

Fountain and Tomb by Naguib Mahfouz

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Time and place figure prominently in the fiction of Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian Nobel Laureate. The novella *Fountain and Tomb* is no exception. While the book addresses such universal themes as the nature of human existence, the struggle between religion and secular knowledge, and the inherent tensions of modernity, Mahfouz, gives these questions a specific tone colored by the rich textures of life in a particular alley, in a particular neighborhood, in a particular city, at a particular point in time. On the one hand, this coming of age novella embraces issues any little boy may confront. On the other hand, the life we read about could only be lived in an alley in the Gamaliya district of Cairo in the 1920s. Perhaps Mahfouz's greatest accomplishment as a writer is this ability to speak to the fundamental questions of the human condition in a way that renders his fiction meaningful to all readers, even as he remains on so many levels a genuinely Egyptian writer. This essay serves as a guide to the readers of *Fountain and Tomb*, providing a historical background, discussing Mahfouz's life, and drawing attention to notable aspects of the novella.

The history of Egypt in the nineteenth century was marked by a contest over power and authority. Geopolitically, Egypt was placed at the vortex of "the scramble for empire." Technically, Egypt was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Although it enjoyed a fair amount of autonomy, it was an important province to the Ottoman rulers, primarily because it was the most economically profitable region of the Empire. The local rulers of Egypt were called "khedives," and they were at least nominally answerable to the Ottoman sultans. European powers also vied for control of the country.

Egypt's importance as a site of colonial power was underlined in 1798 when Napoleon landed on its shores; along with the obligatory soldiers needed for conquest, Napoleon brought with him scores of scientists and scholars. Together, they produced monumental studies of Egypt, paying special notice to the ancient ruins left behind by the pharaohs. These scholars helped establish the field of Egyptology and carried back many of the treasures to Paris where they are still housed in the Louvre. From Egypt, Napoleon hoped to conquer much of the fabled East. He made pacts with the Czar of Russia and the King of Persia that would allow his troops to traverse their empires on their way to India. Napoleon coveted India, the jewel in the crown of the British Empire. His plans were never carried out, as increasing turmoil in continental Europe caused him to withdraw from Egypt after only three years. But Napoleon left his mark on the country. The European imagination was awakened to this part of the world that became synonymous with the mystical and the exotic. Scores of European scholars and tourists made their way across the Mediterranean. Visiting Egypt became fashionable in the Victorian Age. Also, British colonial officials never forgot that anyone who controlled Egypt could attack India. Diplomatic records show that an alarm was sounded among British colonizers, which would forever change the history of modern Egypt.

The growth of capitalism further enhanced the place of Egypt as a coveted prize in the imperial game. As the Civil War in the United States threatened the crucial supply of raw cotton for the British textile industry, Egyptian cotton seemed an attractive alternate source. Additionally, Ferdinand de Lesseps, the famous engineer of the Panama Canal, turned his attention to building a canal through the Suez which would link the

Mediterranean with the Red Sea and by extension the Indian Ocean. When the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, the nature of international commerce was changed. The British navy sought control of the trade routes. Increasingly, Egypt became a site of British commercial interests. Growing numbers of British citizens moved to Egypt and worked to build roads, railways, telegraph lines, and irrigation canals. Large tracts of land were distributed among a few landowners in order to organize the growth of cotton, thus creating an entirely new group of rich Egyptian natives (Brown, 1990; Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 1984).

In short, the entire agro-economic system of the country was changed to accommodate the growth and transportation of cotton. Before it became a major supplier of cotton to England, Egypt had been one of the central provinces of the Ottoman Empire, a major economic hub that produced and exported its own food and textiles. Within a few decades, Egypt was converted into an economy which was dependent on the export of a single commodity, raw cotton. By WWI, cotton accounted for 92% of all Egyptian exports. It has been argued that no other place in the world in the nineteenth century was transformed on a greater scale in order to serve the production needs of a single industry (Mitchell, 1988).

It is critical to bear in mind that the origins of development in Egypt were a direct product of the political and commercial interests of the European colonial powers. As elsewhere in the Middle East, industrialization was carried out in ways that primarily benefited imperial interests, and not necessarily along paths that most suited internal economic dynamics. Thus, for much of the Middle East, the experiment with modernity is inextricably linked with the history of the colonial experience.

By 1882, British interests in Egypt had grown to such an extent that de facto control was no longer sufficient. British colonial officials were shifted from other parts of the empire to Egypt. Sir F. J. Goldsmid, for example, was sent over from India and charged with establishing an office of intelligence and censorship (Balaghi, 1997). British ships bombed the port city of Alexandria. Egypt became part of the British Empire. Henceforth, Egypt was effectively ruled by an awkward triumvirate: the local Khedive, the Ottoman Sultan, and the British High Commissioner.

