

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2017.2.2.07>

Merging of the Pharaonic and Arabic Worlds in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz

Dr. Kavitha N

Assistant Professor in English

All Saints' College

Trivandrum, University of Kerala

Abstract

This paper discusses about the social, political, cultural and historical changes through ages in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz. Throughout his novels there is a blend of past and present. Mahfouz is the son of two civilizations- the Great Pharaonic Empire and a mixture of Arabic and Islamic traditions. Being an Arabic author, he transcends the limits of Arabic and Islamic tradition, to which he belongs, tracing his heritage and seeking his identity as an Egyptian. Paper discusses Mahfouz's four novels *The Mockery of the Fates* (1939), *Thebes at War* (1944), *Midaq Alley* and *Cairo Trilogy*. His aim was to seek the identity of his own country in the space time of his existence and the sphere of his self. Mahfouz makes use of his historical novels to study human nature. He gave it a new dimension by tackling vibrant themes from Egypt's ancient history, some of which were reflected in the surge of nationalism, whose aim was to liberate its people politically, socially and culturally from foreign domination. He also presents a social topography of the colonial Egypt through his texts.

Keywords: Social Stratification, Socio- political approach, East-West dichotomy

The novel genre, which can be traced back to the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe, has no prototypes in classical Arabic Literature. Although all kinds of narratives were there, none of them could be described as a 'novel'. Arab scholars attribute the first serious attempt at writing a novel in Arabic to the Egyptian author Muhammad Hussein Haykal. Soon after, writers like Taha Hussein, Abbas Al- Aqqad, Ibrahim Al- Mazini and Tawfiq Al- Hakim came into unknown realm of fiction. The Arab world's most prominent literary figure Naguib Mahfouz was one among the few Arab writers who sprang to world attention, other than a handful of orientalist. Mahfouz in R. El- Enany's *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning*, wrote, "There was no legacy of the novel (in Arabic) that I could depend on [...] I arrived on

Merging of the Pharaonic and Arabic Worlds in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz

By

Dr. Kavitha N

a scene that was nearly empty. It was incumbent on me to discover things and to lay the ground by myself” (21).

Naguib Mahfouz, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988, was the first Arabic Writer to be so honoured. His fiction features a wide variety of ordinary citizens, usually inhabitants of Cairo, and includes explorations of such issues as the position of women and the problems of political prisoners. He is also widely admired for his ability to capture virtually every aspect of ordinary life, especially in the poorer districts of Cairo. Pamela Allegretto- Dilulio in her book *Naguib Mahfouz: a Western and Eastern cage of Female Entrapment*, comments that, “As a major writer of Egyptian culture and norms amid the British occupation and growing nationalistic fervor, Mahfouz used his art to capture the essence and drama of Cairene culture in the twentieth century “ (2).

Even though his novels are historical, it does not teach history, but tends to glorify it by including the social and cultural factors; its objective is to deepen the feeling about the glorious Pharaonic past. As Matti Moosa says,

We should remember however, that he is writing a historical romance, not a reconstruction of the ancient history of Egypt [...] it was inevitable that Mahfouz should inject his own ideas into the narrative through the different characters and the events they experience cloaked with a veneer of historical facts (28).

Paper discusses Mahfouz’s four novels *The Mockery of the Fates* (1939), *Thebes at War* (1944), *Midaq Alley* and *Cairo Trilogy* to substantiate both the Pharaonic and Arabic themes. The first two novels deal with the glorious Pharaonic past- former being set in Egypt’s old kingdom under the reign of the renowned Fourth Dynasty monarch Khufu and, the latter portraying the struggle of southern city of Thebes against Hyksos, the Asiatic foreigners. *Midaq Alley* plays on the cultural setting- the division between the traditional and modern world in Egypt during the 1940’s and the three novels in *Cairo Trilogy* trace the radical changes undergone by three generations of a Cairene merchant family. The social and political conflicts of the modern age are reflected through different characters of the *Trilogy*.

