor is now for his son Kamal:

[Kamal] ascended the stairs to the top floor, which he called his apartment. He lived there alone, going back and forth between his bedroom and his study, both of which overlooked Palace Walk (Ibid.).

This is a drastic reversal of the situation that had prevailed in volume one, *Palace Walk*, since the house signifies the totality of Egyptian society.

Given that the family represents the 'traditional' order, Mahfouz weaves the political attitudes of its members in a way that functions as a correlate to their 'traditionalism'. Without exception they are introduced to us as supporters of the National Party and they identify with it precisely because they believe in the restoration of the Ottoman caliphate. The one slight exception to this, however, is Fahmy. In training to be a lawyer and influenced by Muhammad Abduh and the school of Islamic modernism, he rejects the family's superstitiousness and traditionalism:

[Fahmy] was angry that he had not found a partner to share the excitement of his ardent soul. Talk of national liberation excited great dreams in him. In that magical universe he could visualize a new world, a new nation, a new home, a new people. Everyone would be astir with vitality and enthusiasm. The moment his mind returned to this stifling atmosphere of lassitude, ignorance and indifference, he felt a blazing fire of distress and pain that desired release from its confinement in order to shoot up to the sky (PW, p. 326).

As Mahfouz juxtaposes Fahmy's political frame of mind in such an obvious form for the first time in the entire Trilogy, he leaves no doubt about his choices as far as the national yearning of his people is concerned. Mahfouz, in addition, goes further when he brings more family encounters into the foreground of the political scene

submerged in social context. This can be clearly observed as the novel progresses and more allegorical envelopes are unfolded. Fahmy, for example, is shown to be increasingly alienated from the kind of society his family represents, and it is through him that Mahfouz brings the allegory into sharper focus. At Aisha's wedding, the moment that Fahmy discovers his father's debauchery is extremely telling:

He could not have been more incredulous or panic-stricken if he had been told that the mosque of Qala'un had been turned upside down, with its minaret below the building and the tomb on top, or that the Egyptian nationalist leader Muhammad Farid had betrayed the cause of his mentor and predecessor Mustafa Kamil and sold himself to the English (PW, pp. 270-1).

His comparison of his father's personal duplicity to political treachery brings the political frame into the foreground in a more focused pattern ever in the Trilogy. Conversely, the father is also now explicitly associated with a particular political position, namely that of the National Party and the Ottoman caliphate, and thus his status as a figure representative of the 'traditional' order is made apparent.

From among the many dynamic characters of the Trilogy, it is Fahmy through whom Mahfouz observes and records the changes in the Egyptian nationalist sentiments before the 1919 revolution. He has seen that Fahmy moved from enthusiastic and emotional conformism to the family's Ottomanist orientation:

As the debate caught fire and grew more intense Fahmy raised his voice and said, "The important thing is to rid ourselves of the nightmare of the English and for the caliphate to return to its grandeur. Then we will find the way prepared for us" (PW, p. 56),

to a reluctant acceptance of the Wafd through which he allows its leaders a place in the nationalist pantheon,

Fahmy replied excitedly, "Amazing news is spreading among the students. Today it was all we talked about. A delegation or "wafd" composed of the nationalist leaders ...went to the British Residency in Cairo yesterday and met with the High Commissioner, requesting that the British protectorate over Egypt be lifted and independence declared." ...

With the resentment of a person who wished these men were members of the National Party, Fahmy replied, "Sa'd Zaghlul is Vice President of the Legislative Assembly and Abd Al-Aziz Fahmy and Ali Sha'rawi are members of it ... As for Sa'd [Zaghlul], I don't see anything wrong with him" (PW, p. 322),

and finally towards an amused displacement of his old traditional order by that of Wafdist nationalism: "Sa'd Zaghlul will do what the angels used to" (PW, p. 348).

