

Naguib Mahfouz

By: Wally Hastings

Source: <http://www.northern.edu/hastingw/mahfouz.htm>

". . . accepted by all who read and enjoy modern Arabic literature as the greatest contemporary novelist not only of Egypt but of the whole Arab world. . ." (Cowan)

Life:

Mahfouz was born in an old quarter of Cairo (Gamaliya) in 1911 and lived there until the age of 12, when his parents moved to a newer suburb; however, he achieved fame as the chronicler of the old neighborhoods of Cairo, and has credited the Cairene world as his inspiration. He was the youngest of seven children, but at 10 years younger than his next-older brother really had no sibling relationship; instead, he emphasized friendships outside of the house. Politics and religion were evidently important topics of conversation in his home, although Mahfouz has remained relatively silent about his family.

Mahfouz began his education at the *kutt_b* (Qur'an school), where the emphasis was on Islamic religion and basic literacy, then went on to primary school. When he was 7, Egypt was caught up in a revolution against British rule, the memory of which continues to dominate his political awareness; images of the revolution recur in many of his novels. He read historical and adventure novels, specifically citing Sir Walter Scott and H. Rider Haggard, but also read widely in both classical and contemporary Arabic literature. (In various statements after he achieved fame as a writer, he specifically mentioned a wide variety of Western writers, most notably Tolstoy, Proust, and Mann.) He then attended King Fu'ad I University, graduating with a degree in philosophy in 1934. As he matured, he gravitated toward a socialist worldview and became increasingly critical of "Islamist" politics.

He began to study toward an M.A. while occupying various bureaucratic positions from 1934 until 1971, when he became affiliated with the daily newspaper *Al-Ahram*. He did not marry until 1954, when he moved for the first time from his family home to an apartment where he still lives; he and his wife have two children. In his entire life, he was out of Egypt only twice; he even turned down the opportunity to travel to Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. Prior to this award, few in the West knew of him; at that point, he had written 38 novels or novellas and 12 collections of short stories and plays, and had received several awards in the Arabic world. His added prominence came with a price, however, as strict Islamic fundamentalists have suggested that a fatwa should have been declared on him after he wrote *Children of the Alley*, as it would have prevented Salman Rushdie's subsequent writing of *The Satanic Verses*. In October of 1994, he was attacked and stabbed on a Cairo street, evidently by a fundamentalist.

His early writings included translations from English and stories about ancient Egypt; but his most significant early novels trace changes in the lives of Cairo's petty bourgeoisie as a national consciousness emerged after the 1919 Revolution. He has been compared to Zola, Balzac, and Dickens, although most critics emphasize his independent Arabic nature. However, after receiving the Nobel Prize, Mahfouz himself said that his work upholds principles widely associated with European civilization - but he has also argued that these principles can be found in Islam as well.

Mahfouz was part of a generation of Egyptian writers who emerged during the 1940s and '50s calling for the reform of Egyptian society. During the 1940s, Egyptian society experienced a major shift as poor workers began moving into the cities seeking employment; under the stress of the changing society, some affiliated with the socialists or communists and others with the Muslim Brotherhood (Badawi 130). There was also a great increase in the number of novels published, both because of the increasing respectability of the genre among Arab readers and the foundation of new publishing ventures (Badawi 130-31). Mahfouz, who took part in this explosion of the Egyptian novel, is "the most significant" contributor to the Arab novel in the 20th century, surpassing any rivals in terms of volume and variety of literary output, originality, and seriousness (Badawi 136).

In his earlier, realistic novels, Mahfouz clearly seems to favor "secularist socialism," aligned with modern science, over "revivalist (fundamentalist) Islamism," as is shown by his presentation of characters espousing each perspective (El-Enani 73). According to Trevor Le Gassick, "Mahfouz saw his stories as a means to bring enlightenment and reform to his society." (Intro, *Midaq Alley*, vi) Mahfouz's Cairo Trilogy (published 1957) in particular contributed to both radicalism and social realism in Egyptian literature, but all of his novels up to at least 1957 strive to give a realistic view of life in the old part of Cairo - many of these novels were named for streets or neighborhoods in the old city. Somekh argues that one important ingredient in Mahfouz's work is the complete identification with the plight of Egyptian masses - in other words, his sympathy is with the downtrodden. These are the novels that the Nobel Committee specifically cited in awarding the Prize.