The Mockery of the Fates set in Egypt’s old kingdom under the reign of the renowned Fourth Dynasty monarch, Khufu, for whom the Great pyramid of Giza was built. Mahfouz got the plot from an Egyptian fable told in James Baikie’s book. As the title indicates, the novel is the conflict between man and fate. This novel aimed to inform the reader about the daily life in ancient Egypt by describing the journey of a ship that sailed over the Nile to Thebes. The novel abounds with detailed descriptions of situations and dialogues that reflect the author’s ideas and imagination, particularly when he discusses the pharaoh’s family gathering, his library, his hunting party, and the educational system in Egypt. According to the Egyptologists, the pharaoh lived in a royal palace surrounded by pools and lakes, which provided coolness and recreation, and graced with pleasure gardens where he could have

Merging of the Pharaonic and Arabic Worlds in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz

By

Dr. Kavitha N

some relaxation. According to historical accounts, the pharaoh believed himself to be the sublime God of both state and people. Mahfouz describes a conversation between Khufu and his chief architect Mirabo, in which the pharaoh asserts that divinity is nothing but power. One of his titles in the old kingdom was good God, and he was so revered that no man dared refer to him by name.

Thebes at War, last of Mahfouz's first series of historical novels is an epic portraying the struggle of the southern city of Thebes against the Hyksos. The expulsion of Hyksos gave old Egypt, independence from foreign domination and set it on the way to becoming an empire. Hyksos were the invaders from Asia, who ruled Northern Egypt for around a hundred years in the sixteenth century BC. This novel which deals with the Egyptians' struggle to their country was written at a time when Egypt was under combined foreign rule: the British on the one hand, and an aristocracy of Turkish stock on the other. It is true that the British had declared Egypt's independence in 1922, but severe restrictions on the country's sovereignty, including the occupation of Egyptian territory especially the Suez Canal Zone, remained. It is clear that, this is a profoundly political novel which invokes patriotism of Egyptians to defend their country against foreign rule. *Thebes at War* did not only herald the beginning of Mahfouz's involvement in the political reality of modern Egypt, but also in the social and economic structures dictated by it. The socio-economic pattern regulating the relationship between governors and governed in the novel is summed up by these two respective statements by two characters, the first a Hyksos, the second an Egyptian: 'If you want to make use of a fallah, first make him poor and then whip him' (113) and 'The rule followed in Egypt is for the rich to rob the poor while the poor are not allowed to steal from the rich' (95).

Mahfouz's another novel; *Midaq Alley* (1947) plays on the cultural setting. *Midaq Alley* is an isolated, dead end street in Cairo, Egypt. The novel is introduced with a description of the Arabic culture. To consider oneself Arab, one had to be a speaker of the Arabic language and more importantly, had to prefer the standard variety of Arabic in common use across the Arab world over the local dialects as a vehicle for communication. Secondly, one had to identify with the history of Arab achievement in the public and cultural spheres as a noble heritage worthy of emulation. The third element of Arab identity is that one had to accept certain values found in the Islamic religion, such as tolerance and egalitarianism, as having a moral and ethical effect beneficial to society, even if one were not practicing Islam. At various points in *Midaq Alley*, which appeared around the time of the founding of Arab League, these three cardinal points of Arab identity as well as subsidiary ones deriving from them come under close scrutiny. The glorious past of Arabs is directly relevant to the world of Mahfouz's characters.

Consequently, there has been a tendency among scholars to analyze *Midaq Alley* as a novel dealing primarily with the problem of poverty in an old Cairene setting, and are of

Merging of the Pharaonic and Arabic Worlds in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz

By

Dr. Kavitha N

relevance to Egypt if not to the Middle East as a whole. This novel shows the division between the traditional and the modern world in Egypt during the 1940's that is to some extent, a re-enactment of the East-West dichotomy and the values, whether aesthetic or moral, which accompany those worlds. Although most of the events in *Midaq Alley* take place in or near the alley itself, the few references in the novel about British colonial existence would have been sufficient to remind the Egyptian colonial policy that had been exerting on their life in their country.

