Worlding of Realism. The case of Naguib Mahfouz.

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Abstract: The routes of European realism into the Arabic cultural and literary expressions are many. They also overlap in both the travel and arrival of this complex package of politics and aesthetics, simultaneously and randomly, through translation and adaptation, at Arabic print culture, cinema, storytelling and theatre, where it is subject to further conceptual blending of all kinds: global with local, visual with verbal, and creative with critical. Reception is the site on which Arabic realism finds articulation. Each articulation is, however, unique, responsive, as it were, to the worldview, priorities and techniques deployed. Tracing the movements and transformations of European realism through Naguib Mahfouz—centrifugally into his novel and film stories and centripetally into Egyptian cinema and criticism—it is possible to track the worlding of Realism in the globalization of Mahfouz. Read outside a linear progressive chronology that implies a cause-and-effect trajectory of worlding (that Egyptian development is directly influenced by European exports), and against a backdrop of visualization and embodiment in Egyptian and Mexcian cinemas, class-conscious discourses of Egyptian criticism, and political allegory of his later novels, Mahfouzian literary realism is theorized as reliant on the ability of the word to unleash the creative potential of the human imagination to relate writing to lived experiences. (207 words)

Keywords: Naguib Mahfouz, globalization, the novel, socialist realism, Marxist criticism, cinema, Chinese orientalism. (7 key words)

Global Reception of Mahfouzian Realism

The 1988 Nobel Prize in Literature catapulted Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006) from regional fame to global recognition (Beard and Haidar 1993). The "prize motivation" provided by the Nobel Foundation for awarding the Nobel to Mahfouz, who "through works rich in nuance - now clear-sightedly realistic, now evocatively ambiguous - has formed an Arabian narrative art that applies to all mankind" (1988), has come to anchor how the world approaches his career and works. Zhong Jikun (仲跻昆), Professor of Arabic at Beijing University, begins his assessment for the *Middle East Studies of PKU* Journal of the more than twenty translations as well as more than one hundred studies of Mahfouz in Chinese since the 1980s, by quoting in full the Nobel "prize motivation" statement, rendering "now clear-sightedly realistic" into "洞察一切的现实主义" or, if this Chinese translation were translated into English, "realism, or ideology of realism, that can look into or examine all or everything penetratingly" (Zhong 2015, 70). The epitome of Mahfouzian "ideology of realism" is his *Cairo Trilogy* (1956-1957). However, Mahfouz's "realism," Zhang Hongyi (张洪仪) and Xie Yang (谢杨) caution in their introduction to the volume of essays on Mahfouz they collected and edited, *Daai Wubian* 大爱无边 (Limitless, 2008), "is not at all traditional," and "his creative style, located in the twentieth century, is different from the nineteenth century realism found in, for example, Balzac and Tolstoy" (5). For Chinese readers of the Arabic novel, *Cairo Trilogy* is comparable to *The Family* (1958) by Ba Jin (1904-2005) (Zhong 2015, 79), and for Egyptian readers of Chinese literature, Mahfouz's coffeehouse is akin to Lao She's (1899-1966) teahouse, made famous by his eponymous 1956 play (Fahmy 2008, 63-68).

On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, two of Mahfouz's "realist" novels found their way into Mexican cinema. In 1993 Arturo Repstein adapted *The Beginning and the End* (1949) into the acclaimed gritty *Principio Y Fin*, very likely based on Marcelino Villegas's 1988 Spanish translation from Arabic, which was selected as the Mexican entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 67th Academy Awards. Two years later, in 1995, Jorge Fons similarly translated *Midaq* Alley (1947) for screen, and *El calléjon de los Milagros* (the alley of miracles), most likely based on a 1988 translation made for MR Edicione from Trevor Le Gassick's English translation, *Midaq Alley* (1966), would also gain critical acclaim worldwide.

Repstein and Fons could not but have been aware of Egyptian films directed by Salah Abu Seif (1915-1996), *The Beginning and the End* (1964), and Ḥasan al-Imām (1919-1988), *Midaq Alley* (also 1964). For one thing, a screen shot from the former adorns the cover of the Spanish translation of *The Beginning and the End*, and for another, early Egyptian cinema, very much like early Mexican cinema, was popular around the world. The involvement of Bruno Bichir might have provided an additional impetus. Bruno is a member of the famous Mexican acting family of Lebanese descent, the Bichir family, and plays the role of one of the brothers in *Principio Y Fin*, Nicolás Botero, and the male lead, Abel, in *El calléjon de los Milagros*, opposite Salma Hayek, another Mexican Lebanese actor, who plays the female lead, Alma. Yet Mexican renditions of Mahfouz could not have been more different from those made by their Egyptian predecessors. In *Principio Y Fin* and *El calléjon de los Milagros*, Mahfouz's Cairo, both the new city of *The Beginning and the End* or the old quarter of *Midaq Alley*, is relocated to two different neighborhoods in Mexico City. The black and white world of Abu Seif and al-Imām, their translation of Mahfouz's 1940s into their own 1960s, is now colorful with the visual scape of Mexico City in the 1990s, and clamorous with its soundscape. The characters inhabiting it wear hairdos and clothes appropriate to their time and place, are surrounded by noises that can only come from the world they live in, speak Spanish and move to the rhythm of their language and popular Mexican music.

The unsuspecting audience are bound to find the stories these two films tell quintessentially Mexican, and credibly so. Those who take the trouble to check the Mexican films against Mahfouz's novels will recognize the characters and the storylines Mahfouz gives them. And, more interestingly, those who look comparatively at the adaptations of Mahfouz in Egyptian and Mexican cinemas may even feel inclined to argue that Repstein and Fons are more "faithful" to Mahfouz than Abu Seif and especially al-Imām. Repstein and Fons may have updated Mahfouz by writing drug trafficking and attendant prostitution into the social fabric of Mexico City in their films, but they have kept to the tone and style of Mahfouz's realism, in particular, to the middle class characters he portrays and pushes to center stage, the social problems they face in the capitalist world they live in, and the events leading up to their downfall. In this, Repstein and Abu Seif are more alike in their interpretation of Mahfouz's story about a family of the "petite bourgeoisie" class who, having lost

the wage-earning patriarch to premature death, fight for survival under the helm of a strong but otherwise helpless matriarch. All eyes look to the youngest boy, the social climber in the family, whose selfish disregard for others would cost his Mafioso eldest brother his life, demand full sacrifice from his other brother, and turn his sister to prostitution. When scandal breaks out, he forces his sister to commit suicide then kills himself. The difference in method, slashing wrists as opposed to jumping into the Nile, cannot hide the real, as well as common, social problems Mahfouz's novel and Abu Seif and Repstein's films raise and tackle in their respective historical and spatial contexts.