He stopped writing for five years after the 1952 revolution (which also coincided with the completion of his Cairo Trilogy). In *Children of the Alley* (1959), he introduces a warning recognition that science, too, may be misused, as the magician's invention of a powerful explosive weapon is appropriated by the forces of tyranny, not those of liberation (El-Enani 7). Beginning with *Children of the Alley* and *The Thief and the Dogs* in 1962, Mahfouz seemed to move away from his realistic style to a more inner-directed narrative of character's thoughts. Novels of this period tend to be more focused on individuals than the earlier works, but Somekh (perhaps the most expert writer on Mahfouz in English) suggests these works are "neo-realistic" in that they avoid detailed description of setting and psychology but nonetheless present an accurate picture of realistic Egyptian society.

Mahfouz again wrote no novels for several years after Egypt's defeat in the Six Days War (Le Gassick 5). Following the hiatus in literary production following the 1967 Egyptian defeat, his work has been even more experimental, using a wide variety of forms (Badawi 144).

* * * * *

Mahfouz claims that all of his books are political in some way, and that his work revolves around the three poles of **politics, faith and love** - but politics "is by all odds the most essential" (qtd. in Altoma, 131). Mahfouz is highly sensitive to political events; e.g., he used the 1919 Egyptian revolution as the background for his Cairo Trilogy, and exhibited prolonged periods of creative stasis followed by new writing directions after both the 1952 revolution and the 1967 loss to Israel in the Six-Day War (Haydar and Beard 7). His politics became a source of controversy in 1979 when his public support of Sadat's treaty with Israel brought denunciations from Islamic fundamentalists and a ban on his works in some Arab countries.

While his works are often realistic, characters and events often have a further significance, which Somekh says is not quite mystic symbolism but may approach it. For instance, the family is often both a family and a condensed version of Egypt as a whole. (For another instance, the healing figures or saints that appear in various incarnations may be types of God - think of the sheikh in *Midaq Alley*.)

**"Although none of Mahfouz's works can be described as `religious', there is in many of them an ongoing search for a value that transcends sensual experience."
(Somekh, 251)**

Children of the Alley:

The novel was originally published in 1959, breaking a seven-year silence and marking a shift in his focus. It is "an allegorical novel offering an essentially pessimistic view of man's struggle for existence" (Le Gassick, Intro, *Midaq Alley*, viii). It was controversial with religious elements in Egypt and, although first published as a serial in an Egyptian newspaper, was never republished in his home country. Specifically, the religious authorities opposed it because of the use of the prophet Mumhammed (even though it did not refer to him by name). It was published in book form in Lebanon. This controversy cost Mahfouz his position as chair of the Cinema Institute of Egypt. The reception may have contributed to another period of relative silence, broken with the 1962 publication of *The Thief and the Dogs*. The controversy was revived some 30 years later when Mahfouz received the Nobel Prize; this book was specifically cited as one of the high points of his work, re-igniting concerns in Egypt about its suppression; again, the book was cited by Salman Rushdie as an example of the way that Islamic societies treat writers, bringing Mahfouz into the debate on *The Satanic Verses*. Mahfouz condemned the fatwa against Rushdie but also suggested that Rushdie's book was a wrong against Islam; his partial defense of Rushdie brought criticism and attacks from Islamic fundamentalists. On the other hand, following a physical attack on Mahfouz in 1994, *Children of the Alley* was removed from the censors' list in Egypt.

Rasheed El-Enany calls *Children of the Alley* "a unique allegory of human history from Genesis to the present day. In it the masters of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are stripped of their holiness and represented, in thin disguise, as no more than social reformers who strove to the best of their ability to liberate their people from tyranny and exploitation. Another character in the allegory stands for science, which is shown to have supplanted religion and at whose hands the demise of God is eventually effected." (Intro, Respected Sir, 13).

At the end, science too is corrupted, al-though the hope remains in the missing notebook.

