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Naguib Mahfouz in Egypt's Literary Conscience

by Sayed Hamed El-Nassag

My fascination with the Trilogy increased later when I started to specialize in the study of the novel and the short story. I had to refer to it from time to time, and in fact I always reread it whenever a new novel by Naguib Mahfouz was published, in order to compare it with every new step in his development, every new aspect of his art.

That old feeling about Naguib Mahfouz and the Nobel Prize became more powerful every time I read that the Prize had been awarded to some other novelist whose works were local in nature, but has become internationally recognized.

Fidelity and truthfulness to the details of life in Cairo mark his work from 'Al-Qahirah al-Gadidah' (1945) published to 'Qushtomar', his latest (1988) published serially in *Al-Ahram*. The limited geographical area within his novels have meant closer contact with Cairo's people. He has shared its problems, knowing its facts and understanding its contradictions. He has breathed its dust, mixed his sweat with the sweat of its people, studied their conflicts, and sympathized with their dreams since the early thirties.

I was truly pleased to see that my critical sense had not faded me after all, when I learned that his Trilogy had occupied the forefront of the Nobel Prize Committee's report. Thus has come the crowning of a half century-long career of painstaking continuous work, work that has been characterized by originality, depth and keen observation of social change. Naguib Mahfouz has deserved this triumph by being true to his art alone and by giving his undivided loyalty to it and his dream for society. He has never resorted to propaganda nor to making vulgar publicity for his books or his opinions. He has given his all to his writing and has been the most studied, researched and criticized of all contemporary Egyptian writers.

Arab universities recognizing his great role in the Arab

For a long time I had a feeling that the Nobel Prize would not evade Naguib Mahfouz. Perhaps the feeling goes as far back as the days when his Trilogy first began to appear serially in Al-Risalah Al-Gadidah magazine. I became fascinated by its architecture, its developing characters, its local colour, tastes and flavours, its fidelity to a specific setting in the old popular districts of Islamic Cairo.



novel, have directed their students to study his works, including them in their regular curricula. Post graduate students specialize in his writings. Scholars have tried to cover every aspect of his art, examining each novel, scrutinizing every character, analysing every single sentence. Critics have, meanwhile, filled the pages of the daily press, the specialized and non-specialized weeklies and monthly magazines, with lengthy articles about Naguib Mahfouz.

The number of books and monographs about him shows that critics and scholars have thoroughly realized the importance of this great writer. They have been following his literary career almost since he began to write.

Commitment to History

Coming to maturity during a period following experimentation of a pioneer generation of writers, Naguib Mahfouz began his literary career with historical novels. 'Abath al-Aqdar' in 1939, 'Radopsis' in 1943, and 'The Struggle for Thebes' in 1944. In these novels he was engrossed in the appeal to neo-Pharaonicism, the idea of a revival of the past glories of ancient Egypt, an idea strongly influenced by Salama Musa, who was then his mentor. These historical novels are the best produced in the genre at the time. In 'Abath al-Aqdar' he made good use of Baikie's 'History of Ancient Egypt' as well as the story of Moses. In his second novel, 'Radopsis', he describes the conflict between

the king and the priests, and the celebrations of the Nile Feast. Battle and travels occupy the greater part of the action in 'The Struggle for Thebes'. In all three novels he adheres strongly to historical outlines, but fills them with symbolic references to contemporary social conditions and to government in Egypt during the rule of the Mohammad Ali Dynasty. The first novel condemns tyranny and the second criticises royal corruption.

Then Naguib Mahfouz takes up a new line beginning with 'New Cairo', where he faces current reality. From among the various sectors of that reality, he chose to write about the petty bourgeoisie, seeing the tragic side of the life of society in general in the inner formation of that class in particular. He himself belongs to the petty bourgeoisie of Cairo. Nor is it accidental that poverty in particular became his favourite issue, with all the moral, political and social corruption that surrounds it.

Elements of Construction

New Cairo led him to 'Khan Khalil'. Then he focused his literary lens on that narrow backstreet 'Midaq Alley', to draw a vivid picture of its people with the life story of each, his manners, inclinations, his good and evil habits. He concluded this stage of his career with 'Bedaya wa Nehaya' (Beginning and End) playing on the same strings with which he began this group of social novels. In these novels we encounter a group of characters, whom no writer before

upon the younger generation of writers even those who were children or babies in 1967.

