



Naguib Mahfouz: A Nobel Laureate Shaping the Legacy of Arabic Literature

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ABSTRACT

Naguib Mahfouz, one of Egypt's most celebrated novelists, is a cornerstone of modern Arabic literature. His remarkable contributions to the literary world earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988, making him the first Arabic-language writer to receive this prestigious accolade. Mahfouz's literary career began in the 1930s when he published his debut novel, "The Absurdity of Destiny". Over several decades, he produced impressive work that included over 50 novels, numerous short stories, and plays. His writings often explored profound themes such as existential dilemmas, social and political dynamics, and the intricate nature of human relationships.

A hallmark of Mahfouz's storytelling is his deep engagement with Egyptian society, vividly portraying the lives, struggles, and aspirations of ordinary people. His iconic "Cairo Trilogy", which includes "Palace Walk" (*Bayn al-Qasrayn*), "Palace of Desire" (*Qasr al-Shawq*), and "Sugar Street" (*Sukkariya*), is a monumental achievement in Arabic literature. This trilogy offers a sweeping narrative of family life across three generations while capturing the cultural, social, and political shifts in Egypt from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. Through his masterful use of language and insightful exploration of human experiences, Mahfouz's work transcended regional boundaries, earning him international recognition and cementing his legacy as a literary pioneer. His profound influence continues to inspire readers and writers around the globe.

Introduction:

Naguib Mahfouz, the celebrated Egyptian novelist and recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, holds a distinguished place in the history of Arabic literature. While there is some uncertainty surrounding his exact birthdate, records suggest that he was either born on December 11, 1911, or December 15, 1912. One account places his birth in Cairo's historic Jamaliya district on December 11, 1911, while another source indicates December 15, 1912, as his date of birth.¹

Mahfouz's father, who began his career as a minor government employee and later transitioned into business, provided a stable and nurturing environment for his family. Mahfouz spent his early years in the culturally rich and lively Jamaliya neighborhood, which would later serve as the setting for many of his novels. The vibrant streets, historical landmarks, and colorful characters of this area left an indelible mark on Mahfouz's imagination and profoundly influenced his literary voice.

Later in his youth, Mahfouz's family relocated to the Abbasiyya district, an area known for its relatively higher social standing. He continued to live there until his marriage in 1954. Unlike the strict and controlling father figure depicted in Mahfouz's famous "Cairo Trilogy", his upbringing was characterized by warmth and joy. As the youngest child in the family, he was greatly loved and doted upon, enjoying a carefree and happy childhood.

This nurturing environment and the dual influences of Jamaliya's bustling life and Abbasiyya's refined atmosphere became foundational to Mahfouz's literary genius, allowing him to craft stories that deeply resonate with the cultural and social fabric of Egypt.²

During his years in public school, Naguib Mahfouz displayed exceptional talent in subjects such as Arabic, history, and mathematics. These disciplines seemed to naturally align with his intellectual inclinations, and he excelled in them with remarkable ease. However, foreign languages posed a significant challenge for him, making this area a notable exception in his otherwise stellar academic performance.

It was during his schooldays that Mahfouz first began exploring the world of Arabic poetry. Initially, he adhered to the traditional forms, maintaining established meters and rhyme schemes. Over time, however, his creativity and desire for innovation led him to break free from these conventions and experiment with free verse. This early experimentation hinted at the artistic versatility that would later define his literary career.

As Mahfouz grew older, his passion for reading expanded beyond the boundaries of classical Arabic poetry. He began to immerse himself in Arabic translations of Western detective stories and historical novels, which introduced him to new genres and storytelling techniques. Alongside these, he also devoured the works of contemporary Egyptian writers, deepening his appreciation for the literary landscape of his homeland.

After completing his formal education, Mahfouz broadened his intellectual pursuits by engaging with translated Western literature. This exposure allowed him to explore a diverse range of themes, styles, and perspectives. The fusion of his profound understanding of Arabic literary traditions with his insights into Western literary approaches ultimately enriched his craft, laying the foundation for the unique narrative voice that would later distinguish his work on both national and global stages.³

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Naguib Mahfouz, one of the most celebrated figures in modern Arabic literature, distinguished himself through a remarkably prolific and versatile literary career. His contributions to literature span multiple genres, including novels, short stories, essays, drama, and cinema. Each of these forms reflects his extraordinary ability to capture the complexity of human experience, society, and culture, making him a pivotal figure in shaping the Arabic literary tradition.

