Chapter – V

STYLISTIC STUDY OF HIS HISTORICAL NOVELS

STYLISTIC STUDY OF HIS HISTORICAL NOVELS:

The technique of the presentation and the style of writings of Naguib Mahfouz reach the Arabic novel with a new look and standard status in the fictional world. The uniqueness of Naguib Mahfouz lies in two features of his literary work.[1] Mahfouz writes in a classical and lucid Arabic style, interspersed with colloquial Egyptian and proverbs throughout the Arab world. Some of these proverbs, which he uses to accentuate his key points, utterly defy translation. He writes not only to entertain but to treat profoundly social, political, and religious issues and their impact on his society. His overriding purpose is clear: to give a true picture of the human condition as he sees it. If his ideas are sometimes controversial, they are nevertheless stimulating and must be understood in the context of Mahfouz's effort to treat the cultural trends of his society as they affect his own life. He is sometimes described as the Dickens of Balzac of Egypt because social realism dominates his choice of subject and style. In essence, however, he is the Mahfouz of Egypt; his realistic styles, his interest in social issues, indeed, his whole ethos are genuinely Egyptian. He should be claimed by all Arabs because most of his novels reflect Arabic and Islamic traditions. Mahfouz creates an intricate pattern of verbal irony which he weaves into the very texture of his novels and maintains throughout.

One is his complete dedication to pure literature; the second is the ever-changing style and form of his writing. Few Egyptian writers restrict themselves so meticulously to literary work, to the exclusion of any journalistic polemical or contemplative writings. The writer in Egypt, by virtue of his skill, is more or less expected to participate in all these ancillary literary activities. Thus, Naguib Mahfouz's careful abstention is noticeable. But the other feature, that of constant change in the form of his writings, is of greater significance in term of his literary contribution. Beginning with romantic historical novels he later

[1]. Yusuf al-Sharuni, *"Dirasat fi riwaya wa-al-qissa al-qahira,"* Cairo, 1967, p. 16

turned to realistic writing, concerning himself with the immediate present and his immediate vicinity. It is through the **three historical novels** that he has become well-known and admired in Arabic-speaking lands. In his next phase he turned to what he called "new realistic writing." This is "a kind of historical writing that has none of the distinctive marks of traditional realism, which aims at portraying a complete picture of life. New historicism leaves behind elaborate detailing and characterization. This is a development both of form and content."[2] The motive for writing in this way, as defined by Naguib Mahfouz himself, is to give vent to "specific thoughts and emotions which turn to reality only to use it as a means of self-expression; to give expression to ideational content through the use of a complete realistic phenomenon."[3]

Naguib Mahfouz does not use the colloquial dialect in the dialogues of his works, although he occasionally slips in a dialect word or even use colloquial word order, consciously or unconsciously. His views on the colloquial language are surprisingly conservative and fortnight, "the colloquial is one of the diseases from which people are suffering and of which they are bound to rid themselves as they progress. I consider the colloquial one of the failings of our society, exactly like ignorance, poverty, and disease."[4] Cultural perspectives such as this are clearly a powerful factor in the decision-making process for some novelists, but there are other, more practical factors as well. Many novelists from other regions of the Arab world compose their novels entirely in the written language, the only standard language of communication, basing their decision as much on their hope for a wide readership throughout the Arab world as on such issues as perceived cultural value. The growth of Arabic as well as historical novel and style of the Naguib Mahfouz and the nature techniques of presentation will be examined in detail in this study.

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[2]. Ibid., p.22

[3] Quoted by Al-Sharuni, ibid. pp.

[4] Fuad Dawwara, "*Ma'a Naguib Mahfouz fi idihi al-dhahabi*," (With Naguib Mahfouz on his Golden Jubilee), al-katib, No. 22, Jan. 1963, p. 31

Prominent among the Arabic writers was Mahfouz, who more than any of the others used the historical novel 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.

It should, however, be pointed out that in the first half of 20th century, there has been a noticeable new development in Naguib Mahfouz's writing.[5] It is too early to define its nature of to attempt an analysis of its meaning. The change is characterized by the use of short stories and one-act plays, structured around a dialogue between symbolic or sometimes mysterious figures which, in turn, revolve around questions just as symbolic or mysterious. It is difficult at the moment to determine to what extent this is really new or different from other Mahfouzian writings.[6] He stresses the dialogue element in these three historical novels writing so much that he prefers to call these ...works simply dialogues, *hiwariyyat*.[7] He believes that the circumstances in Egypt since 1939 "call for a continuous discussion, which makes the dialogue and its display before the public both an artistic and a social necessity."[8] Nevertheless, he feels ill at ease in this role of playwright. "In the novel I am addressing the individual reader, where as on the stage, I am addressing a crowd."[9]

