Literary Conscience

Najib Mahfuz:
The Novelist-Philosopher of Cairo
by Menahem Milson
St. Martin's Press. 336 pp. $49.95

Reviewed by
Daniel Pipes

THE EGYPTIAN novelist Naguib Mahfouz (as his name is more commonly spelled), winner of the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature, is one of those authors—like Norman Mailer or Salman Rushdie—whose lives and political views sometimes overshadow their fiction. Although he commands a decidedly smaller stage than either Mailer or Rushdie—that is, the Arabic-speaking as opposed to the English-speaking world—he dominates it far more thoroughly. His comments are sought on a huge range of subjects, his life is the stuff of gossip sheets, his influence is felt from think tanks to movie studios, and politicians dare not ignore his views. Indeed, as Menahem Milson, a professor of Arabic literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, writes in this lucid and insightful review of Mahfouz's career, he is both "Egypt's most popular writer" and "the literary conscience of his country"—not a common pairing.

The good news is that this colossus of the Arab cultural world, who is now in his late eighties, holds highly attractive views. On key issues facing Egyptians, he has consistently advocated a moderate and sensible outlook. The bad news, for all of us, is that such an outlook is still capable of stirring the most intense controversy within Egypt and the Arab world generally, as was attested by the uproar surrounding the publication of Mahfouz's frank memoirs last June.

Not that the views expressed in those memoirs were anything new. Thus, from the start Mahfouz had loathed Gamal Abdel Nasser, the enormously popular ruler of Egypt from 1952 to 1970, for his attempt to remake the country through revolution, for his subservience to Moscow, and for the police state he imposed on the Egyptian people. Perhaps what most perturbed Mahfouz was Nasser's disregard for Egyptian national interests, symbolized by his erasing of Egypt's very name in favor of an imaginary "United Arab Republic." Indeed, Mahfouz is a stalwart patriot, one who in his work expresses his "love affair with Egypt" (in the phrase of an Egyptian critic) by portraying the country allegorically as a beloved woman fallen into the hands of often rapacious males. Rulers like Nasser, who take liberties with Mahfouz's beloved, are exposed to scathing contempt.

Mahfouz's views have been equally outspoken when it comes to the conflict with Israel. In 1952, when Nasser's regime came to power, Mahfouz had hopes that it would deal first with Egypt's "genuine and historic enemies—poverty, ignorance, disease, and dictatorship," before taking on foreign adversaries. Instead, it made anti-Zionism the center of its program. To this day Mahfouz despairs of this mistake. He has long advocated closing down the conflict with Israel, less out of affection for the Jewish state than from a recognition of the damage the confrontation has done to Egypt in lives lost, economic progress sacrificed, and liberties curtailed. In his view, no foreign issue justifies such a cost.

Finally, although a Muslim himself, Mahfouz deeply mistrusts fundamentalist Muslims, and has been unafraid to put his feelings in print, if often through the characteristic means of allegory. As long ago as 1959 he wrote a tale, *Children of Gebelawi*, that succeeded in antagonizing the fundamentalists so thoroughly that they never forgot it. Shortly after the Ayatollah Khomeini issued his 1989 edict against Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses*, one Egyptian fundamentalist declared:

> If only we had behaved in the proper Islamic manner with Naguib Mahfouz, we would not have been assailed by the appearance of Salman Rushdie. Had we killed Naguib Mahfouz, Salman Rushdie would not have appeared.

Not to be outdone, Omar Abdel-Rahman, the Egyptian sheik now serving many life sentences in Leavenworth, Kansas, for his role in inspiring terrorism in New York City, condemned Mahfouz to death. And in October 1994, a young fundamentalist Muslim stabbed the then-eighty-three-year-old Mahfouz in the neck, an act of vengeance for his anti-fundamentalist attitudes.

FOR SOMEONE who has stirred so much venom, Mahfouz's biography is rather bland. Born in 1911, he was the youngest of seven children in a middle-class family in Cairo. His mother, who had a difficult childbirth, gratefully named him after the doctor (a Christian, as it happens) who delivered him. Mahfouz first appeared in print when still a teenager, writing on religion and socialism in a prominent magazine. An ardent student of phi-

DANIEL PIPES *is editor of the* Middle East Quarterly *and the author of* The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, the Ayatollah, and the West *(Birch Lane Press), among other books.*

losophy, he applied for a government scholarship in 1934 to study in Europe but was passed over, presumably because, thanks to his name, the committee thought him a Christian.

