Chapter – IV

THEMATIC STUDY OF HIS HISTORICAL NOVELS

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The birth of the Egyptian novel, however, could not take place until the modern era, when five preconditions had been fulfilled: 1) the influence of European literature, where the novel developed into a major genre in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; 2) the establishment of Egyptian printing works and pressrooms in the nineteenth century along with the rise of newspaper production; 3) public education and the spread of literacy; 4) a gradual liberation from oppression by foreign powers, starting with the reign of Muhammad Ali in the aftermath of the Napoleonic occupation in the early 1800s; and 5) the emergence of an intellectual class with broad intellectual learning.

Thus an Arabic Renaissance finally arose; its *Janus* face turned as much to the past as to the future. The concept of *Nahdah* in Arabic literary criticism and historiography, meaning a "rising up" or revitalization, refers in part to a period of neo-classicism an awakening of old literary traditions following a time of decline or stagnation since the eleventh century. The term has also creativity, new syntheses, modernization, dynamic experiments, and progress.

Among the matured Egyptian novels Muhammad Hussayn Haykal's novel *Zaynab*, published in 1912, is often regarded as the first true Arabic novel, ut there were many forerunners. The most important successor, however, was born about the time of the completion of Hussayn Haykal's work. The development of the modern Egyptian novel is reflected by – and reaches a peak in – the half century of work by Naguib Mahfouz, Nobel Laureate in 1988, the first writer in Arabic to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Naguib Mahfouz's novels and short stories are works of art. They picture Egyptian milieus from the most ancient of times to contemporary everyday life, deal with questions of broad human concern, raise philosophical and existential questions. The author is always guided by a belief in Egyptian continuity and greatness, from time to time shaken to its foundations by tumultuous history, the corruption of thought and disaster. In his novels there is a moral right and a constant seeking for Egyptian identity behind the weft of illusion and reality. A dweller in truth, unable to define it, Mahfouz is – like the investigator, *meriamun*, in his novel on the enigmatic *Akhenaten* perpetually pursuing his own self.

The Pertinence of the Past:

Naguib Mahfouz started his career as a writer by exploring ancient Egyptian history. He did not do so to understand the contemporary scene, still less it to criticize it in a covert fashion. His aim was to seek the identity of his country in the space-time of his existence and the sphere of his Self. He also obviously sought for a reliable encourage in the distant past during years of war, upheld, and calamity. [1]

Being an Arabic author, he transcends the limit of Arabic and Moslem tradition, to which he belongs, tracing his heritage and seeking his identity as an Egyptian. His preoccupation with the history of Ancient Egypt goes back, however, several years to 1931 when, still a student, he published a translation of an English text with the title Ancient Egypt by one James Baikes. The original was published in London in 1912 as part of a series entitled 'Peeps at Many Lands' aimed apparently at young readers in English.

[1] "Naguib Mahfouz and the Cruelty of Memory", Counter Punch., 16 Dec 2001, www.counterpunch.org/mahfouz.html

The translation on the other hand, with the title *Misr al-Qadima* appeared in the 'Publications of *Al-Majalla al-Jadida'* published by Salama Musa. Though Naguib Mahfouz began his writing in college life, but these first efforts were not publishable. Through the star of his writing life, Salama Mussa the Fabian secularist thinker, however, he eventually had several historical novels published.[2] Mahfouz relates how this happened. During one of his visits to the office of the Magazine *al-Majallah al-Jadidah*, Musa asked him whether he thought that there was a chance for the novel to succeed in Egypt.

Musa believed that since most Egyptian fiction writers were influenced by western ideas and techniques, it would be difficult to produce a genuine Egyptian novel. Perhaps, he thought, a student from the Azhar could write an authentic Egyptian novel, because Azharite students were not influenced by western culture. Mahfouz responded that although the novel in Egypt was still in its infancy, he himself had ventured into the genre. Surprised, Musa asked him whether he really wrote novels: Mahfouz answered that he did. Had they been published? No, he replied, adding that he was not sure that they were worthy of publication. Musa asked him to bring them along with him on the next visit. Mahfouz brought the tree novels, one of which was entitled *Ahlam al-Qarya* (Village Dreams). After reading them Musa opined that the novels were not worthy to publish. Musa encouraged him to modify them and he did. He found his subject matter in the ancient history of Egypt, which he says, he aspired to recreate in fictional form as Sir Walter Scot had done with the history of his country. For that he projected 40 (fourty) themes, for historical novels, he did not as he became more interested in social realism. When he presented the historical novel, entitled *Hikmat*

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[2]. A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993. p/163.