This shying away from direct communication with the mass of people is one of the earliest traits in Naguib Mahfouz the writer. In an interview dedicated to his theatrical pieces,[10] he mentioned one other difficulty he could not face, namely writing with the colloquial language or literary writing, a sentiment once pronounced much more bluntly, when he called the spoken language a

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[5] Mahmud Amin al-Alam, "*A New Phase in the World of Naguib Mahfouz*", al-Hilal, February, 1970, p 101
[6]. Fatima Musa, "*Naguib Mahfouz wa-tatawwar fann al-riwaya fi misr,*" *al-katib*, No 86, May, 1968, p 72
[7] Muhammad Barakat, "*Hawla masrah Naguib Mahfouz,*" (On the Theatrical Works of Naguib Mahfouz), *al-Hilal*, February, 1970, p 202
[8]. ibid p 200.
[9] ibid p. 203
[10]. Ibid. pp

disease.[11] The impartial observer, however, may wonder whether this fuss about the spoken language may not be a thinly veiled excuse on the part of Naguib Mahfouz for avoiding direct communication with the masses. That Naguib Mahfouz has no difficulty using the colloquial may readily be assumed because this is the language he has spoken all his life. Occasionally it even steals into his published interviews. Apart from that, he has for many years been writing scripts for Egyptian films. In fact, since 1945 he has prepared scripts for no fewer than 30 films,[12] all of them in the colloquial language. Of these ten films are based on his novels, which mean that he had to "translate" his own "literary" language into the spoken idiom.

The interesting and very sensitive question of the place and function of the colloquial Arabic languages cannot be discussed here. But it is a fact in his historical novels of literary works Naguib Mahfouz is a strict literalist. It has often been asked why he so completely bans the spoken language of the people from his literature.[13] Although he has never really expounded his point of view on this issue, in line with his reluctance to express himself publicly on any thing but literature,[14] a quick chronological review of his work may suggest some reasons for this attitude. His earliest writings were concerned with areas which seem at first sight rather unrelated to each other. His early short stories are concerned with social criticism of a fairly fierce nature. His early three novels – the first three – are historical romances concerned with Egypt of Pharaohs. These novels had no place for colloquial language, describing a society which spoke a language long forgotten. The historical novels, written by him were in a language which by its very nature gave the writer a greater control over his

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[11]. Dawwara, ibid.
[12]. Hashim al-Nahhas, "*Dawr Naguib Mahfouz fi al sinama al-misriyya*," (The Role of Naguib Mahfouz in the Egyptian Cinema), al-Hilal, Feb., Cairo, 1970, p. 184
[13]. Taha al-Siba'i, *Al-Saqqa mat*, Dar al Awda, Cairo, 1984, p.104
[14]. Naguib Mahfouz, *Atahaddath ilaikum*, Dar al-Awda, Beirut, 1977

work. Control, of course, is a quality needed by writer as well as reader in order to make the work of literature both presentable and palatable.

> "Since the latent if not the manifest content of fiction is often concerned with the imaginary gratification of unsanctioned desires and the confrontation of terrible fears, we demands certain safeguards before giving the fantasies of fiction access to the unconscious. At best there is some danger."[15]

For a writer, working under circumstances of great social popularity and a nearly fanatic resentment against any inroads on inherited values, and in a political tradition which has but a vague notion of individual liberties, any social criticism may be hazardous. Older and more experienced writers than Naguib Mahfouz had to run the gauntlet of rebuke and harsh criticism by an orthodoxy blindly followed by the masses and staunchly supported by a Royal Court. Under such circumstances the use in literary works of a colloquial dialect, rich with secrets and philosophy all its own, might have proved too explosive and therefore too dangerous. The literary language, with its almost arid lucidity and well-worn clichés, out of reach as it is for most of the masses, would certainly be a safer instrument for writing stories which are bound to arouse anxiety. For it must be realized that even the naive **historical novels**, for all the remoteness of the period they describe, constitute peculiarly explosive material under the circumstances. In such circumstances literature is in great need of a language which, while suggesting the gratification of unsanctioned desires, can still be soothing and reassuring by the very banal resonance created by the works conveying the anxiety-provoking story. Sometime the function of language used in fiction is thought of as that of soothing the consciousness of the reader by these guising unpalatable matters, while at the same time, through non-discursive communication, conveying to the unconscious those concealed

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[15]. Al-Sharuni, ibid., p. 22.

matters with extra ordinary vividness.[16] At times this may be achieved through the reassuring, prestigious upper class language whose use, both active and passive, is naturally restricted. Under similar circumstances the use of the spontaneous, lively colloquial language may turn the whole work into something quite unacceptable. The writer may not be able to properly control the images, innuendos subtle implications, and the reader may be frightened into complete rejection of the story. In any case, a young writer desiring to plunge so boldly into some of the most controversial of topics may well be advised to hold on to the safest possible means of self-expression. Needless to say such reasoning is itself not wholly conscious and cultural habits and traditions by themselves can be relied on to lead the tyro on the well-trodden path. It is nevertheless a point worth making that 40 years later as far as Naguib Mahfouz is concerned, not much has changed in this respect.