Prolific Output in Novels:

Mahfouz's literary legacy is perhaps most famously marked by his extensive output of over 34 novels. These novels, written over several decades, explore a vast array of themes, from the intimate struggles of individuals to broader societal and political issues. His works were not only reflective of the changing landscapes of Egyptian and Arab society but also mirrored the universal themes of human existence. Mahfouz's novels often delve into the intricacies of Egyptian life, capturing the nuances of social classes, politics, religion, and the quest for personal meaning. His mastery of storytelling earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988, making him the first Arab writer to win the prestigious award.

Short Stories and Their Wide Scope:

In addition to his novels, Mahfouz wrote 19 collections of short stories, encompassing nearly 250 tales. These stories are a testament to his creative prowess, showcasing his ability to convey complex ideas and emotional depth within a shorter format. Mahfouz's short stories reflect a broad spectrum of themes, from the exploration of individual psychology to the portrayal of social dynamics and moral dilemmas. His work in the short story genre is often compared to that of Mahmud Tymur, a pioneering force in Arabic short fiction, as Mahfouz helped elevate the genre to new heights.

Essays: Intellectual Insights:

Beyond fiction, Mahfouz's intellectual contributions include the publication of approximately 300 essays, compiled in three notable collections. His essays offer deep reflections on various topics such as culture, society, history, and the human condition. His writings are marked by their sharp observations, offering readers insights into the intellectual currents of the time. Mahfouz's essays solidified his reputation not only as a creative writer but also as a thinker capable of engaging critically with the world around him. These essays further enhanced his stature as a literary figure whose influence extended beyond fiction.

Drama and Scriptwriting:

Mahfouz also ventured into the realm of 'drama', composing 10 plays tailored specifically for the stage. His ability to adapt his stories and novels for theatrical productions allowed him to connect with an even wider audience. The transition from the written word to performance demonstrated his flexibility as a writer and his deep understanding of the dramatic form. His work on the stage paralleled his contributions to "cinema", where 25 of his works were adapted into feature films. These adaptations spanned both novels and short stories, illustrating his ability to cross genres and media, further amplifying his influence within Arabic culture.

Influence on Arabic Literature:

Mahfouz's impact on Arabic literature is often compared to that of Tawfiq al-Hakim, the pioneering dramatist, and Mahmud Tymur, who revolutionized the Arabic short story. His work, particularly in the novel and drama, established him as one of the key figures in the development of modern Arabic literature. His novels, often seen as reflective of Egyptian society and politics, helped define the modern Arabic novel as a literary form. Mahfouz's ability to articulate the experiences of ordinary people, while also addressing broader political and philosophical issues, cemented his legacy as a key figure in shaping the cultural and literary landscape of the Arab world.⁵

Description:

Naguib Mahfouz's pursuit of higher education began when he enrolled at "Cairo University" in 1930. Initially, he set out to study "philosophy", but over time, his passion for 'literature' began to overshadow his interest in philosophical studies. This shift in focus was significantly influenced by the Egyptian intellectual Salama Musa,⁶ whose ideas about literature and culture left a lasting impression on Mahfouz. Despite this growing interest in the literary world, Mahfouz initially completed his undergraduate degree in 1934, intending to pursue a postgraduate doctorate under the guidance of Mustafa 'Abd al-Raziq, with a focus on Islamic mysticism. However, he ultimately abandoned this academic path and never pursued the doctorate he had planned.

In 1936, Mahfouz began working at Cairo University's secretariat, a role he held until 1939. That year, he was transferred to a position within the Ministry for the Religious Foundations, where he dedicated the next fifteen years of his professional life. Despite his academic and government roles, Mahfouz's literary career continued to develop. In 1954, he transitioned to the Ministry of Culture, where he took on a prominent role as the Director of Technical Supervision. His influence within the cultural sector was further solidified when he became the Director of the Cinema Organization, a position that allowed him to expand his reach in the arts and media.

Throughout this period, Mahfouz's literary reputation grew steadily. In 1957, his contributions to literature were recognized when he was awarded the "State Prize for Literature" — one of the most prestigious honors in Egypt. His time in government service did not prevent him from pursuing his literary ambitions. Despite his busy career, Mahfouz continued to write prolifically, contributing stories and several novels to the daily newspaper al-Ahram. While he began his literary journey by writing short stories, he is best known for his novels, having produced over thirty during his career. His literary output is considered one of the most significant in the Arabic-speaking world, and his works earned him widespread acclaim, including the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988.