If the Trilogy had established him in the centre of the field of the Arab novel, he henceforth probed in many artistic directions, showing the full capacity as an artist whose vision has never been severed from the reality around him. Nor did he isolate himself from international influences. He has like other modern artists produced novels in which the symbol is not only inseparable from reality, but condenses and concentrates it.

'Children of Gebelawi', 'The Thief and the Dogs', 'Quails and Autumn', 'The Road' and 'The Beggar' all contain artistic devices that tantalized critics. He does not distance himself from reality, however, or deal with an abstract philosophical or moral idea, but takes his ideas from the existing real life as lived by ordinary people. He tries to express these ideas using the artistic means, the tools suited to his subject and purpose. His closeness to ordinary life may be the secret of his appeal to the public who read such novels. They certainly do not find them strange or unusual. On the contrary, what they have found was their real life stamped with an appealingly artistic form.

In 'Chit Chat on the Nile' and 'Miramar', Naguib Mahfouz proved that he had the courage to express his views of current events and that he understood his role as a writer to be critical. The public received these books with great enthusiasm, for it found there its living conscience, a beating heart, deep insight and clear vision.

Despite the great number of publications which deal with Naguib Mahfouz, many aspects of his literature still need to be studied. Starting with his early works, for example, the language in Naguib's fiction needs more research. His diction in 'Bedaya wa Nehaya', for instance, is different from that of 'The Road' and his diction in 'The Thief and the Dogs'. Even Naguib's characters' names have linguistic significance. What do they mean for him?

Although there is a study dealing with Woman in the novel, I still believe that woman characters in the works of Naguib Mahfouz must be subject to more artistic, psychological and social studies. In his novels she occupies a noticeable place.

I also wish to add that his short stories have not been studied comprehensively and that his experiments in play-writing have been ignored by drama critics. He has also begun, in recent years, to expound his views on various political, social, psychological and artistic issues in *Al-Ahram*. These statements may shed more light on his art, his thought and his literary career in general. In any case, Mahfouz will certainly live very long in our literary consciousness.

During the Revolution, Naguib Mahfouz was able to experiment and to criticize in writing in the daily papers where several novels were published serially. A wide range readers waited for each new episode of 'The Thief and the Dogs', 'Quails and Autumn', 'The Road', 'The Beggar', 'Chit Chat on the Nile', or 'Miramar', which was published in 1967.

The new world that Naguib Mahfouz tried to shape after the defeat of June 1967, however, took the form of short stories rather than novels, of which he produced a great number between 1967 and 1972. Short stories like 'Under the Bus Shelter', 'The Black Cat Tavern', 'A Tale without Beginning or End', 'The Honey-moon', and many others written after the June war have had a marked impact

A Short Story by Naguib Mahfouz

The Old Man and the Land



A novel sight drew my attention as I took my daily walk along the Nile bank on Gabalaya Street. It was seven o'clock in the morning, one day in early spring. The road was almost deserted. At the foot of the river bank I saw a man and a woman.

The man looked nearly eighty, tall with a slight stoop, white thin hair, wizened features, wearing a loosely hanging suit of ash — coloured linen. The woman looked over sixty: all signs of femininity had been wiped out of her face, replaced by dryness and coarseness. On the ground between them a folded tent had been thrown down and cooking pots, a tea pot, and a primus stove were scattered about.

It crossed my mind that they had come to spend a day beside the Nile, to while away the loneliness of old age. The stoniness of the river bank and the rubbish strewn on the ground did not make me optimistic about their peace of mind.

The next day I was surprised to see the couple in the same spot. My surprise increased when I saw them engrossed in the task of removing the stones and sweeping the rubbish from a sizable stretch of the bank.

"What's happened to them?" I wondered as I slowed my pace, looking intently. "Do they plan a lengthy stay?"

They noticed me and looked up at me suspiciously. I found it necessary to hurry away to avoid any embarrassment. Did they doubt my intention? Did they think I watched them in an official capacity as being responsible for the river bank? I felt pity and compassion for them and hoped that Allah would not fail them.

On the morning of the third day I saw that the land had been furrowed and divided into successive oblong basins, and that a shaduf had been mounted at the edge of the river bank. Not far away the couple sat sipping tea. When they saw me coming, they raised their heads towards me in anxiety greater than they had shown the day before. I hurried past in sympathy, avoiding any meeting of eyes; their fear, damn it, has pursued them to their new place of emigration! The reason can be guessed though I'm ignorant of the facts of the case. They are suspicious of my morning walks and imagine they take place for the purpose of spying on them. How can I spare them this dose of uneasiness I inflict on them every morning? I cannot give up my route, but I can ignore them or make them believe that I'm ignoring them.