Fons similarly adheres closely to Mahfouz, to the world, characters and four storylines he creates in *Midaq Alley*: in a rather poor and run down neighborhood a middle-aged homosexual man looking for fulfillment outside marriage, a spinster marrying a younger man so as to have a family, young men running away from the poverty of their neighborhood to the big bad world out there, either to new Cairo or Tijuana, for a chance at a better life, and a young woman turning to prostitution for a glimpse of social glamour in the world of the rich, of the Egyptian aristocracy and British colonial officers in Cairo or the drug cartels in Mexico City. Al-Imām, on the other hand, prunes Mahfouz's four interconnected narratives into a single plotline centered around Ḥamīda, a willful social climber, who abandons her suitors in old Cairo and runs off with a pimp who fashions her into an entertainer and, above all, prostitute for British colonial officers in new Cairo. Al-Imām even changes the ending of Ḥamīda's storyline. Ḥamīda, played by the Egyptian iconic singer and actress of the 1950s and 1960s, Shadia, in al-Imām, is Alma in Fons, played by Salma Hayek in her first film role. She remains trapped in prostitution at the end of Mahfouz's novel and Fons' film after her original suitor and love interest, Egyptian ʿAbbās, played by Salāḥ Qābīl, or Mexican Abel, played by Bruno Bichir, gets killed trying to wrest her free from the British colonial officers or the Mexican drug cartel. It is Ḥamīda who dies in al-Imām. She takes the bullet for Abbas, and dies in his arms as he carries her back to Midaq Alley so she could rest in peace in her "homeland."

Al-Imām not only transforms Mahfouz's novel into a "national allegory," in which, orphaned Ḥamīda, the feminized nation, is subject to the competing lust and exploitation of the old Egyptian aristocracy and criminal world, new political elite, British colonizers, and aspiring nation builders native to the quarter, all male and

corrupt if not inept. At the same time she must manage her own wily craving for material goods and societal respect and navigate her way around a maze of overlapping and conflicting male desire and power. But this is not the only departure from Mahfouz in al-Imām. Among the interpreters of Mahfouz's realist novels on screen, al-Imām, who also directed the first two parts of *Cairo Trilogy*, *Palace Walk* (1964) and *Palace of Desire* (1967), has a flair for melodrama, particularly compared with Abu Seif, who directed *Cairo 30* (1966), based on *Cairo Modern* (1945). Abu Seif was a long time collaborator of Mahfouz, who wrote or co-wrote the scripts for quite a few films Abu Seif directed. Their films on the underworld of Cairo, *futuwwa*, are uncompromisingly gritty. In a struggle for survival, the lower class protagonist takes on the violence engineered by the manipulation and exploitation of the wealthy and powerful and unleashed onto his poverty and misery stricken world. This is not to say that Abu Seif is entirely free of melodrama, on the contrary, even in *The Beginning and the End*, the soundtrack and the occasional close shots of Omar Sharif's highly exaggerated facial expressions can veer in the direction of hyperbole. At one point, the film even lapses into song and dance. Heightened emotions and borrowings from musicals pervade al-Imām's filmic version of *Midaq Alley*. Taking full advantage of Shadia's iconic status as both actor and singer, al-Imām has her engage in catfights with women of the alley, click her heels loudly and sway her hips widely as she walks down the streets, flirt prodigiously with every man she meets, gesticulate frenetically with her face and hands, and shriek out her lines. The second part of the film is packed with song and dance. Samia Gamal (1924-1994), Egypt's foremost belly dancer, provides the highlight of the entertainment program in the film. Shadia's melodramatic performance in *Midaq Alley*, however, was not an inevitability determined by her abilities as actor. She appears in another film adapted from Mahfouz's *Miramar* (1966), directed by Kamal El Sheikh (1919-2004) who is known as Hitchcock of Egypt, and her performance there as the female protagonist is truer to life, to say the least, or, one is tempted to say, sedately real, even though *Miramar* is not one of the works identified as Mahfouz's realism.

I have gone into some length describing the reception of Mahfouz's realism in Arabic studies in China today, and in Mexican cinema in the 1990s, and in the latter case, by comparison with Egyptian cinema in the 1960s, to draw attention to the diversity of responses to Mahfouz but, more importantly, to the role reception plays in

a broader understanding of works of art, of what they are, what they do and how they do it. I want to make a concerted argument that worlding of Realism, whether we think of Realism as ideology (politics) or style (aesthetics), can only make sense if we see it through the prism of how Realism is received both creatively and critically and, more importantly, absorbed into the broader canvas of the host culture and literature. Using cinematic renditions of Mahfouz I have described above as a starting point, I pursue in the following a line of inquiry that makes use of reception as a lens to trace the movement and transformation of Realism in modern Arabic novel, centrifugally into Mahfouz and centripetally out of his cinematic and literary works. I eschew a linear progressive chronology that implies a cause-and-effect trajectory of both literary development and worlding, but frame the order in which the works discussed appeared locally and globally within a network of overlapping temporalities and spatialities. European realism, in its diversity, arrived rather randomly in the Arabic novel in a complex bundle across divergent routes, and into an existing literary world. Its worldview, priorities, and techniques, as we see in the example of Mahfouz, became the material for experimentation in modern Arabic storytelling. However, what realism is becomes clear only in the Marxist readings, which extracted from Mahfouz what suited their critical and political agenda. A three way comparison of Mahfouz—his realist novel with political allegory and their cinematic adaptation—demonstrates further the role of reception in giving shape to realism. Cinema is a good example. Camera reproduces "what is there," "puts reality onto the screen" and gives the illusion that it is possible to "portray 'life as it really was'" (Hayward 1996 [2014], 312). However, Realism is a chameleon, a shape-shifter that takes on new colors dependent on the bodies it comes to inhabit. It comes to life only in performance and, more importantly, in that of a conceptual category abstracted from works of art only to be imposed back on them in critical readings.