Khufu (The Wisdom of Cheops), Musssa suggested Mahfouz to change the title into *Abath al-Aqdar* (The Ironies/Mockary/Game of Fates) and published it as a separate issue of *al-Majallah al-Jadida* in September 1939, followed Rhodopis (*Radubis*, 1943) and *Kifah Theba* (The Thebes Struggle, 1944).

Mahfouz's first and only translation and one is tempted to be reprinted in nearly sixty years, he listed the ban only in 1988, probably under the pressure of increased interest in him after the Nobel Prize award. Why did translated the book? The answer he gives is that it was an exercise undertaken to improve his English. But this does not explain why he chose a book with this subject-matter in particular - it is obvious the choice must have been dictated by a growing interest in the history of Ancient Egypt which was only a few years later to be expressed more extensively. [3]

His interest must be placed within the context of a main intellectual current at the time which found in the face of foreign rule a sense of national and cultural pride in Ancient Egyptian history. Elementary as the translated book is, there is no doubt that it had an influence on Mahfouz's early historical novels. His all tree historical novels bear the marks of an apprentice artist who, even when he finished the third of them. Had Mahfouz stopped writing then, these novels would not have earned his name a lasting place in the annals of modern Arabic letters and would themselves have long been forgotten today. The fact, however, remains that these novels provide a valuable glimpse into the mind of the young Mahfouz. Thus, while their consideration from an aesthetic viewpoint is bound to be a largely futile practice, it may prove immensely rewarding

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[3]. Naguib Mahfouz: the pursuit of meaning, El-Enany, Rasheed, ROUTLEDGE, London and New York, 1993. p/35

to look in them for the germination of his later themes, characters and, to a lesser extent, techniques.

Abath al-Aqdar:

Abath al-Aqdar, Mahfouz's first historical novel, draws the theme from an ancient Egyptian Legend. As the title indicates, fate plays a central role in the novel, manipulating the characters like puppets. The novel revolves around the struggle between the powerful will of the pharaoh and omnipotent fate and ends with the victory of indomitable fate over the recalcitrant pharaoh. Mahfouz's central idea is that man's actions are subject to an omnipotent fate.

Abath al-Aqdar (The Game of Fates, 1939) is set during the reign of *Khufu* (Cheops), builder of the Great Pyramid and Second King of the Fourth Dynasty in the time of the Old Kingdom. The action begins when one day *Khufu* asks a soothsayer how long his posterity was to reign over Egypt. The soothsayer answers that though the king himself was to rule undisturbed until the last day of his life, none of his descendents would sit on the throne after him, but rather a boy just born to a priest of the temple of Ra'. Immediately the king sets out the ahead of a military campaign to protect his throne against the young would be usurper. Thus he is set on a collision course with the fates and Mahfouz has his first opportunity in fiction to demonstrate to his readers' a tenet that was to remain central to his work, namely that man's rationalized world is never secure from the haphazard and destructive interference of some mysterious force or law of existence. The force or law will take many forms and names in Mahfouz's work. It could be called fate, accident, chance, coincidence, time or death, but will always have the same effect to upset man's plans and shake the foundation of his rational calculations for his life and the world. This does not necessarily imply belief in the supernatural on the part of Mahfouz. What he seems generally interested in is merely to

record that t6he failure of human endeavour is not always comprehensible in the simple terms of course and effect.[4]

Thus, from the summery, it seems clear that *Abath al-Aqdar* is based on an ancient legend, most likely derived from James Baikie's book Ancient Egypt, which aimed to inform the reader about daily life in ancient Egypt by describing the journey of a ship that sailed over the Nile to Thebes. Mahfouz used some of the Egyptian names appearing in it, and his personal characters are almost identical in both works. But he altered the old prophecy about the pheraoh's successor to make the action more framatic. In Baikie's book, Khufu was succeeded by his son the crown prince, then by the later's son; after that power was transferred to the three sons of the priest of Re, who successively fell heir to thrown. Furthermore, the legend as related by Baikie does not show whether Pheraoh Khufu attempted to get rid of the priest's three sons. Baikie's account of this folktale is similar to that given by the Egyptologist James Henry Breasted. According to Breasted's account, based on the papyrus original, Khufu felt bored one day and asked to be entertained by his sons, who related to him tales of past times. One of the sons, Prince Harzazef, told his father that there was in his kingdom a magician who should do even grater marvels then the men of the past whose windrows works the son were relating. Summoned by Khufu to appear before him, the magician performed miraculous deeds. In response to a question by the Pheraoh, the magician said that the three children soon to be born by the wife of a certain priest of Re had been begotten by Re himself, and that they would become the king of Egypt. Upon hearing this prophecy, Khufu became sad. The magician, who thought that there was no reasons