Elsewhere, El-Enany argues that the book, though different in form from anything that preceded it, remains a *roman fleuve* like the Cairo Trilogy. Here, though the generations covered are the generations of humanity from Adam to modern times (141). All of the significant religious figures in the monotheistic tradition are there, including God and Satan, "but without the halo of religious myth: the novel is an attempt at demythologizing humanity's religious quest" (142). The opening chapter reflects the Qur'anic story of Adam rather than Judæo-Christian Old Testament tradition. Adham's inheritance is stolen by the trustee (ruling classes) -- according to Mahfouz, the major religions are attempts at resistance to this injustice. The upholding of science as the hope

of humanity is consistent with his previous work, but this one contains words of warning that science in the wrong hands may support the oppressor.

However, while most interpretations have centered on the religious aspect of the novel, Mehrez (Samia Mehrez, "Respected Sir," in *Naguib Mahfouz: From Regional Fame to Global Recognition*, Ed. Michael Beard and Adnan Haydar, Syracuse UP, 1993, 65-65) suggests a political reading supported by Mahfouz himself. He sees it as a symbolic history of post-revolutionary Egypt, in which the alley (hara), which in the religious interpretations stands for the world, stands for Egypt. Mahfouz himself said that he was addressing the leaders of the revolution (i.e., Nassar etc.).

Character names:

Adham -- Adam (obvious)

Qassem -- This is the name of one of Muhammed's sons.

Arafa -- arafa, "to know" in Arabic

I. Preface and "Adham"

Referencea to the ancestor, Gabalawi, establish him as God -- he created the alley (i.e., the world), owns everything in it (3), and set rules to govern it, "his much-talked-about Ten Conditions" (4). But note that the narrator also observes that **he has subsequently been absent from the world he created**: "He has dwelled aloof in his house for long ages, and no one has seen him since he isolated himself up there." (3) Right at the outset, the pessimism with religious interpretations manifests itself. And note that the Ten Conditions are never specified in this text -- they remain something to which everyone refers in general but no one applies in specific terms.

The story of Adham's designation as Gabalawi's heir is apparently a Qu'ranic variant of the Adam and Eve story in Genesis. Note that the choice of Adham triggers Idris's anger at his fathers -- the human condition seems to be one of envy and a sense of deep injustice. Each of the prophets who follows enjoys some success but **ultimately that success collapses because of the envy of others, and the usurpation of authority**.

The first exile is Idris himself (11) -- like Lucifer, the fallen angel, who seeks to contest with God. He vows to bring everything down: "Everywhere I spread corruption people will point to me and say, 'He's a child of Gabalawi!' This way I can drag you all through the mud" (19).

Gabalawi is "charmed by the sound of praise" (13) -- in other words, he too is susceptible to human reactions. Adham meets Umaima in the garden, where she "seemed to drift out of his rib cage" (16).

Adham curses his legacy: "God damn the estate!" (27)

Work is Adham's curse (49) "but it is a curse that can only be defeated by more work" (51).

The issue of the inheritance -- Gabalawi's will -- becomes the source of temptation (31). As in the Fall, Idris uses Adham's wife to bring about Adham's transgression, but here tries to tempt Adham himself directly. So we see immediately a theme of betrayal of sorts: "he expected her to help him resist Idris, but she was pushing him toward him" (34). Then Adham is exiled, just as his brother was (49).

Qadri and Humam = Cain and Abel. Note that Mahfouz adds something to the Biblical story, in establishing the parallel between the generations: Idris/Adham::Qadri/Humam, and Gabalawi repeats the decision he made in the previous generation, by calling Humam but not Qadri to him. But this isn't quite the story of Cain

and Abel -- Humam rejects Gabaliya's blessing, choosing family over wealth and inheritance (74). Thus it is ironic when he is slain by his brother Qadri. Mahfouz also complicates matters by having Qadri sexually involved with Idris's daughter, Hind.

"If the past could be forgotten, the present would be wonderful, but we will keep on staring at that mansion, which gives us the only glory we can claim, and causes all the misery we know." (62) Note this could be a commentary on both the warring groups in the Middle East -- each looks to a glorious past to provide a source for its claims, which in turn causes misery. But it is not just the past -- there is also Gabalawi's explicit promise that Adham's children will have the estate (88). Isn't this also part of the problem of the religious and political conflicts of the Middle East?