In his three historical novels, like Kamil, Mahfouz too derived his material at first from Paraohnic history, but unlike him he continued to do so far another two novels. ***Abath al-Aqdar, Radobis,*** and ***Kifah Tiba***. It has been said that in the earlier chapter, it was under Kamil's influence that he gave up his original plan to deal with the whole history of Egypt in a series of novels modeled on Sir Walter Scott's work and turned for his themes to contemporary Egypt instead.

Few people will deny that Naguib Mahfouz is the most significant figure to have arisen this century in the history of the Arabic novel. Yet paradoxically, of all writers he is perhaps the most peculiarly Egyptian sensibility, outlook, and background-and that despite the underlying universality of the themes in many of his works. Other Arab novelists who produce works of literary merit appear from time to time, both in Egypt and elsewhere, and some have written truly

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[16] Simon J. Lesser, *Fiction and the Unconscious*, New York 1957, p. 175

outstanding novels, but no one has approached in output, variety, originality, and seriousness Mahfouz's achievement.

He began his career as a novelist with historical fiction, publishing the three novels in this genre between 1939 and 1944. In these works, the imaginative reconstruction of the Ancient Egyptian past is less important than Mahfouz's use of the distant Pharaohnic setting as a vehicle for commentary on the political and social situation of contemporary Egypt. In this he succeeded to some extent: there is implied criticism of the tyranny of King Farouk in Radobis, and a pronounced feeling of nationalist resentment against the foreign (and hence British) occupation of Egypt in Thebes' Struggle. However, Mahfouz soon abandoned Pharaohnic times for the on temporary Egyptian and especially the Cairene setting. This was a wise decision, not least because he was ill-suited to the historical novel. His venture in that genre, however competent it may be, is in no way superior to the work of others, even though there are perhaps signs of the future novelist in the breadth of his vision, which prevented him from painting his character in black and white in *Radobis* and hence from withholding all sympathy for the dissolute monarch, and enabled him to rise above the limitations of narrow nationalism in depicting Egyptian defeat and victory in Thebes' Struggle. But it must be admitted that had he continued in this historical strain he might not have cut the figure he did in modern Arabic literature.

Mahfouz followed the style of Walter Scott to present his subject matter in the ancient history of Egypt, in fictional form. To achieve this aim, he chose forty themes for historical novels that he hoped to complete in his life time, but he finished only three before discovering that he was more interested in social realism. Some writers have exaggerated Mahfouz's importance as a writer of **historical novels**. Ahmed Haykal says that *Abath al-Aqdar* is considered "the true beginning of the nationalistic historical novel. It does not teach history, but

tends to glorify it. Its objective is to deepen the feeling about the glorious Pharaohnic past.[17]

Some Egyptian critics maintain that Mahfouz's *Abath al-Aqdar* condemns and ridicules kings for their despotism while it praises the common people for their fortitude. In this novel, Mahfouz shows fate plays a central role, 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.

The summery of *Abath al-Aqdar* seems clearly that it is based on an ancient legend, 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 same Egyptian names appearing in it, and in fact, some of the descriptions of the pharaoh's family and his personal character are almost identical in both works.[18] But he altered the old prophecy about the pharaoh's successor to make the action more dramatic.

Mahfouz present in fantastic style, that *Abath al-Aqdar* is a conflict between man and fate. No external power controlling his actions. It defies his will and manipulates him like a puppet. The novel, written in **a clear, easy flowing style**, paints a vivid picture of social injustice, as well as the debilitating confusion of the intellectuals in Egypt during the war years.

As Mahfouz is a Muslim, raised in a strongly religious family, it is most likely that fate 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 ever will be depends on his divine will and foreknowledge. Yet one cannot overlook the biblical and mythological parallels

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[17]. Ahmed Hykal, *al-Adab al-Qisasi wa al-Masrahi fi Misr*, p. 256

[18]. Naguib Mahfouz, *Abath al-Aqdar*, p. 5-25; Baikie, Ancient Egypt (1912), trans. By Naguib Mahfouz as Misr al Qadima, Cairo, 1932, p. 5-8

in Mahfouz's novel. The manner in which Mahfouz tackles the theme and portrays his characters, indeed his whole outlook, is essentially Islamic. He uses Islamic terms in a pre-Islamic setting, for example, *sahaba* for khufu's retinue, and the Quranic term *hawariyya* to describe his army commander.[19]