The Intercultural Context of Mahfouz's Realism

The particular brand of realism associated with nineteenth century European art and literature found its way into Arabic cultural expressions via translation, adaptation, quotation and summation, all creatively prismatic, and by means of linguistic and conceptual blending, all of which are palpable not only in the new media of cultural expression, such as cinema and theatre, but also in the exuberant

print culture of the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. This print culture, enabled by the global proliferation of Arabic printing technology and press, and the emergence of a new middle class educated outside the traditional religious schools in the metropolitan centers of empires (British, French and Ottoman), served as the hot bed for global cultural encounters. Europeans could not have been more present in the Arabic speaking world than the long nineteenth century. Colonial officers, missionaries, adventurers, traders, economic migrants, and orientalists, all arguably cultural ambassadors, took advantage of their position in the machinery of empire and disseminated their political, religious and cultural versions of Europe in churches, schools they founded, cultural projects they supported, and often the structures through which they disciplined, punished and ruled. At the same time, Arab travellers to the Americas and Europe learned different European languages (English, French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish) in the various countries they sojourned, brought home cultural and literary works they found fashionable and to their liking, as well as technologies (printing and print houses), cultural institutions (print culture and theatre), ideologies (Revolution, Democracy and Marxism), bodies of knowledge (including Orientalism), ideas and worldviews (Freud and Darwin) and even disciplines (archaeology), and presented them variously to a home audience on the pages of the print culture in the Arabic language which was always saturated with her own cultural and literary heritage.

Realism arrived in the Arabic literary consciousness, if there is such a thing, rather randomly, as part and parcel of a large-scale, multifarious cultural encounter that, especially seen from the perspective of hindsight, looked more like spontaneous combustion. European Romanticism, Realism and Modernism, let us say, reached Arabic writers simultaneously and very likely in one complex bundle, the novel, short story and drama together with criticism, as we see in the Arabic print culture. The European genres and styles of writing entered the Arabic fields of cultural production at the same time as photography, cinema and theater and in tandem with their divergent modes of representation. Mahfouz remembers his readings in English in the 1930s to Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī like this: "*War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment*, short stories by Chekov, Shakespeare, Maupassant, Kafka, Proust, Joyce, Eugene O'Neill, Ibsen, Strindberg, *Moby Dick* […], Dos Passos, […] Hemingway […], Faulkner […], Joseph Conrad, Sholokhov, Hafez al-Shirazi and Tagore" (Ghītānī 1980, 41) while at

the same time-reading late Nahdawi literary giants, such as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Māzinī, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and ʿAbbās al-ʿAqqād (Ḥāfiẓ 1977, 52). He also sees novel's affinity and overlap with cinema and theatre. The novel, according to Mahfouz, "resembles theatre and cinema in that it can encompass all arts in its unique form. The novel is like a film in that combines idea with its exploration as well as dialogue, production, acting, costume, décor, music, and montage" (Ḥāfiẓ 1977, 37). The arrival of European literary genres and media was, however, shaped by their interaction with contemporary practices in local cultural and literary expressions. Arab writers experimented with the novel, short story, and drama, adapting them to their linguistic and literary sensibilities and, more importantly, to their own material conditions of living. Characters, themes and events in adaptations of European works acquire local colors, accents, manners and materiality. More importantly, they speak to concerns of immediate relevance to their authors, readers and viewers not only in their own language but also in a style they would understand and admire. Arabic cultural and literary expressions are, necessarily and inevitably, sites of global convergence. Each instance of convergence is, however, unique, rendered so by what it brings together. We catch a glimpse of how this works in Egyptian cinema.

Kamāl Salīm's (1913-1945) 1939 feature film, *Determination*, is arguably a hopeful *Midaq Alley* that anticipated the stories Mahfouz would tell in his realist novels. It begins with a panning shot that sets the scene in a quarter of old Cairo akin to *Midaq Alley* and *Cairo Trilogy*, then goes on to tell the familiar story of the rise of a middle class family from among the good people of an antiquated world against the odds: the conspiracies of the aristocracy, the constraints imposed by the British rule, the ignorance of the old folk, the allure of the wealth of new Cairo, and their own social climbing impulses. Unlike ʿAbbās al-Ḥilū, Muḥammad, the first member of the quarter to receive a degree in economics from Cairo University (founded in 1908), succeeds in the end to establish himself as an entrepreneur. His love interest, Fātima, also from his neighborhood, is no Ḥamīda. She does not succumb to the temptations of wealth or the glitters of new Cairo. The two protagonists remain true to their core values and each other. The road to their happy ending is nevertheless paved with melodrama. A misunderstanding that leads to separation, a kidnapping that ends in reconciliation, and a street fight involving gangsters, thugs and the police that effects the final reunion.

Determination and *Midaq Alley*, the film, may have combined realism and melodrama variably and written diametrically opposed endings for the protagonists, but they belong to a common field of cultural production, where emerging urgent economic, political and social problems are expressed and explored. Storytelling, music and theater congregate in cultural texts, whether these texts are made from words, images or sounds, to give expression to issues of the day. Shadia, the star of *Midaq Alley*, as I have already mentioned, was an iconic singer of her generation. The lead female actors in *The White Rose* and *Determination*, Dawlat Abyad (1896-1978) and Fātima Rushdī (1908-1996), were architects and stars of the flowering Egyptian theater in the first half of the twentieth century. Mahfouz was born into this milieu of multilateral cultural collaboration. "East" and "West" came in one package, so did literature, theater, cinema and music. Mahfouz never had to leave Egypt, for world literature and culture reached him at the two Egyptian cosmopolitan centers, Alexandria and Cairo. The gates of literature, theater and cinema were at the same time open to him and his experiments. Mahfouz's literary career epitomizes the worldliness of Alexandria and Cairo, the experimental spirit of his time, and allows us to see European realism in a particular instance of worlding against a global canvas of intercultural exchange.

Realism in Mahfouz's Cinematic World

Mahfouz may be best known for his novels, in fact, Arab novelists and critics regard him as the "father of the Arabic novel" in that he established the novel as a literary genre in Arabic, and that his novels, all thirty-four of them, embody the history of the genre in Arabic. "Our great man of letters, Naguib Mahfouz, was a unique phenomenon in the history of the novel," Fātima Mūsā begins the introduction to her book length study of Mahfouz's novels, "not only in Egypt but the entire world. He worked on writing, innovatively and for the sake of renewing Arabic literature, for more than half a century, and took the Arabic novel through historical romance, social(ist) realism, modernism and postmodernism in such a way that the Arabic novel covered [within half a century] the three century journey of the novel in the West" (Mūsā 2001, 11). Mahfouz's literary career is, however, more varied. In his more than seventy-year writing career, in addition to the thirty-four novels, he wrote more than three hundred and fifty short stories and five plays. In all these realism is a

part of his experiments with forms and modes of representation. His essays on religion, philosophy, culture, literature, nationalism and life are equally voluminous. He was also the first Arab author to have written for cinema. His relationship with cinema was both broad and deep.