Mahfouz gives us a social stratification, or perhaps a social topography of the world of the *Midaq Alley*. On the very top of the social ladder there is Salim Alwan who does not reside in the alley, but the premises of his business enterprise are there. He is a wholesale and retail merchant who made large profits during World War Second by selling tea on the black market. He belongs to the social stratum known as the effendiyya or the petite bourgeoisie, and particularly to the upper classes of that stratum. On the second rung of the social ladder we find the widow, Sanniyya Afifi, who owns one of the houses of the *Midaq Alley*, and significantly occupies the top floor of her house. She earns her income as a landlady, and as the owner of two shops in al- Himzawi. Afifi belongs to the middle class of petite bourgeoisie. Shaykh Ridwan al- Husayni comes next on the social ladder. He is a man of religion who failed al- Azhar and experienced personal tragedies, but never flinched in his faith in, and love of God and humanity. He is relatively well- off and has the reputation of being a fair landlord in dealings with his tenants. All other residents of the alley belong to social strata lower than that of Alwan, Afifi and al- Husayni. For instance, Muallim Kirsha is a cafe proprietor and a leader of the cafe proprietors in his quarter. He is a profligate who spends his money on hashish and homosexual pursuits. His son worked in a bicycle repair shop, moved to work for the British Army camp. He has no savings, so when he lost the job in British Army, he returned empty handed. One of the major characters Um Hamida also belongs to this class. At the very bottom of the social hierarchy we have Doctor who practices dentistry without any formal training.

The epoch making *Cairo Trilogy*, written between 1956 and 1957, traces the radical changes undergone by three generations of a Cairene merchant family, dominated by the towering figure of its tyrannical patriarchal Ahmad Abd al- Jawad. It resurrects Cairo between 1917 and 1944, a crucial period in the history of Egypt which witnessed the rise of Egyptian and Arab nationalism under the leadership of Sa'd Zaghloul. The formidable patriarch, Ahmad Abd al-Jawad is a rich merchant who frequents cafes and houses of ill repute, peopled with dancers and singers. But he is an oppressive father who terrorizes his children and wife who not even allowed his wife and daughters to go out.

In 1914, the British officially assumed political control of Egypt when it deposed Egyptian king, Abbas Pasha, for his suspected German sympathies at the beginning of First World War. This coercive move on the part of the British inspired the first official

Merging of the Pharaonic and Arabic Worlds in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz

By

Dr. Kavitha N

independence movement in Egypt, called the Wafd, whose program established the pattern of secularism in the formation of Egypt's secular political economy after the British removal in 1952 is a major focus of Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy*. The social and political conflicts of this period are seen to influence every aspect of Egyptian life, as controversies rage between individual members of the family over their allegiance to conflicting systems of belief and behaviour. Support and opposition to the monarchy and the various political reactions, the fundamentalists and the socialists, and the devotion or indifference to the constant struggle with the British, are seen as dominant and explosive issues. Two sons of Ahmad Abd al-Jawad represent the main trends in political life of the country, especially Arab Nationalism and Socialism. The most dramatic affect of Egypt's colonization by the British, however, is its radicalizing affect on Egypt's youth-- once again, a portrait of Egypt's future illustrated through allegory. Fahmy represents the hope of the Abd al-Jawad family and the hope of Egypt in *Palace Walk*, Fahmy also represents the last of a generation; after him, Egypt's youth will be hopelessly caught in spiritual crisis and, as a result, will become radically violent and extremely conservative.