In fact, the novel stylized 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. Much of this description may seem redundant and puerile, but Mahfouz intends it to endow the events of the novel with a sense of authenticity. We should remember, however, that he is writing a historical romance, not a reconstruction of the ancient history of Egypt.[20]

Thus 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. One writer suggests that Mahfouz is describing the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid of The Arabian Night than the divine pharaoh. Mahfouz seems also to inject his own ideas about art and woman's nature into the dialogue between Dadef and his step-brother Napha:

> Napha: Do not make an effort to explain or apologize, I know what you mean. This is the third time today that I was likened to a woman. This morning my father told me that I am unpredictable like a young woman. Likewise, an hour ago the priest Shelba told me that I am like a woman, easily overcome by emotion. And here you tell me that I am just like your mother. What am I, then, a man or a woman?

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[19] Abd Allah Muhammad Hasan, *Al-Islamiyya wa al-Ruhiyya fi Adab Naguib Mahfouz* (Islamic and Spiritual Elements in the Literature of Naguib Mahfouz), Cairo, *Maktanat Misr*, 1978, p 31-38

[20] Faruk Shusha, "*Ma al-Udaba. Naguib Mahfouz*," (With Men of Letters Naguib Mahfouz), Al-Adab, Dar al Awda, Beirut, June 1960, 19-20

Dadef (laughing): you are a man, Napha, but with tender soul and feeling. Do not you remember that Kheni said once that the artists are cross between males and females?

Napha: Kheni believes that arts require a borrowing from femininity. But I don't doubt that woman's sentiments greatly contradict that of the artists. For by nature woman is selfish and seeks only what will fulfill her vital ambitions. But the artist has no objective except to fathom the essence of things, which is beauty. For beauty is the unraveling of the essence of things, which bring it into conformity with the rest of created beings.

Dadef (laughing): Do you think that by this philosophizing you can convince me that you are a man?

Napha (with a defiant look): You still need proof? If you do, then know that I am going to be married.

Dadef (surprised): Is it true what you say?

Napha (laughing): Would you deny me marriage?

Dadef: No, Napha, but I remember that you once made our father angry because you showed no interest in marriage.[21]

There is little doubt that Mahfouz, who was greatly concerned with subjects like art and beauty, is speaking here, as this cannot be the conversation of two people in the old kingdom. He had written about the nature and philosophy of aesthetics, and his ideas are reflected in this dialogue. It is rather difficult to decide whether this can be accepted as an imaginative description of

[21]. Naguib Mahfouz, *Abath al-Aqdar* (Ironies of Fate), *Maktabat Misr*, Cairo, 1966, p. 112-13

an ancient Egyptian office and the behaviour of a superintendent under the pharaoh Khufu.

The writer's central theme 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 the throne and Khufu's ultimate failure to overcome fate. The novel has many shortcomings in both form and content; indeed, Mahfouz himself called it "kid stuff." [22] Thus, it can be said that the end of 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 style of presentation.

In *Radobis,* Mahfouz appears to have used historical figures and events out of context in order to create a framework for his novel. The novel is a romance which narrates the love between Pharaoh Mernere II and *Radobis*, and is not coincidental but determined by fate. The events of the novel begin to build after the celebration of the festival of the Nile and culminate in the Pharaoh's meeting with *Radobis* by sheer coincidence, according to an Egyptian legend.

Illustrating Mahfouz's fondness for political allegory, the story of *Radobis* shows his willingness to incorporate fate as an active role player in the development of his narrative. This is what gives the historical romance of *Radobis* its tragic edge. Objects falling as omens from the talons of majestic birds are a common feature of ancient tales, but the falcon choosing to drop his precious cargo in Pharaoh's lap indicates to the two lovers from the onset that players other than the physical human beings who surround them have a role in their destinies. Artists, politicians, lovers, and cynics in this novel debate the nature of coincidence, and the fates and other unseen forces, magical and divine,

[22]. Dawwara, Fuad, "*Rihlat al-Khamsin ma al-Qira'a wa al-Kitaba*" (The Journey of Naguib Mahfouz in his Fiftieth Years of Age with Reading and Writing), *Al-katib*, January, 1963, p 22

are never far away as *Radobis* and her young royal lover are driven inevitably toward their untimely and unhappy ends.

Mahfouz scarifies historical accuracy, bringing disparate places and people together. The *Radobis* described by Herdotus was supposedly a celebrated Thracian courtesan, while Mahfouz presents her as sprung from the masses of rural Egypt and fallen into immoral living. Although there was no Mernere II, the historical Mernere really was a troubled pharaoh who died after a brief reign in the Sixth Dynasty, but he would not have met Radobis in real history. It is Mahfouz who has brought them together. But collagen history in this way is no different than what the collective folk version of the past does too, and even though these pharaohnic novels distort the factual events, there is no doubt that they paint a richly textured picture of the vicissitudes of the court life in the Nile Valley thousands of years ago.