A great number of his novels and short stories have been adapted into films, that he wrote dozens of film scripts, and that he worked for the Ministry of Culture as Director of Censorship in the Bureau of Arts in the 1950s, Director of the Foundation for the Support of the Cinema in the 1960s, and finally as consultant until he retired in 1971, whereby he clearly had access to all the Egyptian, not to mention foreign films that needed permission to be released and shown to the public (al-Naḥḥās 1990, especially 243-4). The original scripts he wrote and the novels he adapted for Egyptian cinema belong to the same body of his storytelling as his novels, short stories and plays. They shed light on his realism. His novels identified as realist (Maḥfūẓ 1945, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1956, 1957), which came after his historical romances (Maḥfūẓ 1939, 1943, 1944) and before his notorious religious-political allegory (Maḥfūẓ 1959), inaugurated his political and existential allegories (Muṣṭafā 1993, 13-14 and Badrī 2000, 20) and took his writing into Modernism and Postmodernism. These parallel and overlap with the film scripts in theme and style. He wrote for the major directors of the golden age of Egyptian cinema in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, such as ʿĀtif Sālim, Niyāzī Muṣẓafā, Tawfīq Ṣāliḥ, Ḥasan Ramzī and Yūsuf Shāhīn, but his collaboration with Salah Abu Seif was the most meaningful and significant.

The ten film scripts he wrote for Abu Seif between 1947 and 1959 run the gamut of the characters that inhabit his fictional world, the economic and social problems they face, the uphill battles they have to fight to overcome them, and the tragic fates that await them. They range from contemporary tales of love and revenge, *The Avenger* (1947), to historical romances based on, for example, the love story between the iconoclastic black pre-Islamic poet and his cousin in *The adventures of Antara and Abla* (1948), true crime in *Rayyā wa Sakīna* (named after the Egyptian Bonnie and Clyde, 1953) and in *The Beast* (1954), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) tailored to the Egyptian context, *A Woman's Youth* (1955), gangster action adventure, *Gangs of Cairo* (1957), and adaptations from Zola's 1868 *Thérèse Raquin*, *The Unjust Will Have His Day of Reckoning* (1951) and his contemporary Iḥsān ʿAbd al-Quddūs's

(1919-1990) highly political, melodramatic and erotic romances, *Dead End* (1958) and *I am Free* (1959). Social-political issues, particularly those related to the rise, or failure thereof, of the new middle class, are presented in a blend of realism and melodrama, as I have observed with regards to Abu Seif's interpretation of *The Beginning and the End*. Even though Mahfouz did not take part in writing the film script of his novel for Abu Seif, the films for which he wrote the scripts share in its style and tone.

Al-Naḥḥās gives a sense of the cinematic world Mahfouz creates with Abu Seif, as well as other directors, in his summary of the "stamp" (*tābiʿ*) of Mahfouz around four key features: place, characters, politics and style or mode of representation (25-6). The events usually unfold in an old quarter of Cairo, the alley in particular. In fact, old Cairo is the "hero" of his stories, and he gives his films, as he did his novels, place names for titles: *Gangs of Husayniyya* (1954, dir. Niyāzī Mustafā), al-Ḥusayniyya being one of the quarters of old Cairo, where the shrine of Husayn, Prophet Muhammad's grandson, is a site of popular pilgrimage, and *Mahabil Alley*, (1955, dir. Tawfīq Sāliḥ), which is the name of a street just like *Midaq Alley*. The characters are children of these ancient neighborhoods who, hungry for power (wealth) and driven by desire (sex), fall into the criminal underworld and meet a horrific end. The stories of men and women trying to rise above their circumstances in a world changing around them are Mahfouz's means to social criticism. They explore the private motives and external circumstances that lead to the moral and social downfall of the tragic heroes he presents. Capitalism is the unrivaled culprit, according to al-Naḥḥās, for it forces individuals to be either "wolves" or "sheep" with no possible alternatives (26).

Realism, *al-wāqiʿiyya*, is by this logic defined by the stories Mahfouz wants to tell. At the same time it determines the style of his presentation. Scenes and characters must look real, and events move in a way that represents the conduct of "real life" individuals as they navigate the social circumstances stifling them (26). Mahfouz's realism is always tinged with melodrama, but only a touch so, noticeable especially of films based on adaptations from originally melodramatic stories. Rather than *Dead End* and *I am Free*, which are based on the novels of the same titles by ʿAbd al-Quddūs, al-Naḥḥās mentions instead *The Unjust Will Have His Day or Reckoning*, which is based on Zola as I have already noted. Mahfouz places the burden of evil on

Munīr (Laurent), who pants after Zaghlūl's (Camille) wealth and lusts after his wife, Inṣāf (Thérèse), and plots to kill his friend, marry his widow and seize his fortune. He succeeds but only to come face to face with his comeuppance at the end of the film, getting drowned himself just as he had drowned his friend. Realism does not preclude melodrama in European or Mahfouzian realism, it is true, but it is also clear here that European realism does not define Mahfouzian realism. Arab critics, including al-Naḥḥās, have a unique take on Realism that always pays homage to its nineteenth century European precursors, but all too nebulously, only to forge its own theory and practice without necessarily offering a clear definition. It is as if references to European realism, however nonconcrete and inarticulate, are sufficient to serve as the grounds for Arab critics to identify it as one of the points of departure in modern Arabic literature, and to use it to characterize a body of works written in Arabic, including Mahfouz's novels from the 1940s and 1950s. What then is Mahfouzian literary realism?

The Politics of Realism and Reception of Maḥfouz's Novels

At the heart of it are the features al-Naḥḥās identifies in his cinematic world, which can be condensed as follows: social criticism by means of narratives of real life characters struggling through events that can actually take place in Cairo at the time of writing. If this smacks of social(ist) realism, it is because this Mahfouzian realism acquires clarity only, as will be seen, in Marxist reception of his works, which flowered momentarily, and most likely only in Arabic. The marked difference between the Marxist critics, especially those contemporaneous with Mahfouz, such as Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim (1922-2009), ʿAbd al-Muḥsin Tāhā Badr (1932-1990) and Ghālī Shukrī (1935-1998), and critics from a younger generation is instructive, so is that between the reception of Mahfouz in Arabic and English. Beyond Marxism, however, Arab critics are today more interested in his experiments with form and in how he rewrites Arabic "classics." Structuralist, poststructuralist and semiotic readings even of his realist novels are in fact more common among his post-1967 generation of critics, with intertextuality preoccupying a large share of their attention. Studies of Mahfouz in English, perhaps because they are products of area studies, are literary biographies and surveys of themes, styles and attitudes towards religion. Realism does not feature prominently. An interesting example is the difference

between Wikipedia entries in the two languages. Realism makes no appearance in the entry in English, whereas the entry in Arabic describes his literary career like this (in my translation):

> In 1945, Najīb Maḥfūz began with *Cairo Modern*, *Khan al-Khalili* and *Midaq Alley* his realist narrative project and would keep to it most of his literary career. He experimented with psychological realism in *Mirage* [Freudian Oedipus Complex drives the plot in this novel], and returned to social/ist realism in *The Beginning and the End* and *Cairo Trilogy*. Afterwards, he turned to symbolism (https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/نجيب محفوظ).