* * * * *

II. Gabal

This section begins with an account of the rise of **gangster culture**, iterating the central question of the book: "How did our alley reach such a pitiful state?" (94) The answer lies in the ambition of the overseer (94), who gradually took over the control of all of the money for himself. To secure his money, he needs the protection of gangsters who keep the populace in line; because the people have no other means of support, they turn to drugs, terrorism, and begging.

The narrative now begins the intermingling of past, present, and future concerns: "This was the horrid state of affairs which I myself witnessed in this, our own era, a mirror image of what the storytellers describe of the distant past. . . . In spite of all, we are still here, patient in our cares. We look toward a future that will come we know not when, and point toward the mansion and say, 'There is our venerable father,' and we point out our gangsters and say, 'These are our men; and God is master of all.'" (95)

In chapter 25, we are simultaneously introduced to the **coffehouse culture** which forms such a backdrop for the rest of the novel's events and to the parallels to the Israelites of Moses' time. The people feel that they are oppressed by the gangsters, and revolutionary sentiments circulate. Like the ancient Jews, the Al-Hamdan feel that their birthright has been taken from them -- Qidra the gangster is not one of the chosen sons of Gabalawi, those who have a right to inherit the estate (98). They elect to go to court, or to the overseer, to seek redress for their wrongs.

Note that the 10 conditions pre-date the Moses figure -- the people have already asked about the Ten Conditions (104) before Gabal is introduced, still the respected foster son of the overseer (103-4). Gabal, distressed by the plight of the people, withdraws into the desert (110), as did Humam and Qadri before him, and as his successors will do in the following sections. **What significance does the desert have as a place of exile and recovery?** Suggests that corruption lies within humanity, and the retreat to the desert brings regeneration of moral fiber?

Daabis suggests that Gabal become the Al Hamdan's "protector" (i.e., their gangster) (113) ==> Humanity has become so corrupted that they can scarcely conceive of any existence not predicated on the rule of strong men.

The death of Qidra and the importance of **state terrorism**: "as long as the people think that Qidra's killer was one of the Al Hamdan, we have to think the same thing. . . . we aren't as concerned with punishing the killer as we are with frightening the others." (116)

Gabalawi escapes to Gamaliya for a period of exile, just as Moses has to flee after killing one of Pharaoh's men -- to lie low and to take a wife in a distant place. Why a snake charmer? See connection to Moses's "magic" when he demonstrates the power of Jehovah against the gods of the Egyptians.

Gabal encounters Gabalawi (144), the first of several encounters suggesting a specific mission from God. Question: if Gabalawi remains remote from the alley, how can he know what is going on to issue the orders?

Gabal's desire on returning to the alley is to trigger a violent suppression of the Al Ham-dan, so as to resurrect the revolutionary desires (153). After the successful vanquishing of the gangsters, Gabal is invited to "bring justice to the whole alley" (166) but declines, since he was asked only to care for his own.

"By God, you only hated the gangs because they were against you. As soon as any of you get the least power, you lose no time in harassing and attacking others."
(170)

This is the bane of humanity, according to this book.

* * * * *

III. Rifaa (175-250)

The section begins, unlike the previous two, in *media res* -- there is no exposition of what has happened since Gabal's time, rather there is the exile of Shafi'i and Abda. Their departure is specifically linked by Shafi'i to Gabal's ("We'll go to Muqattam Marketplace, where Gabal went in his time of affliction. . ." 175). Rifaa thus enters the alley as an alien, as one who is familiar with the life of Muqattam, not of his so-called "home" alley, and he feels "a stranger to the earth he walked upon" (179). On their return, they first encounter Gawad the poet, old and blind, who like Simeon in the Bible, recognizes the significance of the boy:

"You are just like your ancestor!" (i.e., Gabalawi/God - so he is the son of God) (180)
We begin to see the domination that **history** has over the people. Every action, every incident, is interpreted in terms of historical precedent, and there is considerable looking backward at the promise of Gabalawi. But "Time satirizes even the sublimest things" (183); today, even the sites of great happenings of the past have deteriorated, so that Yasmina's window, from which came the water that helped Gabal vanquish the gangsters, now is just an ordinary window.