The language Mahfouz used in *Radobis* sounds distant and regal, echoing the strangeness of the sacerdotal incantations and pharaohnic pronouncements, suiting the historic and solemn nature of the happenings; the feel is classical, even archaic. Some translators have used dialogue lively and reminiscent of the colloquial, though no colloquial words are used by Naguib Mahfouz, so the characters, even those who hail from among the common people, sound vibrant and realistic.

Mahfouz repeats the same words many times, as the canons of Arabic textuality allow it to do so. Mahfouz repeats the Arabic words for fear, pain, sadness, and unease two, three, or four times hot upon the heels of one another to build dramatic atmosphere and regulate the rhythm.

Mahfouz made in this novel the love between the Pharaoh and Radobis is heartfelt, characterized by complete commitment and devotion. Whatever the

reason may be, love is the theme to which Mahfouz devotes the largest portion of this novel. He portrays Radobis as the happiest woman in Egypt, the one who captures the heart of the pharaoh.

The setting and characters in the novel are subordinated to Mahfouz's real purpose, the analytical study of man's nature and his reaction to his circumstances. This is why at the beginning the Egyptians appear occupied with the question of life, death, and especially life after death. This interest is also manifested in the prayers of the priests, the sermon the pharaoh gives at the altar, and the songs of the people in the street. Mahfouz expresses in great detail how the Egyptian people lived and behaved. He seems concerned more with Pharaoh the man than with Pharaoh the monarch, more with *Radobis* the true female than with *Radobis* the High-society prostitute.

Mahfouz wanted him to be, in order to depict vividly the shortcomings of human nature, the deficiency of human reason, and the futility of man's actions. Here stands man, face to face with fate, over which he has no control. Here also is the pharaoh whose false claim of divinity is destroyed by circumstances that transcend his will and expose him as an ordinary man who, although a king, has become a captive of his own nature. In this work Mahfouz meant to criticize the condition of Egypt under the monarchy through the medium of a historical novel. Although, Mahfouz wrote his novel during Farouk's reign, he denies that he had in mind any such analogy to the contemporary situation.[23]

The third and last of Mahfouz's historical novels, is essentially an epic portraying the struggle of southern city of Thebes against the Hyksos, whose eventual expulsion gave Egypt independence from foreign domination and set it on the way to becoming an empire. Unlike his earlier novels, in which history is subordinated to the philosophical treatment of fate, *Kifah Tiba* is focused more

[23]. Badr, Abdul al-Muhsin, *Naguib Mahfouz: al-Ru'ya wa l-Adat (Naguib Mahfouz: The Vision and Technique), Dar al-Thaqafa li al-Tibaa wa al-Nashr*, 1978, Cairo, p.189-90.

directly on events set in a specific time and place, while the love story between Pharaoh Ahmose and the daughter of the Hyksos king seems to be of secondary important. Nevertheless, Mahfouz does not strictly adhere to the historical facts and even find himself forced to manipulate them in order to support his own convictions about certain matters, such as Ahmose's distribution of land which has no basis in fact.

The novel draws on the heroic struggle of the Egyptians and their patriotic Pharaohs to expel the Hyksos, as foreign ruling invaders, from their country. The novel bore a relevance to Egyptian sociopolitical reality at the time (British occupation and a ruling aristocracy of foreign stock) that was all too obvious to be missed. Mahfouz once said he was inspired to write *Kifah Tiba* when he saw the mummy of Seqenenra full of wounds at the Egyptian Museum.[24] Thus, he tries to portray an Egyptian king in a hero style who fell in battle while defending his country against foreign occupation forces. The king lost the battle, but not the war. Although Mahfouz does not identify this Seqenenra, he must be Seqenenra Ta'o II (the Brave) who suffered a violent death. No doubt Mahfouz was moved by the ghastly sight of his mummy, which may well have inspired him to write this novel. His novel is divided into three parts. The first deals with the occupation of Egypt by the Hyksos, who under King Apophis reduced the native rollers, the Seqenenra, into mere vassals and took over their capital, Thebes in south. By way of asserting his authority, the Hyksos king Apophis sends a messenger to Seqenenra II, ordering him to get rid of the Hippopotami in his pool because they are disturbing his sleep. The second part begins ten years after the defeat Seqenenra. Seqenenra's son Kamose is busy marshaling a huge army to fight the Hyksos and regain sovereignty over Thebes. The crown prince Ahmose is sent on a reconnaissance mission to explore the situation in Egypt. Distinguishing himself as the

[24]. Musa, Fatima, *Fi al-Riwaya al-Arabiyya* (On the Arabic Novel), Matabaat al-Anglo-Misriyya, Cairo 1971, p. 39.

merchant Asphenis, and using every possible means, even bribery and deception, he manages to reach the governor of Thebes and finally the court of the Hyksos king. He succeeds in recruiting men who support his family and carries them in the lower deck of his ship to Nubia to join the army in exile. While carrying out his mission, however, Ahmose falls in love with Amenerdis, the beautiful daughter of King Apophis. In token of his love, he gives her a heart shape emerald with a white chain, which the princes greatly cherish.