For days after that, I saw — from the tail of my eye — water covering the little garden patch where the tent had been elegantly erected. Day after day, the face of the land changed to announce the birth of a new life. Emerging like quiet bird song, green shoots sprouted, heralding radiant delight. I wished the two old people could spread their cultivation all along the river bank and relieve the eye of its nasty look. The only thing that disturbed my peace of mind was their persistent apprehensiveness.

Then one day I decided to wave and smile. I had hardly done so when the old man waved back, then climbed up the bank until he stood facing me.

"Your honour, an official? He asked. I answered in the affirmative.

"In the Governorate?"

"No. I have no relation with the Governorate," I said carefully, "nor with the Ministry of Interior nor anything of the kind."

He fell silent in perplexity.

"Why do you eye me suspiciously," I said, laughing, "as if I'm an enemy?"

"I'm an old pensioner," he confessed. "I was an employee with the Ministry of Agriculture. The police evacuated our house, which was liable to fall down. I had a mind to live on the riverbank instead of among the graves."

"A nice idea."

"The pension is small. I thought of growing something. To eat not to trade. We sold the old furniture and bought what we needed, the tent and the shaduf."

"You did well."

He hesitated a moment, then said: "I believe this doesn't offend anyone?"

"It's enough that you've embellished a strip of this dirty riverbank."

"But I'm afraid of being investigated and arrested."

"I really have no knowledge of all that," I said truthfully. I wished him well, shook his hand and walked away.

When summer came I took my annual leave and returned from the summer resort a month and half later to continue my ordinary life, resuming my morning walk. When I reached Gabalaya Street I recalled, maybe for the first time the old man, and the old woman and hurried to the spot, anxious to see what had happened to them. But I found no trace of them or the little garden patch.

The riverbank had reverted to a filthy wasteland. There was no other explanation but that the old man's fears had come true. My heart filled with sadness as I wondered what had become of the old couple.

Not far away I saw a familiar traffic policeman and went up to him. We exchanged greetings, as we had for many years, then I asked him:

"There was a man and a woman cultivating the land..."

The man laughed. "That situation did not last and praise be to Him Who is Everlasting. A policeman came one day to investigate and took the old man off to the station to answer to a complaint."

In distress I fell silent and sank in thought. The policeman said, "Government land is not for every Tom, Dick and Harry. Workers came and uprooted the plants before they'd ripened. I don't know what happened to the old man after that."

My heart constricted with sorrow for Adam and Eve and their little garden. Their memory stayed with me some time, then dissolved in the great sea of everyday life.

Today, over twenty years have gone by. Sometimes I remember when I pass that spot: I remember the old man and the old woman and their green garden patch, which was destroyed as the result of an Almighty investigation?

