

Najib Mahfuz grew up in the midst of stirring national events.

“There is no escape from politics, it is like air,” says one character in his stories.¹²⁴ The revolution of 1919 made a deep impact on him.

“For the first time I learned the meaning of the word ‘kill’ as a real experience and not just through popular stories..... I saw loads of corpses spreadeagled around the square and human blood staining people’s clothes and the ground. I heard people yelling from the depths of their throats ‘Long live our homeland’ and ‘May we die and Sa’d live on forever.’”¹²⁵

The interlinking of politics with the lives of ordinary people was to become the main pillar of his writings.

After graduating in 1932, Najib Mahfuz worked in the administration of Cairo University from 1936 to 1939, then at the Ministry of Waqf, devoting his time above all else to creative writing. After his first printed book,¹²⁶ a translation from an English work on ancient Egypt in 1932, he contributed articles to *al-Risāla*. He wrote many short stories for Salama Musa’s magazine, “The New Journal,” but his genius found its best expression in the novel, which he published at the stupendous rate of one a year and he is one of the most widely acclaimed litterateurs of the Arab world.

✓ Closely associated with the development of the cinema in Egypt, and his own stories have been widely filmed, Najib Mahfuz has been the Director of Censorship for the Arts and Director for Cinema Affairs at the Ministry of Culture. He is now with the literary section of *al-Ahram*, the nation having bestowed on him its highest honours: The State Prize for Literature and The Collar of the Republic.

Najib Mahfuz’ literary output consists of eighteen novels and six collections of short stories (till 1967). He has also written plays.

His novels fall under three broad categories:

(124) In the story ‘*al-Hubb tabt al-Matar*,’ as quoted by Ahmad Muhammad ‘Atiya, “Najib Mahfuz bayn al-Fan wal Siyasa,” *al-Aqlam*, Baghdad, No. 4, Jan. 1975, p. 94.

(125) As Quoted by Roger M. A. Allen, “Mirrors by Najib Mahfuz,” *MW* Lxii No. 2, Apr. ‘72.

(126) Mahfuz’ first novel “*Ahlam al-Qariya*” was not published. Fu’ad Dawwara, “*al-Wijdan al-Qawmi fi Adab Najib Mahfuz*” *al-Hilal*, special number, Feb. ‘70.

(1) Historical novels about Pharaonic Egypt: They are 'Abath *al-Aqdār* (The Game of Fate, 1939); *Rādābis*, 1943, and *Kifāh Tibā* (The Struggle of Thebes, 1944).

(2) Social Realistic Novels: set in modern Egypt include *al-Qāhira al-Jadida* (New Cairo, 1945), *Khān al-Khalīlī*, 1946, *Zuqāq al-Midaqq* (The Midaq Alley, 1947), *Bidāya wa Nihāya* (The Beginning and the End, 1949), and the Trilogy: *Bayn al-Qasrayn*, 1956, *Qasr al-Shawq*, 1957, and *al-Sukriyya* (names of the streets of Cairo).

(3) Post realistic novels: starting with *Awlād Harithnā* (The Children of our Alley), *al-Liṣṣ wal Kilāb* (Thief and Dogs, 1961), followed by six short novels including *al-Suman wal Kharīf* (Quails and Autumn, 1967), *Tharhara fowq al-Nīl* (Chatting by the Nile, 1966) and *Mirāmār* (The Egyptian Alexandria Quartet, 1967).

Like the other writers of his generation, Najib Mahfuz came under the sway of Maupassant. He wrote his early short stories with the same unexpected twists and accidental turns.

A more important source of inspiration came from the Russian writers: Chekov, Gorky, Turgenev and Dostoevsky. Their sympathy for the downtrodden is shared by Mahfuz and frequently expressed in his works. Like Chekov, Mahfuz graduates from simple events and ordinary characters to men and matters of deep significance. Gorky's stress on creating standards and types rather than distinctive and individual personalities is also adopted by Najib Mahfuz.¹²⁷

To Galsworthy, Anatole France, Stendhal, Proust, Malraux, Mann, Joyce and Lawrence, Najib Mahfuz owes many ideas, but more especially to Walter Scott who inspired him to write the historical series.

Among the Egyptian thinkers who made an impact on Najib Mahfuz is Salama Musa, the great intellectual who propagated interest in the Pharaonic legacy of Egypt. Salama Musa's ideas on socialism shaped the political ideology of Mahfuz who wrote on socialism long before it was accepted in Egyptian circles. Taha Husayn and al-Aqqad with their liberating ideas also inspired his free thinking.

Najib Mahfuz excels in panoramic, almost photographic descriptions and details of background. His characters are vivid and his plots are true to life.