Thebes at War treats of what Mahfouz considers "the greatest moment in all of ancient Egypt's three thousand years," namely, that at which the last pharaohs of the native Seventeenth Dynasty rose up against the domination of the Hyksos, Asiatic foreigners who had dominated northern Egypt from roughly 1640 to 1532 BC (there is debate over whether the Hyksos were an entire people or merely a line of foreign rulers: Mahfouz treats them as the former). This novel is more solidly grounded in historical fact than the two that preceded it, and the novelist bases most of his main characters on real people. Seqenenra, Kamose, and Ahmose, the three pharaohs who succeed one another in Thebes at War were, respectively, the two pharaohs of the Seventeenth Dynasty and the first of the Eighteenth (although recent scholarship world make Ahmose the brother, rather than the son, of Kamose): Tetisheri, the 'Sacred Mother' of Seqenenra and, symbolically, of the Egyptian people, existed and was "venerated by later generations as a powerful influence on the fortunes of the dynasty and the country";[25] Apophis, their foe, was the last king of the Hyksos and the remains of his citadel of Avaris may be seen at Tell al-Dab'a in the eastern Delta; and Ahmose Evana, commander of King Ahmose's fleet, takes his name from an Egyptian officer whose auto biography curved on a pillar of his tomb, is "the only contemporary account extant of the final defeat of the

[25]. *Arrisalab*, {=*al-Risala*} magazine (Cairo), October 2, 1944, p. 889

Hyksos."[26] Seqenenra's mutilated corpse, which may be seen to day at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, is credited with having inspired Mahfouz to write the novel.[27] Similarly historical events, such as the letter sent by Apophis to Seqenenra that participates the outbreak of war, are incorporated into the narrative. Even the green heart pendant that plays a vital role in the romantic sub-plot of Thebes at War may well be the "green stone heart scarab set in gold and inscribed .... For Sobekemsaf (a successor to Ahmose) is now in the British Museum",[28] spotted by Mahfouz's keen eye and transformed.

Occasional errors do occur. When Khamose says, "In the past, chariots were not instruments of war that the Herdsmen used,"[29] he and Mahfouz are mistaken, since it was the Hyksos who introduced the chariot to Egypt. The length of Hyksos role in Egypt is most often given in the novel as the conventional two hundred years, but in two places as only "a hundred years of more." Queen Tetisheri is said at one point to be sixty years of age; at another, it is stated that she was born in the north before the occupation, in which case she would be any thing from "a hundred years or more" to two hundred years in age.

The general accuracy of Mahfouz's account of the history of the period should not be taken to imply, however, that the work is simply a fictionalized historical narrative. Rather, the author has used the historical elements that suit his purposes as a novelist, while eliminating those that do not. For example, the historical Ahmose, with his commander Ahmose Evana, pursued the Hyksos beyond the borders of Egypt and in to Palestine. Mahfouz however, in order no

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[26] Peter A Clayton, *Chronicles of the Pharaohs*, Roultadge, London, 1999, p 97

[27]. Raymond Stock, A Mummy Awakens The Pharaohnic Fiction of Naguib Mahfouz, (a doctoral dissertation-in-progress by the writer of the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies of the University of Pennsylvania) 2003

[28]. Clyton, p. 97

[29] Humphrey Davies, Thebes at War Naguib Mahfouz, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 2003, p 33

doubt to bring a satisfying closure to the story, gives the impression that the Egyptian campaign ended with the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egyptian soil.

Thebes at War is not just about ancient Egypt. When Mahfouz was writing it, Egypt had been under foreign tutelage, if not outright occupation, for over sixty years. While it is true that, the British had unilaterally declared independence in 1922, severe restrictions was on Egypt's sovereignty, including the occupation of a part of Egyptian territory (the Suez Canal zone), remained. At another level, as political discourse had evolved from the pan-nationalism of the Ottoman Empire so that of single-state nationalism during the 19th century, so Egypt's own largely Turkish-speaking upper class had come to be seen by many as foreigners. Which of the two groups Mahfouz intended the reader to identify with the Hiksos (if indeed either group was more specifically his target than the other) may remain a moot point. What is clear is that this is a profoundly political novel, whose ringing patriotism and passionate call to Egyptians to defend their country against any outsider who would seek to dominate it continues to resonate today. Unsurprisingly, *Thebes at War* is a set text in modern Egypt's elementary and intermediate school curricula (thus fulfilling the hope Sayyid Qutb expressed in his review, that "the ministry of education should place {the work} in the hands of every student").[30] It is also been turned into a play by Abd al-Rahman al-Abnudi, one of Egypt's leading poets and is slated to be made into the first Egyptian full-length animated film for children.[31]