In *Palace of Desire*, as in *Palace Walk*, the interaction between public and private makes an examination of the social and political changes as they are registered by individual characters a useful way of narrating Egypt's transition into independence. Indeed, the larger social, political and cultural conflicts Egypt faced between past and present are manifested in the *Palace of Desire* through the character of Kamal. He is in the centre of the Egyptian dilemma between tradition on the one hand and modernization and innovation on the other. Kamal's spiritual crisis represents an entire generation and results in a new generation's exposure to modern Western thought. The tension between past and present is brought into dramatic relief in the scene in which Kamal is scolded by his father for having published an article advancing Darwin's theory of evolution. For al-Sayyid Ahmad, who represents Egypt's past, Kamal's activities are an act of heresy against God and, by questioning the authority of the father, Kamal, acts like a modern son.

In *Sugar Street*, the struggle between Westernization and tradition is carried forward into the third generation by Kamal's nephews, Ahmad, the Communist, and Abd al-Mun'im, the Muslim Brother. Abd al-Mun'im, however, represents the stronger tendency in *Palace of Desire* towards a return to the fundamentals of Islam. This tendency gains momentum through out the novel and crystallizes into a full-fledged movement by the beginning of *Sugar Street*. The tenets of Communism espoused by Ahmad represent a threat to the Western democratic model imported to Egypt through the British occupation. Egyptian population of the 1930s and 40s, the return to a golden age of Islam, represent the most dramatic refusal of the West. Indeed, the movement back to an Islamic past was engendered by Egypt's intense hatred for the British, a hatred provoked by 54 years of occupation and exploitation. The move back to Islam is thus a defensive move born in direct confrontation

Merging of the Pharaonic and Arabic Worlds in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz

By

Dr. Kavitha N

with the West. The cultural and ideological turmoil that Egypt experiences after the turn of the century came ahead at the end of Second World War. It is masterfully handled by Mahfouz through his characters that range in their ideologies from the extreme rightist fundamentalists to the extreme leftists who relentlessly fought the foreign occupier.

Mahfouz's socio-political approach took another turn in 1959, as he became openly critical of the Nasser regime, which he had initially supported but which had failed to bring about significant change in the Egyptian people's circumstances. After 1967 and Egypt's defeat in the Six- Day War with Israel, his style became extremely bleak, reflecting the Egyptian people's sense of helplessness, frustration and shattered illusions. Time, Mahfouz claims, is the real protagonist of his novels, as his characters negotiate their identity as heirs to the great civilization of the ancient Egyptians 7000 years ago, while making adjustments necessary in a modern industrial society that has cast off foreign and undemocratic rule. We get a portrait of the twentieth century Egypt and Pharaonic Egypt at the same time.

Thus Mahfouz is anything but a humble story teller who frequents Cairo's cafes and essentially works away quietly in his obscure corner. As a geographical place and as history, Egypt for Mahfouz has no counterpart in any other part of the world. It's the land of the oldest civilization; old beyond history, geographically distinct because of the Nile and its fertile valley. Egypt has an astounding variety of rulers, regimes, religions and races; nevertheless the land retains its own coherent identity. Moreover Egypt has held a unique position among nations. It is a land of conquerors, adventures, painters, writers, scientists and tourists; the country is distinguished by its position held in human history and the timeless vision it has afforded to humanity. Mahfouz's novels depicted the contemporary society, colonial background and the great Pharaonic past with the same ease. He began his writing career with novels of Pharaonic theme and after a short term began to deal with the Arabic and Colonial Egypt, and towards the end of his life time, showed much interest in contemporary politics. Even though he is speaking of the contemporary political and social aspects of Egypt, he often reminds us about the glorious age of Pharaohs and Arabic civilization of Egypt. Thus the writer is a link between the Pharaonic and Arabic worlds of Egypt.

Works Cited

- El- Enany, R. *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Mahfouz, Naguib. *Thebes at War*. Trans. Humphrey Davies. New York: Anchor Books, 2003. Print.
- Moosa, Matti. *The Early Novels of Naguib Mahfouz: Images of Modern Egypt*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994. Print.
- Allegretto- Dilulio, Pamela. *Naguib Mahfouz: a Western and Eastern cage of Female Entrapment*. Newyork: Cambria press, 2007. Print.

Merging of the Pharaonic and Arabic Worlds in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz

By

Dr. Kavitha N