

Egypt's Greatest Writer

# Naquib Mahfouz, 9/11 and the Cruelty of Memory

Monday 4 September 2006, by [SAID Edward](#) (Date first published: December 2001).

**Naguib Mahfouz died yesterday. He was one of the world's great writers. Here's what the late Edward Said wrote about him on [Counterpunch] site back in December, 2001. AC / JSC**

Before he won the Nobel Prize in 1988, Naguib Mahfouz was known outside the Arab world to students of Arab or Middle Eastern studies largely as the author of picturesque stories about lower-middle-class Cairo life. In 1980 I tried to interest a New York publisher, who was then looking for "Third World" books to publish, in putting out several of the great writer's works in first-rate translations, but after a little reflection the idea was turned down. When I inquired why, I was told (with no detectable irony) that Arabic was a controversial language.

A few years later I had an amiable and, from my point of view, encouraging correspondence about him with Jacqueline Onassis, who was trying to decide whether to take him on; she then became one of the people responsible for bringing Mahfouz to Doubleday, which is where he now resides, albeit still in rather spotty versions that dribble out without much fanfare or notice. Rights to his English translations are held by the American University in Cairo Press, so poor Mahfouz, who seems to have sold them off without expecting that he would someday be a world-famous author, has no say in what has obviously been an unliterary, largely commercial enterprise without much artistic or linguistic coherence.

To Arab readers Mahfouz does in fact have a distinctive voice, which displays a remarkable mastery of language yet does not call attention to itself. I shall try to suggest in what follows that he has a decidedly catholic and, in a way, overbearing view of his country, and, like an emperor surveying his realm, he feels capable of summing up, judging, and shaping its long history and complex position as one of the world's oldest, most fascinating and coveted prizes for conquerors like Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon, as well as its own natives.

In addition Mahfouz has the intellectual and literary means to convey them in a manner entirely his own—powerful, direct, subtle. Like his characters (who are always described right away, as soon as they appear), Mahfouz comes straight at you, immerses you in a thick narrative flow, then lets you swim in it, all the while directing the currents, eddies, and waves of his characters' lives, Egypt's history under prime ministers like Saad Zaghlul and Mustafa El-Nahas, and dozens of other details of political parties, family histories, and the like, with extraordinary skill. Realism, yes, but something else as well: a vision that aspires to a sort of all-encompassing view not unlike Dante's in its twinning of earthly actuality with the eternal, but without the Christianity.

Born in 1911, between 1939 and 1944 Mahfouz published three, as yet untranslated, novels about ancient Egypt while still an employee at the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments). He also

translated James Baikie's book *Ancient Egypt* before undertaking his chronicles of modern Cairo in *Khan Al-Khalili*, which appeared in 1945. This period culminated in 1956 and 1957 with the appearance of his superb Cairo Trilogy. These novels were in effect a summary of modern Egyptian life during the first half of the twentieth century.

The trilogy is a history of the patriarch El-Sayed Ahmed Abdel-Gawwad and his family over three generations. While providing an enormous amount of social and political detail, it is also a study of the intimate relationships between men and women, as well as an account of the search for faith of Abdel-Gawwad's youngest son, Kamal, after an early and foreshortened espousal of Islam.

After a period of silence that coincided with the first five years following the 1952 Egyptian revolution, prose works began to pour forth from Mahfouz in unbroken succession—novels, short stories, journalism, memoirs, essays, and screenplays. Since his first attempts to render the ancient world Mahfouz has become an extraordinarily prolific writer, one intimately tied to the history of his time; he was nevertheless bound to have explored ancient Egypt again because its history allowed him to find there aspects of his own time, refracted and distilled to suit rather complex purposes of his own.

This, I think, is true of *Dweller in Truth* (1985) translated into English in 1998 as *Akhenaten, Dweller in Truth*, which in its unassuming way is part of Mahfouz's special concern with power, with the conflict between orthodox religious and completely personal truth, and with the counterpoint between strangely compatible yet highly contradictory perspectives that derive from an often inscrutable and mysterious figure.

Mahfouz has been characterised since he became a recognised world celebrity as either a social realist in the mode of Balzac, Galsworthy, and Zola or a fabulist straight out of the *Arabian Nights* (as in the view taken by J M Coetzee in his disappointing characterisation of Mahfouz). It is closer to the truth to see him, as the Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury has suggested, as providing in his novels a kind of history of the novel form, from historical fiction to the romance, saga, and picaresque tale, followed by work in realist, modernist, naturalist, symbolist, and absurdist modes.

Moreover, despite his transparent manner, Mahfouz is dauntingly sophisticated not only as an Arabic stylist but as an assiduous student of social process and epistemology—that is, the way people know their experiences—without equal in his part of the world, and probably elsewhere for that matter. The realistic novels on which his fame rests, far from being only a dutiful sociological mirror of modern Egypt, are also audacious attempts to reveal the highly concrete way power is actually deployed. That power can derive from the divine, as in his parable *Awlad Haritna* (*Children of Gebelaawi*) of 1959 in which the great estate owner Gebelaawi is a godlike figure who has banished his children from the Garden of Eden or from the throne, the family, and patriarchy itself, or from civil associations such as political parties, universities, government bureaucracy, and so on. This isn't to say that Mahfouz's novels are guided by or organised around abstract principles: they are not, otherwise his work would have been far less powerful and interesting to his uncounted Arab readers, and also to his by now extensive international audience.