Socialist realism, as Samah Selim astutely observes in her discussion of "politics of reality," describes more the critical reception of the Arabic novel written by Mahfouz's generation and less the Arab novelists, their ideology or style (Selim 2004, 139-145). It does, however, coalesce briefly around an impulse shared by writers and critics that interrogated the alliance between power and ideology especially in the Nasserite era between 1952 and 1970 (141). Mahfouz's realism does not coincide with this timeframe, for it covers only the period between the two world wars and even as it anticipates Nasser's 1952 Revolution it stops short of engaging with its aftermath. His critique of the Nasserite regime takes the form of, as I already mentioned, political and existential allegories. However, Marxist readings place his realist novels squarely in the critique of the type of political authority exercised by Nasser. Al-ʿĀlim sees Mahfouz's realist novels as anticipatory critique of the political regime that would emerge and take shape under Nasser:

> The question of power (*sulṭa*), political, symbolic or ethical, may not show itself directly in these novels, but we can already sense the question of power in its various manifestations: patriarchal, social, cultural, moral, and aesthetical as well as political. These novels, in their totality, showcase the conflicts among and struggles against these diverse manifestations of power, which affect the individual, group, class, and collective in their psychology, behavior, values, and ideology (al-ʿĀlim 1997, 329-30).

Mahfouz's realist novels, culminating in *Cairo Trilogy*, anticipate the politics of *Children of the Alley* (1959), which continues his examination of power politics but in the new context of the Nasserite regime. *Children of the Alley* allows al-ʿĀlim to reconstruct the development of what he calls Mahfouz's political project from the

perspective of hindsight. Noting that the period Mahfouz's realist novels prior to *Children of the Alley* cover coincided with the two key revolutions in Egypt in the twentieth century, 1919 and 1952, al-ʿĀlim is able to confidently suggest that Mahfouz's silence between the completion of *Cairo Trilogy* and the publication of *Children of the Alley* as a period of gestation during which Mahfouz experienced a "creative crisis" (*azma kitābiyya ibdāʿiyya*) as he watched the contradiction between "progressive political, nationalist and social slogans and achievements and the undemocratic political and social practices" unfold before his eyes (334).

Al-ʿĀlim places the burden on criticism not only to unravel the politics of a work of literature but also to usher in progress and innovation. Realism is both discourse (*al-khiṭāb al-wāqiʿī*) and critical thought (*al-fikr al-naqdī al-wāqiʿī, or al-naqd al-wāqiʿī*). The former describes poetry, the novel, short story, theatre, visual arts and cinema, while the latter the critical thought that called for, advocated and supported innovation in the arts. Realist critical thought is not the same as realist discourse, for it also introduced into Arabic writings modernism in the arts and structuralism in criticism (324). However, for Al-ʿĀlim both realist creative and critical works are by definition Marxist and must be distinguished from later deconstructionism and postmodernism as well as earlier existentialism and structuralism (325). Mahfouz may have on the surface diverged from realism after *Cairo Trilogy*, but the practice of realist criticism is always able to bring him back into the Marxist fold.

Mahfouz did not practice literary criticism and never interfered in how his critics interpreted his, as he told Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ, "authors do not interfere in what critics say" (Ḥāfiẓ 1977, 131). However, many of the sporadic statements Mahfouz made during interviews do corroborate the directions his Marxist critics took. In his conversations with Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, he did acknowledge that he chose realism as his mode of writing so as to represent his lived experience (Ghīṭānī 1980, 42) and that *Cairo Trilogy* was a family saga (63). In another interview, he stated, "I write for the middle class, or I am a middle class writer (*Anā kātib al-ṭabaqa al-mutawassiṭa*)" (Ḥāfiẓ 1977, 32). In yet a third, he is recorded as saying that even though he was not a Marxist he would have chosen Marxism over Capitalism in a heartbeat (Ḥāfiẓ, 16). More importantly, he wrote through his novels "the history of Egypt under Ottoman rule and British colonialism" and this was applicable to his historical romances as well as his later novels starting with *The Beginning and the End* (Ghīṭānī, 44).

Literature (*adab*), including the novel, even if it was unreliable as testimonial (*wathīqa tasjīliyya*), could not be too far afield from history. Literature was a record of the writer (i.e., his experience) not necessarily of history (*al-tārīkh*) or reality (*al-wāqiʿ*), and as such, it was rebellion against reality not representation of it (*al-adab thawra ʿalā l-wāqiʿ lā taṣwīr lahu*). *Palace Walk*, the second part of *Cairo Trilogy*, may be considered this type of record or testimonial. In a similar sense, *Cairo Trilogy* was not his attempt to write the history of Egypt, "*li-uʾarrikh li Miṣr*" (Ḥāfiẓ, 18), but rather to chart a revolutionary course, according to al-ʿĀlim, for middle class Egyptians driven by "desires for change and upward mobility (*al-taṭallu ʿilā l-taghyīr wa l-tafawwuq*)" in "a socially unstable world (*ʿālam al-qalqala l-ijtimāʿiyya*)" (al-ʿĀlim 1994, 37).

> The family tree of Mahfouz, the novelist, if one were to devise one, would show both European and Arab lineage, and at the same time, foretell the divergent paths on which the Arabic novel would embark, loosening up the form and its attendant modes of representation, including Realism, to further diversification.

Being a Marxian nationalist, if we may thus describe him, Mahfouz is without a doubt committed to representing the lived experiences of Egyptian nationals in his works. How he writes about them is an entirely different matter. The interpretations of Mahfouz, even among the Marxist critics, are variously diverse, thanks to his often ambiguous statements (Badr 1978, 7), but they do stay close to the intersection among politics, religion and sex in his writings, these three being the main axes of his concern and narrative (Ḥāfiẓ, 19). Marxist interpretations of *Midaq Alley* and *Beginning and End* are good examples. These are, however, always tempered by a parallel and equally powerful impulse to authenticate Mahfouz's stories as Egyptian works of art as opposed to merely European imports.