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[4]. *Naguib Mahfouz: the pursuit of meaning*, El-Enany, Rasheed, ROUTLEDGE, London and New York, 1993. p/35.

for the king's melancholy, assured him that his son would reign, then his grandson, and after one of these three children. [5]

In essence, *Abath al-Aqdar* is a conflict between man and fate. No matter what man does, he is subject to an inexorable and mysterious external power controlling his actions. It defines his will and manipulates him like a puppet. In this context Khufu represents man, trying unsuccessfully to defy fate and subjugate it to his own will. He was the omnipotent will. He was sure of his majestic power, which no man could defy, until he discovered that whatever he intended could be followed by events for which there was no logical explanation. He learned belatedly that it is futile to defy fate. [6]

Thus, when Khufu first hared from the soothsayer Djedi the prophecy that a stranger, not one of his sons, would succeed him, he began to investigate the relation of man with fate. He asked the stage Khomini whether fate could be avoided if a man acted beforehand to protect himself. Khomini's answer was that according to the Egyptian wisdom transmitted from times of old man's precaution can not dispose of fate. This sounded pessimistic, and responded with a serious look that indicated he; too believed man cannot defy fate, no matter what precaution he takes. Khufu smiled and told the men, in effect, if fate is what they say it is, then there can be no meaning to the creation, life, and the dignity of man. Infact, there is no distinction between work and idleness, strength and weakness, rebellion and subservience. But, the pharaoh said, fate is no more than a false belief, not to be held by mighty men.

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[5] "Naguib Mahfouz and His Historical Works", www.soas ac uk, accessed on 23rd Aug. 2008.
[6] "a critical search on historical novels of naguib Mahfouz" Counter Punch,, www counterpunch.org/mahfouz.html

Events proved Khufu wrong, however; despite his might, he could not prevent fate from determining his life, and on his deathbed he acknowledged the futility of his actions. More than twenty years ago, he said, he had commanded a contingent of soldiers to kill an unknown infant who he believed was to succeed him to the throne. Instead, he killed another infant by mistake. Ironically, he found himself protecting the stranger infant, whom he allowed to marry his daughter and proclaimed as his successor. He thought that he had overcome fate and secured the throne for his sons, but now found himself humbled by the gods, who "slapped my pride". This last statement by Khufu is significant, for it raises the question of whether fate is mere coincidence, that is, sheer luck, or the determinant action of a divine power operating beyond man's will.[7]

Since Mahfouz is a Muslim, raised in a strongly religious family, it is most likely that here has an Islamic connotation. According to Islamic tradition, man's actions, both good and evil, are absolutely decreed and predestined by God and everything that has been or everything that has been or ever will be depends on his divine will and foreknowledge.

Whatsoever, the novel abounds with detailed descriptions of situations and dialogues that reflect the author's ideas and imagination, his library, his hunting party, and the educational system in Egypt. The theme of this novel derives from a myth handed down from the time of Khufu in the old kingdom, but there is little specific information about how this pharaoh lived, thought, or communicated. Thus, it was inevitable that Mahfouz should inject his own ideas into the narrative

[7] Moosa, Matti The Early Novels of Naguib Mahfouz: Images of Modern Egypt Gainesville Florida University Press of Florida, 1994 p/25

through the different characters and the events they experience, cloaked with a veneer of historical facts. Khufu is not only the divine ruler of Egypt whose authority no man may contradict, but a worm and considerate person who loves his family and cares for his friends. At the outset of the novel, Mahfouz presents him as a fully developed character, relating his different traits and characteristics.