Mahfouz's aim is, I think, to embody ideas so completely in his characters and their actions that nothing theoretical is left exposed. But what has always fascinated him is in fact the way the Absolute—which for a Muslim is of course God as the ultimate power—necessarily becomes material and irrecoverable simultaneously, as when Gebelaawi's decree of banishment against his children throws them into exile even as he retreats, out of reach forever, to his fortress—his house, which they can always see from their territory. What is felt and what is lived are made manifest and concrete but they cannot readily be grasped while being painstakingly and minutely disclosed in Mahfouz's remarkable prose.

Malhamat Al-Harafish (1977), *Epic of the Harafish*, extends and deepens this theme from *Children of Gebelaawi*. His subtle use of language enables him to translate that Absolute into history, character, event, temporal sequence, and place while, at the same time, because it is the first principle of things, it mysteriously maintains its stubborn, original, if also tormenting aloofness. In Akhenaten the sun god changes the young, prematurely monotheistic king forever but never reveals himself, just as Akhenaten himself is seen only at a remove, described in the numerous narratives of his enemies, his friends, and his wife, who tell his story but cannot resolve his mystery.

Nonetheless Mahfouz also has a ferociously antimystical side, but it is riven with recollections and even perceptions of an elusive great power that seems very troubling to him. Consider, for instance, that Akhenaten's story requires no fewer than fourteen narrators and yet fails to settle the conflicting interpretations of his reign. Every one of Mahfouz's works that I know has this central but distant personification of power in it, most memorably the dominating senior figure of El-Sayed Ahmed Abdel-Gawwad in the Cairo Trilogy, whose authoritative presence hovers over the action throughout the trilogy.

In the trilogy his slowly receding eminence is not simply offstage, but is also being transmuted and devalued through such mundane agencies as Abdel-Gawwad's marriage, his licentious behavior, his children, and changing political involvements. Worldly matters seem to puzzle Mahfouz, and perhaps even compel as well as fascinate him at the same time, particularly in his account of the way the fading legacy of El-Sayed Abdel-Gawwad, whose family is Mahfouz's actual subject, in the end still manages to hold together the three generations, through the 1919 Revolution, the liberal era of Saad Zaglul, the British occupation, and the reign of Fouad during the interwar period.

The result is that when you get to the end of one of Mahfouz's novels you paradoxically experience both regret at what has happened to his characters in their long downward progress and a barely articulated hope that by going back to the beginning of the story you might be able to recover the sheer force of these people. There is a hint of how gripping this process is in a fragment called "A message" contained in the novelist's *Echoes from an Autobiography* (1994): "The cruelty of memory manifests itself in remembering what is dispelled in forgetfulness." Mahfouz is an unredemptive but highly judgemental and precise recorder of the passage of time.

Thus Mahfouz is anything but a humble storyteller who haunts Cairo's cafes and essentially works away quietly in his obscure corner. The stubbornness and pride with which he has held to the rigour of his work for a half-century, with its refusal to concede to ordinary weakness, is at the very core of what he does as a writer. What mostly enables him to hold his astonishingly sustained view of the way eternity and time are so closely intertwined is his country, Egypt itself. As a geographical place and as history, Egypt for Mahfouz has no counterpart in any other part of the world. Old beyond history, geographically distinct because of the Nile and its fertile valley, Mahfouz's Egypt is an immense accumulation of history, stretching back in time for thousands of years, and despite the astounding variety of its rulers, regimes, religions, and races, nevertheless retaining its own coherent identity. Moreover, Egypt has held a unique position among nations. The object of attention by conquerors, adventurers, painters, writers, scientists, and tourists, the country is like no other for the position it has held in human history, and the quasi-timeless vision it has afforded.

To have taken history not only seriously but also literally is the central achievement of Mahfouz's work and, as with Tolstoy or Solzhenitsyn, one gets the measure of his literary personality by the sheer audacity and even the overreaching arrogance of his scope. To articulate large swathes of Egypt's history on behalf of that history, and to feel himself capable of presenting its citizens for scrutiny as its representatives: this sort of ambition is rarely seen in contemporary writers.

Mahfouz's Egypt is a charged one, strikingly vivid for the accuracy and humour with which he

portrays it, in a mode that is neither completely taken with great heroes nor able to do without some dream of total harmony of the kind Akhenaten so desperately strives to keep but cannot sustain. Without a powerful controlling centre, Egypt can easily dissolve into anarchy or an absurd, gratuitous tyranny based either on religious dogma or on a personal dictatorship.

Mahfouz is now ninety years old, nearly blind, and, after he was physically assaulted by religious fanatics in 1994, is said to be a recluse. What is both remarkable and poignant about him is how, given the largeness of his vision and his work, he still seems to guard his nineteenth-century liberal belief in a decent, humane society for Egypt even though the evidence he keeps dredging up and writing about in contemporary life and in history continues to refute that belief. The irony is that, more than anyone else, he has dramatised in his work the almost cosmic antagonism that he sees Egypt as embodying between majestic absolutes on the one hand and, on the other, the gnawing at and wearing down of these absolutes by people, history, society. These opposites he never really reconciles. Yet as a citizen Mahfouz sees civility and the continuity of a transnational, abiding, Egyptian personality in his work as perhaps surviving the debilitating processes of conflict and historical degeneration which he, more than anyone else I have read, has so powerfully depicted.

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\* Posted August 31, 2006 by "Counterpunch": <http://www.counterpunch.org/said08312006.html>