Badr pointed out as early as 1978 that readings of Mahfouz had been going in a sleuth of contradictory directions, "from the extreme left to the extreme right" (Badr 1978, 7). He felt compelled to bring discipline into assessment of Mahfouz's achievements in and contributions to the development of the Arabic novel. Continuing on from his previous study which excluded Mahfouz (Badr 1963), he now dedicated his full attention to Mahfouz, considering him the unrivalled Arab novelist before WWII, and approaches Mahfouz through the angle of the relationship between the writer's vision of the world and his style (Badr 1978, 5). Anchoring his analysis in

the context of the rise of nationalism and of the middle class in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Badr sees Mahfouz's realism as a panoramic examination of the new Cairene petite bourgeoisie (*al-burjuwāziyya l-ṣaghīra*), whether they hail from the countryside or the ancient quarters of the city, and of their tragic destiny as they get caught up between the sources of their oppression—fate (*al-qadar*), human nature (*al-ṭabīʿa al-bashariyya*), society (*al-mujtamaʿ*) or ruling authority (*al-sulṭa al-ḥākima*)—and their anxiety (*al-qaliqa*), ambition (*al-ṭamūḥa*), sense of loss (*al-ḍāʿiʾa*), oppression (*al-maqhūra*) and disappointment (*al-muḥabaṭṭa*) (330). *Cairo Modern* exposes the moral and political corruption of the upper class, and *Mirage* details its break up and downfall, while *Khan Khalili* and *Midaq Alley* explore the ways in which the middle class is caught between the aristocratic and working classes in the old Cairo, and *The Beginning and the End* interrogates the fragile financial conditions of the middle class and its susceptibility to moral corruption.

Midaq Alley, centred round a specific old quarter in Cairo at a particular time in Egyptian history, opens out temporarily to its ancient history and to its surrounding expansive new Cairo. The attitudes of the various members of the middle class towards the material allure of New Cairo would determine their respective destinies: those who lust after the decadence of new Cairo, like Ḥamīda, would be expelled and condemned to end up in calamity; those who live in modesty and contentment or manage to curb their greed, like Riḍwān al-Ḥusaynī, would make it through the vicissitudes of change, and those who hang on to their principles would survive intact but continue to live in poverty. To the critics the novel is not allegorical, and Ḥamīda is not a symbol of Egypt as Rajāʾ al-Naqqāsh claims (al-Naqqāsh 1972, 70; and Badr 1978, 414). Neither it is about war and peace, or the alley's confrontation with WWII (al-ʿĀlim 1971, 41; Badr 1978, 413). Rather, the old quarter is a tiny enclave in the vast mansion of history, here, of changes brought on by the onslaught of time and its ravages. Mahfouz sees change as a necessary evil, Badr explains, and it is ultimately for worse not better in Mahfouz's vision.

The Beginning and the End puts Egyptian social classes under the microscope and brings three together in one family then diverges outward into society at large, knocking down the borders Mahfouz had imagined for each class in his earlier iterations of realism. The eldest, Ḥasan descends into the poverty riven old Cairo and its underworld only to get killed at the end, the middle brother, Ḥusayn remains steadfast in middle class, while the youngest, Ḥasanayn, claws his way up the

aristocracy ladder but fails miserably and throws himself into the river. The novel is an expression of the metaphysical dimensions of Mahfouz's pessimism. Man is destined for the tragic fall (*al-maʾsāt*) from the outset (Badr 1978, 446), weighed further down by his desire for pleasure, wealth and social standing (Badr 1978, 446-7). The small middle class family without a patriarch and his income—the novel begins with the death of the father—is condemned to lose their way and end up in poverty and death. Nafīsa, the ugly sister who can never hope to be married let alone into a respectable family, spirals down the world of prostitution as she struggles to help finance her youngest brother's social climbing and to manage her sexual desire. All comes to a head when she is found out. The vain Ḥasanayn brings her to the Imbaba Bridge and shows her the way into the Nile only to join her moments later. These two characters must be punished for their fatal personality flaw: their desire for the material world and the pleasures it offers.

The idea of Mahfouzian tragedy in Badr comes from Ghālī Shukrī, whose extended study of Mahfouz's realist novels before *Cairo Trilogy* (Shukrī 1969) Badr cites. Shukrī has also written about Mahfouz elsewhere, he locates the tragedy in Mahfouzian realism in that "the social organization in its entirety is on the verge of collapse and individual rebellion could not do a thing about it, therefore a total revolution was called for" (Shukrī 1971a, 21-2). *Al-Muntamī*, a word Shukrī coined to denote both Mahfouz's belonging (*intimāʾ*) and commitment (*iltzām*) to modern Egypt and her new middle class, reads all Mahfouz's realist novels as one epic of the fall and collapse (*malḥamat al-suqūṭ wa l-inhiyār*), here, necessarily of the petite bourgeoisie. This epic is at the same time a tragedy (*maʾsāt*), but of the Egyptian not Greek type, for the crux of the matter is time, not fate as in Greek tragedy, or sin in Christianity. The Egyptian tragedy finds its expression in the Isis-Osiris myth (Shukrī 1969, 85, 88). Struggle for freedom is at the heart of all tragedies. Mahfouz transforms in his realist novels the ancient Egyptian tragedy from its theatrical origins, rooted in a belief in the certainty of fate, into an epic that is underpinned by the idea of man's freedom of choice (88-9).

The Mahfouzian tragi-epic begins with the feeling of loss experienced by a generation of Egyptians intellectuals between the two world wars in *Cairo Modern*, triggered by the onslaught of a financial crisis in the capitalist world, the hijacking of people's democratic liberties, the rise of Fascism, and the proliferation of unemployment and poverty (101-2). This story continues in *Khan al-Khalili*, where

the sense of loss escalates into moral bankruptcy to a degree that a husband would sell his wife's body for a profit (125). Life is hell and death is man's only deliverance. *Midaq Alley* is a symbolic hell on earth. The brother and sister in the novel, Ḥusayn and Ḥamīda, are the alley's adventure in the wider world (145), but their fast lane (my translation of *al-ṭarīq al-qaṣīr*, which literally means "short road") to a better world is paved with degradation. Dignity is not possible for the Egyptian people as represented by the middle class except in death. Death begins and ends *The Beginning and the End* (161). And, moral depravity proves to be the last nail in their coffin in *Mirage*. There is, it seems, no way out.

Shukrī does read *Midaq Alley* as allegory but of the human condition not the nation. He hones in on the question of "honor" (*karāma*, which also means dignity and pride) as the site in the novel where ethics are interrogated. Mahfouz spoke to Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ about his concern with morality in *Midaq Alley* (Ḥāfiẓ 1977, 163) and how poverty corrupts when the subject of Ḥamīda came up in their interview. There is no way out for the petite bourgeoisie when their honor, dignity and pride are violated (Shukrī 1969, 170). The problem of the petite bourgeoisie, however, is that they are not engagé leftists.