One writer suggests that Mahfouz is describing the Abbaside Caliph Harun al-Rashid of The Arabian Nights rather the divine pharaoh. If this is true, he has utilized one ancient fantasy to represent another. In fact, his vision of the pheraoh's life is similar to those provided by other twenty-century writers about the ancient civilization of Egypt. Mahfouz describes a conversation between Khufu and his chief architect Mirabo, in which the pharaoh asserts that divinity is nothing but power. The chief architect responds that divinity is also mercy and love. It seems doubtful that Khufu conversed with anyone about divinity or even tried to define it. According to historical accounts, the pharaoh believed himself to be the sublime go of both state and people. One of his titles in the kingdom was the good God, and he was so reverenced that no man dared refer to him by name. [8]

Mahfouz's central idea is that man's actions are subject to an omnipotent fate. It is in this context that we must understand both the prediction about the stranger who would succeed to the throne and Khufu's ultimate failure to overcome fate. Ironically, he found himself protecting and supporting the very man he tried to kill after hearing the

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[8]. Moosa, Matti.The Early Novels of Naguib Mahfouz: Images of Modern Egypt. Gainesville Florida: University Press of Florida, 1994 p/29

prophecy. The novel has many shortcomings in both from and content, Mahfouz himself called it "kid stuff".[9]

Nevertheless, it marks the end of his obscurity as a novelist and the beginning of a long, busy career during which he refined the writing of the Egyptian novel and gradually won recognition as a leader in his craft.

[9] Moosa, Matti.The Early Novels of Naguib Mahfouz. Images of Modern Egypt. Gainesville Florida· University Press of Florida, 1994, p/32

Radobis:

Radobis is Mahfouz's second historical novel, it focuses on a love that is totally subject to fate. Whereas in *Abath al-Aqdar* fate is depicted as a strong external power opposed to the will of man, in Radobis it is an uncontrollable force emanating from the very depth of man's soul.

In essence the novel is a romance whose theme, the love between Pharaoh Mernere II and Radobis, is not coincidental but determined by fate.

Life here is again shown to be a frolic of fate, now assuming the form of an eagle which carries away Rhodopis sandal and drops it is *Pharaoh*'s lap, thus offering him the bait of love and eventually death.

The central role that Mahfouz assigns to coincidence in life is eloquently explained by one of his characters of Rhodopis: 'Coincidence is an abused word confused with randomness yet, all fortunes, both good and ill, are attributed to it and seldom do the gods rely on logic'. Elsewhere in the novel, coincidence is described as 'fate in disguise'. The unfolding of the action to its tragic end comes as a testimony to this fatalistic thread that runs through the book.

Radubis (Rhodopis*)*, is appeared in 1943. It is set during the short reign of Mirinar towards the end of the sixth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom. The young *Pheraoh* of the novel is engaged in a power conflict with the clergy over their enormous land possessions. Meanwhile, accident brings the king in contact with *Rhodopis*, the courtesan at whose fact the cream of the city's men lie prostrate. It is love at first sight – love which takes possession of the king to the deriment of the affairs of the state and the feelings and pride of the queen, his sister and wife. More

tragically, the affair gives the elegy a moral weapon to use against their opponent, who is finally killed in a popular uprising which he bravely faces without protection. True to romantic form, Rhodopis commits suicide with poison.[10]

Rhodopis, like *The Game of Fates*, is centrally built on coincidence. Life here is again shown to be a frolic of fate, now assuming the form of an eagle which carries away Rhodopis sandal and drops it is *Pheraoh*'s lap, thus offering him the bait of love and eventually death.

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[10]. "Times Higher Education – Naguib Mahfouz: Egypt's Nobel Laureate", www.soas.ac.uk, accessed on 30th Aug. 2008.

thing is certain through, that this early appearance of fate in the work of Mahfouz would prove, if one may say so, a genetic quality: it would persist in his work, only gaining with subtlety with time.

In essence the novel is a romance whose theme, the love between Pheraoh Mernere II and Radobis, is not coincidental but determined by fate. The setting is the southern city of Abo; the occasion is the festival of the Nile, which attracts crowds from every corner of Egypt. Mahfouz describes in detail the people awaiting the Pharaoh's arrival; their conversation previews the events and characters of the novel. Looking over the crowd, a man whose appearance shows his upper-class status dolefully remarks that many such festivals been celebrated and many Pharaohs have attended them, but all gone as if they never existed. They have gone to rule another world better than the present one, he adds, and all people will one day follow them to that world. He wonders aloud whether future generations will remember him and the crowds celebrating the festival of the Nile, as those present remember others who have come before. He wishes that death did not exist. Another says philosophically that death is as natural as life and questions the value of immorality when people cannot satisfy their hunger, stop growing old or even attain love. Such statements may reflect the skepticism of Mahfouz, who apparently could not find and answer to the whole questions of existence. The pessimistic view taken by this character reflects the innermost sentiments of a perplexed soul. The people of then talk about the pharaoh, observing that he is tall and handsome like his grandfather Mehtemsuf. He is a valiant warrior, expected to invade the north and south bring them under his domination. He is young and rash and indulges in carnal pleasure. He always shows his pride of his youthfulness and feels need of worthy things to fulfill his luxurious life. Once, he came across four Nubians