Translated by Lotfia Adawi



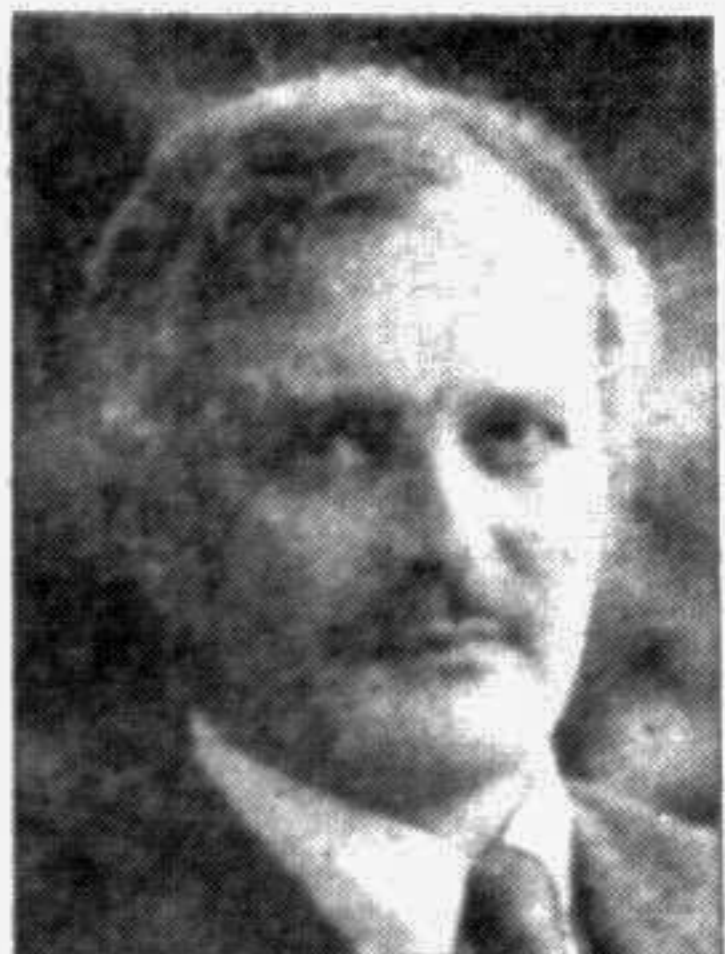
IDEALLY, the process of translating a Mahfouz novel into English has involved the following stages: 1) a first translation from Arabic to English made by a native Arabic-speaker with literary training; 2) checking of the accuracy of the translation by another native Arabic-speaker, sometimes with the help and advice of Mahfouz himself; 3) revision of the translation by a native English-speaker with literary training, experience of the Middle East, and some knowledge of Arabic; 4) re-checking of this revision for accuracy; 5) preparation of notes or other apparatus, depending upon what may seem required; 6) final vetting by an educated native English-speaker who has little or no knowledge of Arabic.

It is obvious that such a process, which does not even include actual production or publication of the book itself, may be very time-consuming. It can be shortened when several talents and skills are combined in one person, but the combination has proven to be very rare indeed. Shortcuts have usually resulted in a final product that fails to read well in English.

The basic problem resides not with any intrinsic "difficulty" in the Arabic language, it has been suggested, but in the fact that Arabic lit-

Translating Naguib Mahfouz

by John Rodenbeck



erature and English literature represent different and widely separated rhetorical traditions, which have met in the past only occasionally. Though both literatures owe something to the culture of ancient Greece, for example, the debts are of two quite different kinds. All of Western literature — and indeed a great deal of Western thinking — is descended from the poetry of Homer and the pre-Classical lyricists, whose influence runs directly into Roman culture (by way of Ptolemaic Alexandria) and thence into the European ver-

Through a series of legal agreements that began in 1972, the English language rights to most of Mahfouz work have become vested in the American University in Cairo Press, which has published English translations of one collection of short stories and of nine novels; *The Beginning and the End*, *Midaq Alley*, *The Thief and the Dogs*, *Autumn Quail*, *The Search*, *The Beggar*, *Miramar*, *Wedding Song*, and *Respected Sir*.

The most successful of these translations have usually involved at least two people — a native English-speaker and a native Arabic-speaker — working as a team. Occasionally they have needed as many as four, five or even six people, whose labours have taken shape over periods that have lasted as long as three years.

For the Arabs in the earliest centuries of Islam, however, Greek poetry was of much less interest than Greek mathematics and medicine, in which they eventually surpassed the Greeks themselves. Thus influence of Greek rhetorical structures, omnipresent in all the European literatures, Romance, Germanic, Slavic, or whatever, has been minimal in Arabic literature.

The job of translating Arabic into English is therefore altogether different from translating, say, Hungarian or

Portuguese, even when what is being translated is a novel — even when, that is to say, it belongs to a Western literary form.

The translator must work on behalf of an audience in his own language, not the language of the original. And he must certainly not suppose he is creating a substitute for the original. Accuracy must therefore be weighed against the demands made by the literary culture of his audience, which may be very far removed from the literary culture represented by the original.

Certainly there is a large distance between the literary sense of an English-speaking audience and any modern Arabic original, a distance that cannot be bridged by literal translation.

Thus, although Western translators nearly always make mistakes — every Egyptian professor of Arabic has a sizeable collection of "howlers" committed by Western colleagues — they probably matter less in the long run than the achievement of a text that strikes and educated man

or woman as "readable."

These are the kinds of people, after all, for whom Mahfouz is writing in the Arab world: educated people, with a sense of literary values, who are

therefore likely to understand his moral vision. Mahfouz Western readers but with the same capacity for understanding his work with a different sense of literary values, but

with the same capacity for understanding his moral vision. And it is this vision, above all, not verbal niceties, that a translator must try to capture and present to his audience.



Mahfouz in his study