> Death as a social tragedy [in fact] defines time and fate in light of economical and political reality in society. Metaphysical echoes go into hiding when social problems persist […]. Fate becomes a rigid system with independent laws. The human will finds no support unless the human being learns to control the laws governing society. […] Struggle with these laws for the sake of changing the system from its tragic form to a more progressive structure is the path to freedom. Only an engagé leftist, who is not an integral member of the petite bourgeoisie, will discover the way. As for those who comprise the petite bourgeoisie, their tragedy is rooted in their interiority, their ideological and psychological make up which suffers from ignorance of the link between will and social laws, and considers sex and bread the essence of freedom. […] Ḥamīda […] is a model of misguided rebellion, and Ḥasanayn that of a misguided revolutionary. […] Perhaps tragedy for the petite bourgeoisie […] is that they want to escape their tragic fate, unlike the engagé leftist who ploughs right through its heart (166-7).

Shukrī's injection of ancient Egyptian metaphysics into Mahfouz's worldview is his way of locating Mahfouzian realism in the Egyptian local. It does add a philosophical

depth to the contemporary Marxist readings of Mahfouz performed by al-ʿĀlim and Badr, but nevertheless adopts similar interpretive strategies. Mahfouz's reception of European realism, in his critics' reception of his own realism, is a site of intercultural encounter and conceptual blending through which he creates a unique vision for representing the world he lived and experienced.

Sīzā Qāsim concurs in her study of *Cairo Trilogy* (Qāsim 1984), and insists that even though realism in *Cairo Trilogy* is inspired by the European novel, particularly the realism of Balzac and Flaubert, naturalism of Zola, and [the style] of Edwardian Bennett and Galsworthy (17), but it is also rooted in the Arabic storytelling tradition and must be understood within its historical context as well as that of the development of the Arabic language (18-9). The construction of time and space in *Cairo Trilogy*, Qasim shows, is effected in the intertextuality between the English and French realist novel and the Qur'anic stories, 9th century al-Jāḥiẓ's *Book of Misers,* 10th century al-Hamadhānī's picaresque *Maqāmāt*, and classical Arabic poetics. Pharaonic tragedy, classical Arabic narration and poetics, and the modern history of the Egyptian middle class are all marks of Mahfouz's authenticity and give his realism its unique style derived from local colors. The narrative trajectory of Pharaonic tragedy and the socio-economic conditions of the Egyptian middle class may seem unproblematic in realism, but classical Arabic narration and poetics do generate some conundrum. These are part and parcel of the 'high' classical Arabic language that no living Arab speaks in practice. Qāsim avoids this thorny issue of language by focusing on the construction of time and space in *Cairo Trilogy*. However, the impeccable classicism of Mahfouz's Arabic language in his novels can serve as a prism to see Mahfouzian realism as style and its chameleon-like personality, so to speak. More importantly, it points to the role of performance in bringing Realism to life.

Language and Realism in Arabic

Mahfouz never waivered from writing in the high classical *fuṣḥā* register, and always insisted that it did not present a problem for realism in his novels (Ḥāfiẓ 1977, 25). In fact, in the contest between the colloquial and the standard *fuṣḥā*, the latter would win hands down (Ḥāfiẓ 1977, 38). Even if the dialogues in the novels would have come closer to real life if set in the colloquial, the narration would have needed

the wealth of vocabulary of the classical *fuṣḥā* and the depth of its poetics. Mahfouz does not shy away from the colloquial, for the dialogues in the film scripts he wrote are cast in this register. The colloquial he uses in his film scripts not only brings into sharp relief the difference Mahfouz sees between novel and film, but also gestures towards realism's multiplicity and its multifarious styles. The visualizing capacity and performativity latent in language based in word do rely on the active imagination of the reader in order to bring a literary work to quotidian life. In this sense, film has an advantage over literature for it can transform a literary text (as well as a film script) into a three dimensional world in which word, image and sound all contribute to, let us say, fleshing out description and characterization, and to grounding them in lived time and space.

The coffeehouse, the microcosm of Cairo in *Midaq Alley*, and the hub of community and site of an imagined public sphere in all his novels, realist or allegorical, offers a convenient locus for assessing the role of language, and in this case Arabic, in unleashing the latent realism of a literary work, especially if seen against the background of cinematic renditions. The descriptions of place, things and people in two realist novels, *Midaq Alley* and *The Beginning and the End*, and in two allegories, *Children of the Alley* (1959) and *Arabian Nights and Days* (1979), is similarly simultaneously concrete and evocative. They may be evocative of "real" places, things and people, but they are in fact rather abstract. They need the readers to conjure them up in the mind based on their own material conditions of living to take "real" shape. The cinematic renditions, which are arguably manifestations of this conjuring, demonstrate this aptly. Other than the proper names and language, there is no indication of the time and space of the novel or their geographical and cultural specificity. Translation obscures these even more. The images and sounds Arabic coffeehouse evokes are not the same as those, for example, English does. Image and sound together bring the word closer to the real things and people we have seen, heard, touched, interacted with and known. Each conjuring is necessarily unique, shaped as it were by the person performing the act. It does not matter very much whether dialogues are written in the spoken colloquial register or not, for writing is evocative not prescriptive. More importantly, it can easily be transformed into the colloquial in readerly conjuring such as cinematic renditions. There is no difference between allegorical and realist works in this regard.

The coffeehouse plays a pivotal communal role in Mahfouz's political allegory, *Children of the Alley* and *Arabian Nights and Days*. While the former is woven from Islamic tales of the prophets and Biblical Genesis and Book of Kings and secularized for the purpose of critiquing "traditional" form of patriarchal authority. It has been banned in Egypt and most Arab countries until recently and has not been made into a film. The latter is a re-write of *The Thousand and One Nights* that imagines a national, democratic community rising out of the ashes of kingship. These two novels have not been adapted for film or television. *The Harafish* (1977), the re-write of *Children of the Alley* in the form of a Cairene working class family saga, however, graced both the Egyptian big and small screens. Even though it is only mentioned in the novel in passing, the coffeehouse has a central role in the film. It is based on contemporary coffeehouses in Cairo, particularly those Mahfouz himself frequented and all those who knew him and met with him there could see in their mind's eye. El Fishawi Café in Khan al-Khalili is perhaps the best known. It has most likely inspired the Egyptian cinematic renditions of the coffeehouses Mahfouz describes in his novels. The same may be said of his characters. They dress, behave and speak according to their time and class especially in realist films, including *The Beginning and the End* and *Midaq Alley*. By the same token, they easily acquire a Mexican look and sound in Mexican film.

