

of his times.¹³² Thus he turned to writing realistic novels, starting with *al-Qāhira al-Jadida*, which was written during 1938-39 but published in 1945.

"New Cairo" presents a sketch of Egyptian life in the thirties with an emphasis on its poverty and corruption. It is the Cairo of the middle classes which grew up in the shadow of British occupation and reflects the contradictions in the social and economic order of the city and more so within the individual characters.¹³³

The story opens on an optimistic note. Mahjūb, the son of a poor village employee is able to enter the university for further studies. Students with different backgrounds like Mahmūd Radwan of the Brotherhood and 'Alī Ṭāḥa of the Socialist party can discuss their political and social ideas openly indicating a spirit of tolerance.

Just four months before Mahjub's final examination his father falls critically ill. Mahjub ponders over the implications. His well-to-do fellow students in Cairo, in anticipation of their inheritance, would only be too happy to see their fathers die. But for him his father's death spells disaster. "Four months between me and the fruit of fifteen years hard work" he laments. His father's muscular paralysis signals the beginning of a financial crisis in the family. Mahjub despairs, "O canals of the countryside, distribute your favours among your children with justice."¹³⁴

The overriding question, with his parents also having to be fed now, is how to ward off hunger. On graduation, Mahjub's friends all get settled or go abroad for higher studies. Only he remains unemployed. A friend tells him frankly:

"Forget your qualifications. Do you have a recommendation? Are you related to someone in power? Can you marry the daughter of a government official?"¹³⁵

In a show for the blind, Mahjub meets Ikshidī, an old friend who has settled down to a life of ease after deserting the "cause" of his student days. He sees him with the upper crust, who are shown

(132) *Ibid.*

(133) Ghali Shukri, *al-Muntami*, *Dirasa fi Adab Najib Mahfuz*, p. 95.

(134) As quoted by Ghali Shukri, p. 99.

(135) Najib Mahfuz, *al-Qāhira al-Jadida*, p. 67.

speaking French, and thinks that this glamour and glitter make life worth living and that money is the key to everything. He sees his rich cousin Tahiyya and is spurred by a mad desire to overpower her. They make a date at the Pyramids but Mahjub fails to seduce her "Forty centuries regard my tragedy from the top of the pyramids" he concludes sadly as if he is speaking for the whole of Egypt.¹³⁶

Meanwhile the quest for a job continues. Ikhshidi shows Mahjub the way to wealth by dubious means. He can get him a sixth class position if he marries the mistress of his boss to be.

On the way to the wedding, Mahjub philosophises. Marriage is merely a social habit. In some places the custom is to have many wives. In others, many husbands, There is no absolute law for marriages and honour is a chain that shackles the necks of the poor only.

The bride turns out to be none other than Ihsan, the girl 'Alī Ṭaha, Mahjub's friend used to love and who mysteriously had later disappeared from his life. She too had loved him deeply. Her misfortune was brought about by her father, a drunkard, who had gambled her honour away.

The story reaches a dramatic end when the boss' wife, at the instance of al-Ikhshīdī, who is jealous of Mahjub's quick promotions, enters Mahjub's flat to find her husband with his mistress. Simultaneously Mahjub's parents arrive on the scene, and the scandal becomes public. The government servant resigns and Mahjub is taken away to the countryside far from the entanglements of "New Cairo."

Najib Mahfuz delineates his characters skilfully, especially Mahjub whose changing lifestyle is drawn in detail from his college days and life at the student hostel, to the one room tenement he takes up when he is out of funds and he counts every *qirsh* to the posh apartment where he lives after his marriage.¹³⁷

By focusing on social injustice in Egypt, without in any way siding with the hero, the victim of its inequities, and by his concern for detail without deviating, a fault most novels suffered from, Najib Mahfuz evolved the first great novel in the realistic tradition in Egypt. Yet it was not *al-Qāhira al-Jadīda* which brought him recognition but *Midaq Alley* his most popular novel.

(136) Ghali Shukri, *al-Muntami*, *Dirasa fi Adab Najib Mahfuz*, p. 103.