It was within this complex struggle for power that Egyptian nationalism arose, a movement which would take on even greater importance during World War I. Sensitive to the strategic importance of Egypt to their war efforts, the British upped the ante and declared Egypt a Protectorate of the British Empire and imposed martial law. The thin disguise of autonomy was stripped away. Egypt was under foreign occupation. Egyptian farmers were forced into corvée-like labor, beasts of burden were commandeered, and foodstuffs were channeled for British use. The brutality of the British presence during wartime was woven into the fabric of the nationalist lore of Egyptians. The end of the war seemed to hold great promise. Egyptian nationalists lobbied the Allies for an opportunity to attend the Paris Peace Conference, hoping that the tide of self-determination foreshadowed by Woodrow Wilson would help bring about Egyptian independence. Saad Zaghloul became the leader of the Egyptian nationalists, known as the wafdists. Faced with British intransigence, Egyptians rebelled, and 1919 proved to be a tumultuous year (Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 1985). Some Egyptians were part of an organized nationalist struggle against the British; others rebelled in spontaneous fashion. Women sat on roads, blocking British trucks; they climbed telegraph poles, snipping the lines. The modern Egyptian feminist movement arose from the nationalist efforts of the wafdists (Badran, 1995). British response was stern; Zaghloul was arrested and exiled in Malta. In 1922, the British declared the end of the Protectorate and martial law was removed. Efforts to create a constitutional system of government were

underway, and in 1923, the constitution was officially declared. But the yoke of colonial influence had not been completely broken. It is during these years that our little boy from *Fountain and the Tomb* grows up, living in an alley nestled between a Sufi takiya and a large square which leads to the rest of Cairo.

It is also in these times that Naguib Mahfouz himself grew up in an alley in Gamaliya. Born in 1911, Mahfouz became aware of the world and his place in it at a time when Gamaliya suffered the strains of poverty, and Egypt struggled for its freedom. This childhood experience permeates the pages of *Fountain and Tomb*. Though his family moved on to the more modern district of 'Abbasiyya in 1924, in some ways, Mahfouz never left his childhood neighborhood. Even today, he visits it frequently, socializing in its cafes. From *Midaq Alley* to *Fountain and Tomb*, the life of Gamaliya remains a focus of the author. Though Mahfouz refuses to glamorize the folk-life and avoids drippy nostalgia for a romantic past that never was, the struggles of Gamaliya in the years of Egypt's struggle for independence remain a constant occupation of Egypt's most eminent author. The need to understand the moment of Egypt's arrival into the community of nation-states and its uneasy and incomplete transformation into modernity seem to drive Mahfouz's fixation on his childhood neighborhood. All the while, the need to understand Gamaliya (and the world that surrounds it and the people who occupy it) is interwoven with a need to understand the basic nature of the human condition.

Where does salvation lie? With modern science or with traditional religious values? Mahfouz explored these questions as he studied philosophy at Cairo University where he earned a B.A. before moving on to a long life of work as a bureaucrat. He retired from civil service in 1971, after holding numerous positions, including posts in the hugely important Egyptian film industry (al-Nahhas, 1991). Indeed, several of Mahfouz's stories and novels have been rendered into films, and he has written a number of movie scripts.

Through his films and his books, Mahfouz has become a leading voice in the Arab world. Egyptian cultural production is exported to other parts of the Arab world; its music, literature, films, and television series are watched by millions of Arabs (Armbrust, 1996). So in some ways, Mahfouz is as much an Arab writer as he is an Egyptian writer. After winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988, he became an internationally known author. The world watched with shocked dismay as this patriarch of Arab culture, this voice of Egyptian conscience, was stabbed in the throat by Egyptian terrorists in the streets of Cairo a few years ago. But Mahfouz is a survivor. Indeed, his stature and the sheer volume of his body of work have made him an important feature of Egyptian life; his queries into the nature of life have become overlapped with the history of Egypt in this century. His renditions of modern Egyptian life are not just compelling literature; they are the musings of a philosopher, observations of a sociologist, recordings of an ethnographer, and notations of a historian.

There is another hat that Naguib Mahfouz wears, that of detective. He grew up reading detective stories, and his penchant for them colors his narrative style. *Fountain and Tomb* is one bigger story that is told through 78 shorter tales. Like a detective story, the larger whole unfolds incrementally. Clues left behind in one tale are picked up in another, sometimes unexpectedly. The little boy who tells the tale is a detective of sorts, seeking out answers, exploring the nooks and crannies of the alley. We learn about the life of the alley through the mind of a small child, discovering his own life as it unravels before him. He embraces life with some fascination and some trepidation. "The day is lovely but redolent with mystery" (15). Such is his life in the alley.