The novel's political character is not limited, moreover, to the struggle to regain lost territory and expel the aggressor: other politically changed themes emerge, though not all of these are so explicit or consciously acknowledged by the author. Nubia, the land to the south to which the Egyptian leadership flees to

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[30]. Ali Shalah, *Naguib Mahfouz – al-Tariq wal-Sada*, Dar al-Adab, Cairo, 1990, p. 152
[31]. Stock, A Mummy Awakens, p. 89

escape the Hyksos' onslaught, clearly does not service for modern Sudan, a country that, when Mahfouz was writing, was ruled by Egypt and Britain together in a 'condominium' in which Egypt was, humiliatingly, the junior partner. King Ahmos's departing words to the governor of Nubia – "From this day on let us not deny to southern Egypt anything that we desire for ourselves and let us shield it from whatever we would not wish for ourselves" [32] - constitute a clear reference to the importance of the unity of the Nile Valley for the country as a whole. The Nubians themselves, however – and this is no way clashes with the preceding – appearing the novel in a minimal role, as loyal, unspeaking extras. (Ironically, recent discoveries show that, far from applauding the 17th Dynasty's attempts to drive out the Hyksos, the Nubians in fact seized the opportunity to attack Egypt, in what has been described as "a pincer movement."[33])

At a less explicit level, the novel manifests a clear satisfaction of races by colour. The Egyptians, who are "golden-brown", or "coppery", clearly and unsurprisingly the ideal of beauty and wholesomeness. They are flanked as it were, by the "long-bearded Herdsmen with their white skins that the sun will never cleanse," as Kamose puts it[34], and the pygmies, "intensely black in colour," who live "in the furthest forests of Nubia, where the divine Nile has its source"[35]; the first are grotesque and evil, the second grotesque and comic. Not all that is other, however, is ugly: the Hyksos princes Amenridis, whose "golden hair stray (s) over her shining forehead"[36], has a disorienting effect on the young Ahmose, and the dynamism of their relationship propels the novel into realms beyond those of national myth and politics alone.

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[32]. Humphrey Davies, Thebes at War Naguib Mahfouz, p. 205
[33]. Nevine El-Aref, *Elkhab's Hidden Treasure*, Al-Ahram Weekly, 31 July-6 August, 2003
[34] Humphrey Davies, Thebes at War Naguib Mahfouz, p 14.
[35] Ibid. p 65
[36] Ibid p. 112

In *Thebes at War*, there is none of the underlying colloquiality that is said to characterize the dialogue, at least, of Mahfouz's later novels, even among the jolly drunks of the scene of the inn and the work is peppered with the equivalents of words such as "doughty" and "stalwart." While the modern ear may be unaccustomed to these, it should become obvious that, through his masterful use of such language, Mahfouz is able to forge both fine heroic passage appropriate to his story of love and self-denial.

In representing the names of persons and places, Mahfouz has followed the conventions obtaining among European-language Egyptologists of the time as reproduced in Arabic. However, given the limitations of hieroglyphs, and given that the scholarly consensus evolves, these conventions have never been either consistent or static. Mahfouz also tended to follow the Egyptological convention of using the classical forms of place names, even though Greek and Latin did not come into use in Egypt for twelve hundred years or more after the period in which the novel is set. Thus, he refers, for example, to Apollonopolis Magna, rather than Edfu.

In *Kifah Tıba* Mahfouz does not treat the abstract concept of fate as either an external force controlling man's will or an internal force emanating from man's inner being. Rather, he concentrates on the Egyptians' struggle against their oppressors, the Hyksos. In his previous novels, historical events only in outline and are of secondary importance; in this novel, the historical material constitutes the central theme, while the love story between Ahmose and the Hyksos princes occupies a secondary place. Indeed, this love episode is superimposed on the central theme, and it could be dropped without affecting the structure of the novel.