(137) Fatma Moussa, *fi'l Riwaya al-Arabiyya al-Mu'asira*, pp. 49-50.

positive = a. or above, (range, 25, 100, 150)
 range = a. without above, 25, 100, 150
 1. (100, 150, 200)

Set in the core of Cairo, in the quarter of Khan al-Khalili, Midag Alley presents in miniature the lifestyles of the urban lower classes during World War II. A host of characters moves across the huge canvas the Alley provides, with no single one dominating the rest.

[illegible]

“A whispering here, a muttering there. Oh God, my Help, O Provider, O Generous one. A quiet death, O God. All is in His Hands. Good evening all. Come on, it is time for entertainment. Get up, Uncle Kamil, and close the shop. Change the water of the hookah, Sangur! Put the oven out, Ja'da!” 138

Mahfuz goes on to show that the concern of the inhabitants is to get away from the Alley which once flashed like a star in Cairo. Such is the case with Hamida who despises everything the Alley represents.

In tune with the general chain of events in Najib's stories, life ends

sadly for most of the Alley dwellers. Abbas the barber joins the army to make enough money to marry Hamida, but finds on his return that she has become a prostitute. He attacks her in rage and is in turn overpowered and killed by the soldiers she has been entertaining. The son

of the coffee shop owner Husayn Kishia manages to trade and lives in luxury with a fashionable girl but has to return to his father's fold as the war ends. His frustration makes him ever ready to burn the whole place.

“What hopeless wretches we are! Our country is pitiful and so are the people. Why is it that the only time we can find a little happiness is when the world is involved in a bloody war? Surely it's only the devil who has pity on us in this world!” 139

- (138) Najib Mahfuz, *Zuqag al-Midaqq*, pp. 5-6. Trans.: Hamdi Sakut, *The Egyptian Novel and its Main Trends 1913-1952* p. 119.

It is a world in miniature that Najib Mahfuz creates with his characters assuming a life of their own, much like those of Dickens. One such character is the dentist Bushf.

"He was perhaps, the first doctor to receive his doctorate from his patients."¹⁴⁰

He steals gold teeth from the dead to supply them to his rich patients and his accomplice in crime is the cripple maker Zaiṭa who not only lives in filth but loves it.

Mahfuz' skill as a superb artist reached a high peak with "Midaq Alley" but it is the trilogy that is undoubtedly his greatest novel.

✓ In this family saga, covering three generations, Najib Mahfuz describes the life of the middle classes in Cairo and their involvement in politics. Selecting the sensitive period of social and political change that he himself lived through, Mahfuz brings out the spirit of the peoples struggle for freedom. A deeper significance lies in the similarity between the national revolt and the revolt against parental authority.¹⁴¹

In the first novel of the series *Bayn al-Qasrayn*, Mahfuz comments:

"The same time as the nation was occupied in its demand for freedom, Yāsin (the eldest son) was determined to get his."¹⁴²

The three novels, *Bayn al-Qasrayn*, *Qasr al-Shawq* and *al-Sukariyya* are named as many other novels of Mahfuz after the streets in the al-Azhar district. There the family of Ahmad 'Abd al-Jawād, a provision merchant, lives in an atmosphere steeped in tradition. The father Abd al-Jawad is a dogmatic disciplinarian who brooks no nonsense at home. Outside it, and undetected by the family he is a libertine who drinks and sings with his trader friends every evening and visits his mistress who is a singing girl. The women of the house know very little of the outside world and hardly ever go out. ✓

Bayn al-Qasrayn starts with the family obeying the father blindly and ends with the open rebellion of Fahmi, the second son, who joins the revolution against his father's wish. ✓

(140) See Trevor le Gassick, *Midaq Alley*, p. 5.

(141) Yusuf al-Sharuni, *Dirasat fil Adab al-'Arabi al-Mu'asir*, p. 64.

(142) As quoted by Ibrahim Amar, "Najib Mahfuz-Siyasiyan..." *al-Hilal* Sp. No. Feb. '70, p. 28.