"I enjoy playing in the small square between the archway and the takiya where the Sufis live" (11). We are thusly introduced to the topography of the alley as the little boy describes his constant craving for the fruit of the mulberry tree that grows in the fortress-like takiya, this place of "aloof isolation" which lies beyond his reach. The boy's yearning for mulberries is a multi-layered motif which is reiterated throughout the book. On the one hand, it strikes a familiar chord. Climbing mulberry trees in order to pick their juicy fruits is a favorite pastime from my own childhood. The tree I climbed was in the courtyard of my school in downtown Tehran. From the very first line of the book, then, the Middle Eastern reader is put in a position of empathy with this little boy. But nothing in Mahfouz's writing is simple.

The yearning to taste the forbidden fruit brings to mind images of the most infamous infraction and alerts the reader to the religious motifs that pervade the book. It may be fitting that the philosopher-author writes about Islamic practices by featuring a Sufi takiya. Sufis, or mystics, live a life withdrawn from the rest of humanity, seeking close metaphysical connection with the divine life, eschewing concerns of the here and now. This "aloof isolation" of the compound which Mahfouz describes seems at odds with the turmoil of life in Cairo during the nationalist struggles of Saad Zaghloul's wafdists. And yet, it is this other-worldly esoteric form of Islam which anchors the alley, foils the hustle and bustle of big city Cairo that lies on the opposite end of the alley. Our little boy plays somewhere in the middle of these two opposing ends, the modern ever-growing Cairo and the contained immutable takiya; his alley seems suspended between the old and the new, fusing tradition and modernity into an awkward reality that characterizes his childhood years.

This uneasy balance, between the takiya at one end of the street and the large square at the other, comes to represent a peculiar sort of safety and sanctity for the neighbors. When word gets out that the government has decided to take down the takiya for an urban renewal project, the neighborhood is abuzz with talk. The takiya, which no one from the alley ever actually visits, is revealed as a source of comfort to many by its simple existence, by its symbolic importance. "The blessings of the takiya protect us. . . . The takiya blocks the natural flow of the main street just like a dam and prevents us from expanding to the north" (114). So even though the Sufis who reside in the takiya remain aloof and unavailable for direct discussion or guidance, their symbolic power of presence remains a stabilizing counterweight to change, a source of spiritual comfort. In the end, the government's urban renewal project calling for the razing of the takiya is not opposed, but postponed indefinitely. Temporal and religious power continue to coexist.

Even as the little boy deals with the everyday, the extraordinary impinges on his life in his alley. One day, his daily routine is shattered by a visit from the local barber to circumcise him. Another day, a cousin from a village moves in with the family in order to escape the repercussions of his political involvement. These events are woven together, as our boy's awareness of his growing sexuality becomes enmeshed with his knowledge of political events of the times. "English patrols are now a common sight. We stare at their handsome faces in wonder, puzzled by the contrast between their atrocities and their elegance" (28). For many Middle Eastern children, politics enters their consciousness in exactly such a fashion. It seeps into their awareness, into the periphery of their gaze, from a very early age. All of it is not immediately understood, but all of it remains affixed to the memory and examined throughout life as one grows and matures. "I know only a little about the new words Saad Zaghloul, Malta, the Sultan, and the Nation, but I know a lot about the British cavalry, bullets, and death. . . . And I tell myself that what is happening is an exciting and unbelievable dream" (26).

Though the space between the takiya and the square is this little boy's playing area, his alley, his neighborhood in Cairo in the 1920s, Mahfouz lets the reader know he is delving into larger questions. The alley is referred to as a "cosmic stage" (89), one on which the struggle is the struggle for mankind, the search for salvation. One day, the boy's father enters a debate with the schoolteacher, the most educated man on the street. The father exclaims in despair, "The people who live here are drowned in daily life, ground down by poverty, disease, strife" (111). Where does their salvation lie, he wonders? The schoolteacher responds with his own brand of philosophy, his own solution to the human condition. God, he believes, "has decided to leave us to our own devices. . . . Mankind won't take life lightly just because God has left the world; there's no avoiding high resolve and new achievements, no escape from morality, law and punishment. . . . Heroism and nobility and sacrifice will never die And some day mankind will achieve a certain wholeness in themselves and in society. Then and only then, by virtue of this new human personality, will we understand the meaning of divinity. Its eternal essence will become clear. . ." (110-111). It would seem, then, that Mahfouz has finally resolved the struggle on the cosmic stage, demarcating the role of God and the place of mankind. But this story is not one that ends with resolution, with answers, with hope. The schoolteacher is driven from his job, his words taken as blasphemy. "Life on our alley ignores him" (111). Perhaps Mahfouz keeps writing because even at his ripe old age, he has yet to discover the answers to the questions of his own Gamaliya childhood.

Questions for Reflection

1. Some critics claim that Naguib Mahfouz supports modernist, "Westernized" solutions to Egypt's woes. From your reading of *Fountain and Tomb*, would you agree? Is the secular, Western world glamorized and trumpeted?
 2. Other than the takiya, what are some ways in which Islam and Islamic routines affect the daily life of the residents of the alley?
 3. How are women depicted in the Mahfouz book?
 4. What aspects of the little boy's life seem similar/ different from your own childhood?
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