(127) Ghali Shukri, *al-Muntami, Dirasa fi Adab Najib Mahfuz*, p. 292.

The language employed by Mahfuz is classical though he does not shun colloquial idioms when dialogues require them. A touch of humour pervades all his writing:

These two passages indicative of his style are taken from the novel *Midaq Alley*. Note the penetrating and amusing description of Zaita, the cripple-maker.¹²⁸

و حسب أن يرى مرة واحدة كيلا ينسى بعد ذلك أبدا، لبساطته المتناهية،
فهو جسد نحيل أسود، وجلباب أسود، سواد فوقه سواد، لولا فرجتان
يلبع فيها بياض مخيف هما العينان ولم يكن زبطة - على ذلك - زنجيبيا، بل لأنه
مصرى أصغر اللون في الأصل و لكن القذارة الملبدة بعرق العمر كونت على
جثته طبقة سوداء؛ كذلك جلبابه لم يكن في البدء أسود، و لكن السواد
مصر كل شيء في هذه الخرابية.

"If you once saw Zaita you would never again forget him so starkly simple is his appearance. He consists of a thin, black body and a black gown. Black upon black were it not for the slits shining with a terrifying whiteness which are his eyes. Zaita is not a negro; he is an Egyptian, brown skinned in color. Dirt mixed with the sweat of a lifetime has caked a thick layer of black over his body and over his gown which also was not originally black. Black was the fate of everything in this hole (alley)..."

و كان إذا باشر عمله و أخذ في صنع العاهة لطالبيها، اشتد عليه في قسوة
مقصودة مستخفيا وراء سر المهنة، حتى إذا نددت التأوهات عن فريسته لمعت
عيناه المخيفتان بنور جنوني و مع ذلك كان الشحاذون أحب البشر إلى نفسه،
و تمني كثيرا لو كان الشحاذون أكثرية أهل الأرض.

"When he set about his work of making cripples at their request he was as cruel and deliberately vicious as he could be, cunningly employing all the secrets of his trade. When his victims cried out at his torture, his terrifying eyes gleamed with an insane light; despite all this beggars were the people dearest to him and he often wished that beggars formed the majority of mankind."¹²⁹

(128) Najib Mahfuz, *Zuqaq al-Midaqq*, pp. 60-61.

(129) Najib Mahfuz, *Zuqaq al-Midaqq*, p. 62.

Monarch = Supreme ruler, সম্রাট
exploit = ২. Service deed, শীর্ষকর্ম, গান্ধীকর্ম

✓ Najib Mahfuz' novels deal with various aspects of life such as love, faith and death and above all the meaning of life. The tussle between man and woman also forms an important aspect of his novels. Another equally important dimension—politics, is projected by the author directly or by way of symbolism. Mahfuz is preoccupied mainly with liberty, and deals with the relationship of the citizen to the state, of the child to the father and of the woman to man.¹³⁰

✓ The first three novels of Najib Mahfuz: *'Abath al-Aqdār*, *Rādūbis*, and *Kifāh Ṭiba*, in the historical setting of Pharaohnic Egypt are relevant to the political problems of Egypt in the nineteen thirties. The author is inspired by the lessons of ancient Egypt to find a way out of these predicaments. The struggle to end foreign domination or a tyrant monarch is resolved by the people's heroism or of the leader who represents them.

✓ "The Game of Fate" depicts a monarch who exploits his people and is finally overcome by the son of a commoner chosen by the people to rule. The novel dwells on the greatness of the Egyptian people and prescribes the deposition of the king to remedy such situations.

✓ "Radubis" is the story of a playboy king who neglects the affairs of the state and devotes himself to the charms of the singing girl Radubis. The people revolt against him and kill him. The connection with the country's monarch is clear.

In the third novel, the national aim is clearer than in the two previous ones. It depicts the period of Egypt's occupation by the Hyskos and the revolt against him leading to his banishment.

✓ After the first three novels, Mahfuz abandoned his original plan to write one historical novel a year.¹³¹ Perhaps his experience with practical life in government service provided him an insight into corruption at different levels and he decided to deal more directly with the problems

✓ (130) Ibrahim Amar, "Najib Mahfuz Siyasiyan min Thawra 1919 ila yuniu 1967," *al-Hilal* sp. No. Feb '70.

(131) Mahfuz had prepared forty subjects for his historical novels one for each year of his life. "I wrote three of them and suddenly the desire to write historical romances died within me and I turned to realism in *al-Qahira al-Jadida* (New Cairo) without any preliminaries." Fu'ad Dawwara, "Riblat al-Khamsin," *al-Katib*, Jan. 1963, p. 17.