carrying a magnificent litter worthy of nobles and princes. In it the beautiful Radobis leans on a cushion, carrying in her right hand a fan made of ostrich feathers. Her eyes glow with a soft and dreamy look, cat at the far horizon. The crowd, apparently spellbound, seems about to forget the pharaoh and the celebration of the festival of the Nile. In a passage which recalls The Arabian Nights, Mahfouz introduces the sorceress Dam, whom he describes as old, stopped, and toothless, with unkempt white hair, a long hooked nose, and long yellow nails. Leaning on a heavy cane, her eyes flashing with terror, she plows through the crowd to reach the litter, seeking to tell *Radobis* her fortune, but is stopped by a slave. Thus, we are left temporarily in suspense as to what fate has in store for this beautiful woman.

Kifah Teba:

Kifah Tiba (The Struggle of Thebes), Mahfouz's third novel, appeared in 1944; It deals with the struggle of the Egyptians, against the Egyptians against the foreign rule of the *Hyksos*, the invaders who ruled Lower Egypt for around a hundred years in the sixteenth century B C. the action of the novel spans some twelve years and the reign of three pharaohs until Egypt is finally and fully liberated under the leadership of king *Ahmus* later known in history as the founder of the Eighteenth Dynasty. The heroic, nationalistic line of the plot is further complicated by a love story between the victorious king *Ahmus* and the captive daughter of the vanquished *Hyksos* King, *Abufis*, a love which he will have to renounce in favour of duty.[11]

Structurally it is a better novel than its predecessors in the action does not depend on coincidence, and conflict between human wills takes precedence over conflict between man and fate. Altogether *The Struggle of Thebes* represents a considerable movement forward for Mahfouz as a novelist. It is the maturest and most balanced of his early historical trio. On the other hand the fact that it was to his last venture into history for a very long time should come as no surprise: his obvious preoccupation with the present through his treatment of the past seems in retrospect to have been a natural step on the road to realism, which he adopted in the next novel.

The novels which deals with the Egyptians struggle to liberate their country from foreign rule at a certain period in the past was written at a time when Egypt was under combined foreign rule the British on the one

[11] . Foud Ajami, "The Humanis in the Alleys," The New Republic, September 25,2006,

http//www.saisjhu.edu/programs/Mideast/documents/Recent%20Articles/The%20Humanist%20in%20the%20Alleys.pdf

hand, and an Aristocracy of Turkish stock on the other. Throughout, the novel contrasts the brown skinned Egyptian fallahin (peasants) with the white – skinned *Hyksos* shepherds. The old Hyksos held the Egyptian fellahin in contempt just as their in the novel are equally contemptuous of the *Hyksos* who are portrayed as uncouth shepherds coming from the north-Asian desert. In modern terms this corresponds to the nomadic origins of the Ottoman Turks. In the novel again the *Hyksos* are consistently described as arrogant and quick tempered "tyrants without minds" epithets which correspond neatly to the modern Egyptians' popular image of the Turk. All of which leaves us with no doubt that Mahfouz had in mind the contemporary offered both parallel and hope.[12]

The struggle of Thebes did not only herald the political reality of modern Egypt, but also in the social and economic structured dictated by it. The socio-economic pattern regulating the relationship between governor and governed in the novel is summed up by two characters, the *Hyksos*, the second an Egyptian: 'If you want to make use of a *fallah*, first make him poor and then whip him!', 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'. The modernity of the very phraseology used here cannot be missed. In fact, so preoccupied was Mahfouz with the injustices of the present that he ascribed to *Ahmus*, at the expense of anachronism, the economic and social reforms that he wished for modern Egypt.[13]

Mahfouz is happy to admit to this historical untruth: he was trying to mix history with the social utopia he had been dreaming of, as he puts it.

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[12] Deseret Morning News editorial"The legacy of a laureate", Deseret News, 7 September2006 Retrieved on 2007-09-20.

[13] Haim Gordon Naguib Mahfouz's Egypt: Existential Themes in his Writings Retrieved on 2007-04-26