Mahfouz retired from his government duties in 1972, but his literary endeavors continued well into his retirement. Even after stepping away from formal employment, Mahfouz remained an active and influential figure in the literary world, contributing to Egypt's cultural and intellectual life through his regular writings and his ongoing novels. His career exemplified a unique balance of public service and creative expression, and his legacy continues to impact both the literary and cultural landscapes of the Arab world.⁷

Naguib Mahfouz's literary evolution, from essays to novel writing, was marked by a significant shift driven by the increasing acceptance of his short stories in the literary world. Initially, Mahfouz's works primarily consisted of essays and philosophical reflections, but as his short stories gained attention, he moved towards novel writing, solidifying his position as one of the most important authors of modern Arabic literature. His first collection of short stories, "Hams al-Junûn" (The Whisper of Madness), was published in 1938, marking a pivotal moment in his career. These stories demonstrated Mahfouz's emerging style, which blended personal reflections with social commentary.⁸

Mahfouz's background in philosophy played a crucial role in shaping his intellectual approach to literature. As a graduate in philosophy, Mahfouz's early writings often dealt with philosophical issues, reflecting his deep engagement with ideas about society, civilization, and individual existence. One of his early contributions to intellectual thought was an article he wrote in October 1930 for Salama Musa's periodical, "Al-Majalla al-Jadida". In this article, Mahfouz explored the idea of life's transient nature and argued for the acceptance of the inevitable consequences of civilization. He discussed how individuals must reconcile with

the progress of civilization, accepting its material benefits while acknowledging that these advancements might not lead to spiritual fulfillment.

Moreover, Mahfouz expressed support for 'moderate socialism' to address the material needs of the population, recognizing that while it might not bring about spiritual happiness, it could improve the quality of life for many. This perspective on society and its ills was reflective of Mahfouz's broader concerns with the socio-political landscape of Egypt during his early career. His early works, therefore, combined both philosophical musings and social critique, establishing a foundation for his later, more expansive novels, which would go on to explore complex human conditions and societal transformations in Egypt and the broader Arab world.

Thus, Mahfouz's transition from essays to novels was not just a career shift but a natural progression of his intellectual growth and engagement with the changing times in Egypt. His ability to interweave philosophical discourse with narrative fiction helped him produce works that were not only literary masterpieces but also profound reflections on the social and political fabric of his country.⁹

Naguib Mahfouz's literary journey, from his early stories to his mastery of novel writing, is a testament to his profound contribution to Arabic literature. His progression can be categorized into three major phases, which encapsulate his versatility and artistic genius: historical novels, social realist novels, and post-realistic novels. Each of these phases marked an important milestone in Mahfouz's development as a writer, reflecting his engagement with both Egypt's rich history and the evolving realities of his society.

(1) Historical Novels:

Mahfouz's early works were deeply rooted in the history of Egypt, particularly Pharaonic Egypt. His historical novels are rich in detail and imagination, drawing inspiration from Egypt's ancient past to explore universal themes. Among his most notable historical works are:

- i. *'Abath al-Aqdâr* (The Game of Fate, 1939): This was Mahfouz's first significant historical novel, which delves into the ancient world, exploring the complexity of fate and human destiny.
- ii. *"Râdûbîs"* (1943): A novel set during the reign of the Pharaohs, *'Râdûbîs'* explores themes of power, love, and betrayal, blending historical fiction with Mahfouz's characteristic introspection on human nature.
- iii. *"Kifâh wa Tîba"* (The Struggle of Thebes, 1944): Set during the reign of a Pharaoh, this novel is a vivid portrayal of the tension between duty and personal desire, further cementing Mahfouz's skill in depicting ancient Egyptian society.

(2) Social Realist Novels:

Following his success in historical fiction, Mahfouz turned his attention to modern Egypt, crafting works that depicted the daily lives and struggles of ordinary Egyptians. These works marked Mahfouz's shift to social realism, a genre that would become a hallmark of his literary style. His social realist novels often tackled issues such as poverty, social injustice, and the aspirations of the working class. Some of his most influential works in this genre include:

- i. *"Al-Qâhira al-Jadîda"* (New Cairo, 1945): A depiction of the social transformation occurring in Cairo, this novel addresses the rapid urbanization of Egypt and its effects on its people.
- ii. *"Khân al-Khalîlî"* (1946): Set in Cairo's famous market district, *Khân al-Khalîlî* explores the intersecting lives of various characters and their struggles within the larger social and political landscape of Egypt.
- iii. *"Zuqaq al-Midâq"* (The Midaq Alley, 1947): This novel focuses on a small alley in Cairo and the lives of its inhabitants. It vividly portrays the socio-economic realities of life in the alley while capturing the complexities of human relationships.
- iv. *"Bidâya wa Nihâya"* (The Beginning and the End, 1949): A story about a lower-middle-class family, *"Bidâya wa Nihâya"* explores the themes of family loyalty, fate, and social mobility.
- v. The "Cairo Trilogy": Arguably his most famous works, the "Cairo Trilogy" comprises *"Bayn al-Qaşrayn"* (1956), *"Qaşr al-Shawq"* (1957), and *"al-Sukkariya"* (1959). This trilogy is a sweeping narrative of Egyptian society from the perspective of a single family, spanning several generations. The trilogy intricately examines social class, political change, and the emotional landscape of Egypt in the early 20th century.

(3) Post-Realistic Novels:

As his career progressed, Mahfouz began to experiment with more abstract, philosophical, and post-realistic forms of narrative. These works often blur the lines between reality and fiction, exploring the complexities of the human psyche and the absurdities of life. Notable works in this phase include:

- i. *"Awlâd Hâratinâ"* (The Children of Our Alley): One of his most controversial and innovative works, *"The Children of Our Alley"* is an allegorical exploration of religion, society, and the concept of free will. The novel's blend of magical realism and philosophical musings marked a new direction in Mahfouz's literary career.
- ii. *"Al-Liṣṣ wa al-Kilâb"* (Thief and Dogs, 1961): This novel is an exploration of crime and punishment, as well as themes of existential despair. Through the story of its protagonist, Mahfouz delves into the psychological depths of his characters.

- iii. "Al-Sumân wa al-Kharîf" (Quails and Autumn, 1967): A collection of short stories that showcase Mahfouz's growing engagement with the nuances of human emotion and personal reflection.
- iv. "Tharathara fawq al-Nîl" (Chatting by the Nile, 1966): A surreal exploration of the passage of time and the impact of historical change on ordinary lives.
- v. "Mirâmâr" (The Egyptian Alexandria Quarter, 1967): This novel explores the lives of several residents of a pension in Alexandria, offering a reflection on the intermingling of personal histories and national identity during a time of great political change.

Support and Influence of Salama Musa:

An essential aspect of Mahfouz's early literary development was the significant encouragement and support he received from intellectual figures like Salama Musa, a prominent Egyptian writer and intellectual. Musa played a crucial role in promoting Mahfouz's work through his journal and periodicals, helping Mahfouz gain wider recognition in the literary world. One of the early instances of this support occurred when Mahfouz's novel "Hikmat Khufu" (The Wisdom of Cheops) was renamed by Salama Musa as '*Abath al-Aqdâr* (Ironies of Fate). This novel was subsequently published as a standalone edition in 1939 within the pages of Musa's magazine.

This collaboration not only helped Mahfouz gain early literary acclaim but also fostered his continued growth as a writer, allowing him to hone his craft and experiment with different styles and genres. Musa's influence on Mahfouz was pivotal in shaping the trajectory of his career, with Musa's intellectual guidance helping Mahfouz navigate the complexities of writing for both local and international audiences.

Naguib Mahfouz's literary achievements are a testament to his extraordinary ability to evolve as a writer, adapting to the changing intellectual and cultural currents of Egypt and the Arab world. From his early historical novels to his explorations of modern social realities and post-realistic narratives, Mahfouz's body of work has made a lasting impact on Arabic literature. His intellectual journey, coupled with the encouragement of influential figures like Salama Musa, helped shape his legacy as one of the most important literary figures in the Arab world. His works continue to resonate with readers worldwide, offering profound insights into the complexities of human nature, society, and the ever-changing landscape of Egyptian history.¹¹

Naguib Mahfouz, a prominent modern writer and novelist, found considerable inspiration in the works of several key Russian authors, including Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorky, Ivan Turgenev, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. The deep empathy and compassion that these writers expressed toward the marginalized and oppressed left a profound impact on Mahfouz. Their portrayal of human suffering, social injustices, and the complexities of the human condition mirrored the realities of his society. As a result, Mahfouz incorporated similar themes of social critique and emotional depth into his literary creations, often exploring the lives of ordinary people caught in the throes of oppressive systems. This connection to Russian literary traditions helped shape Mahfouz's distinctive narrative voice, enabling him to tackle universal themes while remaining firmly rooted in the Egyptian context.¹²

Discussion:

The emergence of the Egyptian novel in the modern era was contingent upon the fulfillment of five key conditions. First, the influence of European literature, especially the rise of the novel as a major literary form in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, played a crucial role. Second, the establishment of printing presses and publishing houses in Egypt during the nineteenth century coincided with the expansion of newspaper production, making literature more accessible. Third, the growth of public education and the widespread increase in literacy across the population laid the foundation for a more educated readership. Fourth, the gradual liberation from foreign domination, starting with Muhammad Ali's reign after the Napoleonic occupation in the early 1800s, facilitated the country's cultural independence. Finally, the rise of an intellectual class, well-versed in international knowledge and education, further contributed to the fertile ground for literary development. Together, these five factors created an environment where the Egyptian novel could take shape and flourish, ultimately becoming a significant part of the nation's cultural landscape.¹³

Naguib Mahfouz, one of the most important figures in Arabic literature, gained global recognition for his contributions, especially when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. Mahfouz's work reached a wider audience through the encouragement of his Western friends, who suggested translating his novels into English. This not only brought his stories to the European readership but also introduced Arabic literature to a broader international community. One of Mahfouz's most famous works, *Awlâd Hârâtînâ* (translated as "Children of Gebelawi" or "Children of the Alley"), became a key text in this translation effort. The novel, which explores the history of religious faith and the moral struggles of its protagonists, tells the story of various leaders striving to bring order and spirituality to their community. Despite its literary acclaim, the novel stirred considerable controversy, particularly for its critical portrayal of religious figures and themes, which provoked strong reactions among some readers.¹⁴

During the period of political upheaval surrounding the Egyptian Revolution, Naguib Mahfouz provided a poignant literary exploration of the social and political inequalities that fueled the unrest. Through a series of powerful novels, Mahfouz captured the struggles of ordinary people grappling with systemic corruption and societal disparities. One of the most notable settings in his work is an old Cairo district, which Mahfouz depicted with great familiarity and insight. This district becomes the backdrop for a narrative that delves into the aspirations of its residents, illustrating the various ways in which their dreams are thwarted by larger, uncontrollable forces.

The trilogy consisting of “Bayn al-Qaşrayn” (translated as “Palace Walk”), “Qaşr al-Shawq” (translated as “Palace of Desire”), and “al-Sukkariya” (translated as “Sugar Street”) stands as a cornerstone of Mahfouz’s literary legacy. These novels, which form part of his monumental work, not only reflect the deep socio-political tensions of Egypt but also solidified Mahfouz’s position as a pioneering figure in the development of the Arabic novel. Through the trilogy, Mahfouz masterfully portrayed the personal and collective struggles of his characters, providing insight into the fabric of Egyptian society.¹⁵

The widespread acclaim of his body of work, including this trilogy, significantly contributed to Mahfouz’s recognition as a Nobel laureate in Literature in 1988. His ability to intertwine universal themes with the specifics of Egyptian culture and history ultimately earned him a place of honor in global literary circles, marking him as one of the most influential authors in the Arabic-speaking world.

Conclusion:

During the challenging years of the Second World War, Naguib Mahfouz not only survived the tumult of the time but also used it as a lens through which to examine the socio-political climate of Egypt. His works from this era provided a nuanced portrayal of life under the strains of war, particularly focusing on the lives of clerks and the broader bureaucratic system. As a graduate in philosophy, Mahfouz had a sharp awareness of the intellectual and social issues confronting the Arab world. He understood that the region's leaders, especially in the post-independence period, were grappling with the need to find new directions for their countries. With keen insight, Mahfouz sought to capture the tensions and shifts that were shaping political and social transformations across Egypt during the 1950s.

Mahfouz’s writing during this time was not just an intellectual pursuit but a conscious effort to reflect on and heal the psychological wounds of the Arab populace. His novels, filled with intricate social commentary, explored the complexities of Egyptian life and the larger Arab condition. Through his compelling narratives, Mahfouz sought to offer a remedy to the struggles and frustrations of his society. His ability to weave these deep, often painful, themes into his stories earned him a reputation as a masterful storyteller.

Many scholars and critics have hailed Mahfouz as a novelist of exceptional merit, drawing comparisons between him and literary giants like Charles Dickens and Honoré de Balzac. His profound impact on Egyptian literature, as well as on Arab society at large, solidified his place as one of the greatest literary figures of the 20th century. Naguib Mahfouz, indeed, became a symbol of Egypt’s literary and cultural identity, embodying his nation’s complexities and aspirations. His contributions to Arabic literature, particularly through his novels, elevated him to the pinnacle of global recognition, earning him the distinction of being one of the foremost literary figures in world literature.

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