Mahfouz took a job as a secretary at a university—the first of a long series of administrative positions. In 1936, having decided his true vocation was as a writer, he adopted a discipline somewhat resembling that of the 19th-century British novelist Anthony Trollope, performing ably at his civil-service job by day and writing during his spare time. By this method he produced, again like Trollope, a huge corpus—52 books, plus innumerable articles and screenplays. But for a long time fame eluded him: he passed years of frustration as a novelist while seeking refuge in the writing of film scripts. Only with the publication in the mid-1950's of his "Cairo Trilogy" (*Palace Walk*, *Palace of Desire*, and *The Sugar Bowl*) did Mahfouz finally win the acclaim that has been his ever since.

Throughout his career, Mahfouz has kept to an extremely rigorous schedule; friends used to joke that they could set their watches by his daily regimen. He has also traveled little; as Milson notes, he "has never vacationed, let alone lived, outside of Egypt, except for two short trips he made as a member of official delegations to Yugoslavia and to Yemen."

But beneath the clockwork surface there are a few surprises, of both a personal and a professional nature. When he married in 1954, Mahfouz kept the liaison secret for years from virtually everyone, including his own mother. Perhaps more strikingly, this paragon of free expression filled, for over two decades, the position of chief censor in Egypt's Ministry of Culture—and for half that time he worked for the despised Nasser. Throughout his career, indeed, Mahfouz has taken particular care not to allow his opinions to cross over the line into open confrontation. He has worried about rousing the authorities to the point of taking action against him, perhaps even banishing him, Solzhenitsyn-style, from his homeland, and has kept a cautious eye on the forces swirling through Egypt's public life.

Hence his reliance on the arts of literary subterfuge. In *The Novelist-Philosopher of Cairo*, Milson breaks new ground by demonstrating just how wily Mahfouz is as a writer who uses allegory, myth, symbolism, and other devices to convey his true thoughts. A full third of this study is devoted to deciphering the significance of the personal names Mahfouz assigns to characters—a little bit in the manner of Dickens, but less playfully and more fearfully. The point is, as Milson rightly observes, that in Mahfouz, "words always have more than one level of meaning."

THAT MAHFOUZ exerts a benign and moderating influence on the turbulent politics of the Arabic-speaking countries is something for which one must be grateful. But is he a great artist? True, the sages of Stockholm bestowed the world's most famous prize on him, but one suspects that in the end, the absence of any Arabic literary laureates weighed most heavily on them, and that Mahfouz was selected less as the leading belletrist in a worldwide competition than as the confirmed giant among Arab writers.

I once spent an academic year in Cairo, enrolled in a program to polish my Arabic. It amounted to a crash course in modern Egyptian literature. Of the many novels I read, most left me deeply unimpressed. The plots seemed contrived, the characters thin, the language stilted. Had they been written in English, most of them, I concluded, would probably never have been published. Nor is this entirely surprising: the glory of Arabic literature remains poetry, not prose fiction. Mahfouz's own statement that "the novel is the poetry of the modern world" merely underscores how far most Arab authors have to go to master the form.

By this unexacting standard, at any rate, Mahfouz does indeed shine, even if by international standards he must be considered rather middling. Two of his works are truly compelling: *Palace Walk* (1956),* the first volume of the "Cairo Trilogy," offers a panoramic and lovingly observed account of three generations in a prosperous family living in pre-World War I Cairo. Particularly unforgettable is its portrait of a dictatorial husband and father who insists that his family live a thoroughly Islamic life while going off nearly every evening to pursue his own sybaritic pleasures. Similarly, *Arabian Nights and Days* (1982),† a set of fantastical stories about the town where the original "Thousand and One Nights" are supposed to have occurred, is a modernized version of an ancient fable that succeeds surprisingly well.

But the two remaining volumes in the "Cairo Trilogy" fall off in quality from the first, and most of Mahfouz's other major works (like *The Beginning and the End*, *The Thief and the Dogs*, *Miramar*) repetitively and somewhat tediously pursue the same well-worn themes. Though he has been compared with Balzac, Mahfouz's vision is far more constricted than that of the great French master, and his stories fall correspondingly short. In addition, Mahfouz's work suffers from being, as Milson puts it, "the outcome of his desire to reform society." However laudable that desire may be, it gives his work a didactic and sometimes stifling quality.

In sum, and with the important exceptions noted, Mahfouz is an author perhaps better read about than read. Whether or not one already knows his work, one cannot do better than to read about him in Milson's fine appreciation.