Mahfouz's Realist Aesthetics

The diverse ways in which word finds three-dimensional realization in film, whereby things, people, and time and place acquire image and sound and come to life, gives a nod to Mahfouz's nonchalance towards the debate surrounding the use of the high classical *fuṣḥā* in his writing. His language does not undermine the realism of his writing; on the contrary, it unleashes the realist imaginary of his readers, just as his characterization and staging of events. Here the difference between his allegorical and realist novels is significant. Mahfouz inhabits his allegory with characters he rehabilitates from biblical and *Arabian Nights* archetypes, giving them contemporary relevance not by means of characterization but through staging the events which either transform them into modern subjects or lead them to their comeuppance. Gabalawi, metaphor for God in *Children of the Alley*, and Shahrayar, symbol of patriarch in *Arabian Nights and Days*, recede into the background in Mahfouz's

secularized Eden and kingdom of God on earth, so that men and occasionally women have a chance to put themselves forward, decide their course of action and carve a space for themselves in the nation. Modern cultural institutions such as the coffeehouse bring the story down to earth and place it squarely in the present. The characters in realist novels acquire interiority, distinct patterns of speech and behavior, as well as social classes and roles. They spiral down narrated events driven not only by their desire for power and wealth but also by actual historical and political happenings and real financial and social problems. Against the backdrop of WWII and modernization of Cairo between and 19th and 20th centuries, respectively in *The Beginning and the End* and *Midaq Alley*, Ḥasanayn and Nafīsa in New Cairo and ʿAbbās and Ḥamīda in old Cairo take advantage of the opportunities colonial capitalism, parliamentarian government and modern education opened up for lower class Egyptians and attempt to climb up the social ladder.

Even these realist characters gain "flesh and blood" in embodiment and performance. For example, when Farīd Shawqī, the emblematic wild animal or beast of the Egyptian screen (*waḥsh al-shāsha*), plays Ḥasan in *The Beginning and the End*, whose "life was as violent and as savage as the murderous drug he was taking. Jobless though he was, he remained a leader among his company, because he could strike awe and fear in their hearts," the character produces additional meaning once through acting and another the iconic image of the actor. Shawqī had previously played another gangster and third class personality for which he was known, the lead in a film written by Mahfouz, *Gangs of Husayniyya Quarter* (1954). The way the "iconic image" of an actor, a Barthesian "myth," plays a part in characterization, conveying a milieu, and how viewers respond to a film and make meaning draw attention to the structures of thinking, feeling and behaving underpinning the characters Mahfouz writes. These, which he derives in part from classical Arabic poetics, can inform how his readers comprehend his characters and, of course, his novels.

The second part of *Cairo Trilogy*, *Palace of Desire*, covers roughly the period between 1924, beginning five years after the 1919 revolution, when Saʿd Zaghlūl formed the Wafd Government, and ending in 1927, the year in which he died. Nothing drastic happens at the political front as Zaghlūl was still negotiating with the Europeans. Egypt is powerless, existing in the margin of international arena of war and power games, negotiating for self-mastery, while feeling the tidal waves of

transformations of all kinds occurring in the global arena wash over her. Mahfouz deploys Arabic poetics of love and its reception by his contemporary critics to convey this sense of powerlessness. He portrays the three male protagonists as less than politically minded but more obsessed with their love life, casting them in the mold of archetypal poet lovers: the patriarch, al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Jawād, and his first-born, Yāsīn, as play boys; and his youngest, Kamāl, as love mad Majnūn Laylā. He evokes the historical period of early Islam, when this tradition of love poetry and stories is said to have flourished, relying on contemporary reading of this tradition as an expression of political powerlessness of an Arab(ian) elite, when the seat of power moved from Mecca and Medina to Damascus in the 7th century, to capture the personality of his protagonists, their thoughts, feelings and behavior, and the mood of an era (Ouyang 2012, 254-62).

The fabric of Mahfouzian realism is complexly diverse. No two texts seem to be cut from the same cloth. It is, however, possible to see with some clarity a trajectory for his reception of European realism in both film and the novel, even as he experimented with the two forms at the same time. Marxist readings of his realist novels privilege his left-leaning politics and show him to be an engagé intellectual concerned with the social problems of an emerging Egyptian middle class. They also locate his realism in the politics of local time and place and even ancient Pharaonic mythology. A closer examination of his language and poetics showcases his play with the evocative power of the Arabic language, and more particularly, classical Arabic poetics, to trigger and guide the visualization and performance of the characters he portrays and the world he describes. The politics and poetics of his realism together partake in history making of a new order with the petite bourgeoisie playing the leading role and poverty their foil. This history of the Cairene petite bourgeoisie is a microcosm, just like Cairo, of Arabic-Islamic history and the world it draws but now secularized and written from the perspective of present heroes. Realism, seen through Mahfouz's experiments, is a site of intercultural confluence and creativity, where European realism is distilled and repackaged then integrated into Egyptian Arabic cultural expressions, centrifugally, only for it to diversify, centripetally, and work its way into myriad expressions, in literary works, visual arts and literary criticism, and become and integral part of the fabric of Arabic writing beyond the short lived heydays of European realism in Arabic culture and literature.

Realism, as seen in the works of "the father of the Arabic novel" in the 1940s and 1950s and their reception, whether in Egyptian cinema in the 1950s and 1960s or Marxist Arabic literary criticism in the 1960s and 1970s, flowered briefly in Arabic cultural, literary and critical expressions. It served as the site of creative adventures. Mahfouz is arguably most representative of experimentation with realism in Arabic storytelling and cinema. His works capture almost fully the fleeting realist moment in Egypt at a crucial time of the transformation of Egyptian history and society from Islamic (Ottoman) caliphate to Arab (Egyptian) nation. Marxist literary criticism, embodied by Badr, al-ʿĀlim and Shukrī, also had its day in court. Realist works are, however, only a part of their experimentation with form and ideas. The scope of their oeuvres is expansively broad and goes beyond realism. In fact, as their later works show, realism could not serve their purposes. Elias Khoury (b. 1948), a prolific contemporary Lebanese novelist, states that "there is no point in talking of 'realism' in art" because "no matter how hard it tries, [art] will never get to the bottom of all aspects of reality." "[T]he incompleteness of truth," as he puts it, is a fact of life, and no "exhausting research" could have "brought [anyone] to the complete truth" (Khoury 214, 102). Works of art, if Mafhouz's novels and films may be considered such, by definition and necessarily chip at the truth slowly but surely, stone by stone, by whatever means possible, all the while inhering and pushing against the ideological and stylistic limitations circumscribed by the very means itself. Realism, for all its potential, as understood by Mahfouz, could not provide him with sufficient space and tools to explore tyranny, which he sees as born in the triad of religion, tradition and political authority, or faith and spirituality, or the weight of the past on the present, or the vicissitudes of history including colonialism and postcolonial nationalism. Even in its heydays, Realism, especially in its European garb, was always only ever a tableau in the canvas of Arabic storytelling.

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