Mahfouz admits that while he was writing *Kifah Tıba* (1937 - 38), his major concern was the Egyptian national question, that is, the Egyptians'

struggle to overthrow the British, who had occupied the country in 1882.[37] He explains that when he was writing the novel Egyptian nationalism was ablaze, and there were many people who saw a real continuity from the pharaonic period to the modern history of Egypt. Mahfouz's mind, however, does not seem to have been uppermost. It is not clearly stated in the novel. We can comprehend it when we see how the Hyksos looked upon the Egyptians, who they thought should be treated as a subject people. We can also comprehend it from the manner in which the Egyptian characters thought of themselves, their national destiny, and their attitude toward the Hyksos. Mahfouz, fully aware of the humiliation of his own people by their foreign masters, seeks through Hyksos characters to show that the Turko-Egyptian aristocrats of his time harbor similar contempt toward the Egyptians. This theme is further accentuated in his novel *al-Qahira al-Jadida* (New Cairo).[38]

The novelist portrays Egyptian kings as god-fearing, noble, brave, civil, just and peace-loving. They are the moving spirit of their people. Their subjects are likewise brave; seldom is a coward found among them. They are also tall, handsome, like their predecessors, and very proud of their heritage. In brief, they are paragons of every human virtue.[39] In portraying the Egyptians and the Hyksos as symbolizing the strife between good and evil, civility and savagery, reverence and tolerance, Mahfouz perhaps inadvertently injected his own sense of values into the novel. One has only to skim the pages of the Old Testament to realize how ancient people treated each other in time of war. Neither the history of the Arabs, before or after Islam, nor the history of Western countries is free from atrocities. The absolute dichotomy between good and evil permeates most of Mahfouz's novels.

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[37] Sabri Hafiz, "Naguib Mahfouz," in Naguib Mahfouz: *Atahaddath Ilaykum*, p 86-87

[38]. Badr, Abd al Muhsin, *Naguib Mahfouz. al-Ru'ya wa al-Adat* (Naguib Mahfouz The Vision and Technique), *Dar al-Thaqafa li –al-Tbaa wa l-Nashr*, Cairo, 1978, p 257, 276

[39] ibid p 8, 11, 26

The outstanding novelist, Naguib Mahfouz, also injects his own understanding of socialism into the Egyptian society under Ahmose, describing his distribution of land to the peasant farmers in something like a sharecropping transaction. After he wrote *Kifah Tiba*, however, his proclivity for social reform became stronger.[40]

As in the two earlier novels, Mahfouz describes the events in *Kifah Tiba* with so much detail that it diverts the readers' attention from the central theme. Some of these details are superfluous and boring. The army's march to the front, for example, is portrayed as if it were a hunting expedition.[41] When Seqenenra meets with Testisheri to seek her advice about the demands of the Hyksos king, Mahfouz even notes that he sits at her right hand, while his wife sits at her left, and that Testisheri kisses him on the left cheek and his wife Ahotpe on the right. There are also lengthy, often repetitious dialogues between Ahmose and the Hyksos princess, most of which turn into disputes between the pair, who brag about the noble traits of their own people. The Hyksos characters, in contrast, poses no redeeming virtues; in fact, Mahfouz does not even give names to the Hyksos minor characters and refers to them only in the third person.

Mahfouz appears to have adhered more closely to the facts than he did in the previous novels. He uses pharaohnic and Hyksos names the same way as Egyptologists. Given that the available historical evidence, especially about Ahmose, is meager and confusing, Mahfouz has succeeded in giving the common reader a fictionalized picture of the struggle between the Egyptians and the Hyksos. Yet the main question here is not historical integrity so much as plausibility. Does present-day Egypt resemble that of the pharaohnic period? Are the Egyptians of today similar to the people in the time of Seqenenra and

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40. Sabri Hafiz, *"Naguib Mahfouz," in Naguib Mahfouz: Atahaddath Ilaykum*, Al-Adab, 1973, p. 86-87.
41. James Henry Breasted, *A History of Egypt from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest*, chap. 5, 2nd ed , Charles Scribe Sons, New York, 1912, p. 143.

Ahmose? Naguib Mahfouz seems to believe that they are, and that the passage of time and the many foreign invasions have not affected them greatly. Not even the Arab conquest could affect the pharaohnic features of Egypt; the conquerors imposed their religion (Islam) and their language on the Egyptians but could not convert them to Arabism. They were and are still pharaohnic Egyptians, with the traits of the ancient culture. Indeed, Mahfouz so firmly believes that the two cultures have mingled that in his address to the Nobel Prize Committee, he called himself the product of two civilizations: pharaohnic and Islamic. He explicitly avoided saying that the latter is the exclusive civilization of Egypt.[42]

In a nutshell, Mahfouz, like a number of Egyptian writers, is a leader of the movement that has claimed that by history and culture Egypt is more pharaohnic than Arab. This movement was very lively and strong until the rise to power in 1954 of President Jamal Abd al-Nasir, who propagated Arab nationalism in Egypt and gave it a great impetus in the Arab countries. It is in this pharaohnic context that Mahfouz's historical novels should be read and appreciated.

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[42]. See Mahfouz's address to the Nobel Prize Committee in no. 59, January 1989, p. 10-14; and Milton Viorst, "*Man of Gamaliya*," The New Yorker, July 2, 1990, p. 33.