VI. Focalizing New Egyptian Political Identity: *Palace of Desire* and *Sugar Street*

Having seen that the character of Fahmy is focalized in Mahfouz's political handling of the allegorical submerging in the first volume of the Trilogy, *Palace of Walk*, we find Kamal as the main character to shoulder the responsibility in the second volume, *Palace of Desire*. In this, Mahfouz focuses on the 'middle generation' which dominated Egyptian politics in the 1920s.

Through Kamal's emotional and intellectual development, *Palace of Desire* unfolds much of the wrapping related to the alternative focus of political loyalty. As the figure of Aida emerges as the new symbol of the nation, Kamal gravitates towards her and towards the image of Egypt she represents. She "is easily recognizable as a covetable symbol of a new 'social order' and a certain vision of Egypt, free of the inhibitions imposed by tradition" (Leeuwen, 1995: 103). Kamal's yearning, then, is to see Egypt rids herself of the chains

of the past that have crippled the nation. However, the way his relationship with this 'westernized' young lady is concluded brings the allegorical dimension Mahfouz intended to highlight. If the Egyptians had to free themselves of the crippling traditions of the past, Egypt's emancipation is never to be achieved through simulating Western life styles and Western thoughts. Their hope for a better future can come true through their own indigenous patterns of practices in all fields of life.

After foregrounding the real change the Abdul-Jawwad family was to experience in the first and second volumes of the Trilogy, the third volume, *Sugar Street*, introduces the character of Ahmad Shawkat who seems to be free from the allure of the past, believing in everything that entails "various duties intended to help establish a new order on earth" (SS, p. 122) and rejecting everything that acts as "a brake obstructing the free movement of humanity's wheel" (p. 123). Furthermore, it is Ahmad Shawkat in whom Mahfouz invests his hopes for the future, and it is he who had earlier articulated what seems to be the conscious ideological position of the Trilogy:

Yes, there is no argument about the need for independence, but afterward the understanding of nationalism must develop until it is absorbed into a loftier, more comprehensive concept" (SS, p. 26).

According to the paradigms of allegory set by Mahfouz in the Trilogy, this critique of Egyptian political concept is aimed at a 'loftier' and a 'more comprehensive' alternative, which is central in Mahfouz's strategies.

VII. Conclusion

In his novels and short stories, Naguib Mahfouz has represented the rich Egyptian identity in an unprecedented way. His themes have focalized and depicted the concrete details of the local Cairenes and made, consequently, the Egyptian settings unforgettable. The world has now recognized the independent literary identity that many have endeavoured to marginalize. It is Mahfouz who has given the Egyptians, and the Arabs at large, one of the most essential tools to counter any attempt to flatten them.

NOTES

1. From Terry Eagleton's keynote address at *The Ninth International Symposium on Comparative Literature* held at Cairo University, November 4-6, 2008. All references in this paper to words or statements made by Eagleton are taken from that speech.
2. For more details see, for example, Giddens, p. 97 and Easthope, p. 12.
3. A detailed account of experiences of other nations is well documented by Anne-Marie Thiesse, 1999.
4. Gamal Al-Ghitani, *Akhbar Al-Adab*, 29 March 1998, quoted in Jacquemond, p. 91.
5. Quoted in Jacquemond, p. 113.
6. Mahfouz gave this interview to *October*, on the 22nd of June, 1980.
7. This and other pieces of information are usually sourced from the various interviews Mahfouz gave over the years.
8. This text was translated by Naguib Mahfouz and published with the title *Misr Al-Qadima* in Cairo in 1931 and was reprinted in 1988, according to Enany, p. 42.

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_____. *Palace Walk*, trans. William Maynard Hutchins and Angele Botros Samaan, London: Black Swan, 1994. All citations will be to this edition and will be indicated in the text by the abbreviation PW.

_____. *Sugar Street*, trans. William Maynard Hutchins and Angele Botros Samaan, London: Black Swan, 1994. All citations will be to this edition and will be indicated in the text by the abbreviation SS.

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