Rifaa contemplates the past, but considers what has happened since, and asks, "what good was his (Gabal's) victory?" (182) Indeed, what good *was* it? In Mahfouz's story of this world, each temporary victory is just a punctuation in the continuing saga of man's brutality to man; echoes of the past suggest cycles of history, but the cycle as a whole is dominated by brutality and cruelty.

Rifaa, who is "a stranger to the earth," seems unfitted by his previous existence for life in the alley (even though Muqattam was also dominated by gangsters, as his father told him). When he witnesses the cat catching a mouse, he "set down his glass of cinammon brew in disgust"; the disgust and the cat-and-mouse game are immediately linked to the rule of gangsters as he raises his eyes to see Khunfis, the local gangster, expectorating (185; Somekh calls attention to this passage as an instance of "coincidental symbolism"). (Note that on p. 200, the people of the alley are referred to as "mice, or rabbits.") Rifaa seems to

be beyond this world also in his sexuality -- note his resistance to marriage, even a marriage that is advantageous in a worldly sense (194-95).

Rifaa's fascination with the old stories is made evident by his response to the coffee-house. He is first told that "Our people are the biggest liars in this alley. . . In the next coffee-house you'll hear that Gabal said he was from the alley, when he just said that he was from the Al Hamdan. . ." (186 -- indicating the possessiveness of groups who claim to have exclusive rights to different aspects of the inheritance), and responds by telling his father "I want to visit all the coffeehouses" (187).

Rifaa learns the art of casting out demons from Umm Bekhatirha, which prepares him for the task that Gawad identifies: "This alley needs someone to rid it of its devils just as you rid people of their demons" (190).

Rifaa however introduces a new concept into the alley -- the idea of looking at all people, not just the local group: "I used to be wrong like you, and only cared about the Al Gabal, but only people who try sincerely to find happiness deserve it." (217 - speaking to his wife Yasmina) But this position flies in the face of the historical experience of the people of the alley -- that the nature of human beings is to be jealous of one another. Nevertheless, he acquires disciples and creates fear/consternation in the gangsters.

* * * * *

IV. Qassem

What does it mean, within the symbolic structure of this novel, that Qassem does not represent the final stage in development of ideas of peace and justice?

This section returns to the pattern of the earlier sections, with a historical overview as the first chapter. We learn that the Al Gabal (Jews) are unpopular because they claim to be the closest to Gabalawi, and that the protector of the Al Rifaa (Hagag) is no different from the others, embezzling to enrich himself and relying on violence to control the others (253). "All those who wielded clubs, as well as the poets with their instruments, said that it was a just system that observed Gabalawi's Ten Conditions" (253-54).

Qassem enters this world without a direct link to either of the "privileged" groups (252), just as Mohammed does. However, he is fascinated by the stories of the Al Gabal and the Al Rifaa, and seems to have absorbed something from both; for instance, he notes the brotherhood of all by analogy to his sheep (260) and solves the problem of the stolen money without fostering further rivalries and resentments between the groups (268).

Qassem is distinguished from Rifaa, who had a similar belief in universal brotherhood, by his obvious sexuality and by his willingness to employ force on behalf of justice. He is "the equal of any protector" (271) because he has come to the attention of Qamar, relative of the overseer. He achieves "the first procession ever to come off peacefully" (277).

* * * * *

"The thing is that power that does good, like the power of Gabal or Rifaa, is different from the power of bullies and criminals." (280) Is this true? In what sense? He attempts to embody this sense in his revolt. "We will raise clubs the way Gabal did, but to achieve the mercy that Rifaa called for. We will use the estate for everyone's good, until we make Adham's dream come true. That is our mission -- not gang rule." (330) Coming from an author writing inside the Islamic tradition, what is the significance of Qassem's failure to

establish this rule of righteousness and mercy? Is he challenging the existing ideology of Islam? But in the actual warfare, the violence takes over: "the thwacking of the clubs grew more frenzied, blood streamed from heads and faces, lanterns were smashed and flowers were scattered and trampled" (339) Critics have argued that the recurrent battle scenes come to dominate the novel more than the philosophical background. Do we agree? Is this a flaw in Mahfouz's attempted disquisition? Perhaps, rather, he causes the reader to fall into the same trap as the society -- i.e., while we say we want peace and justice, we actually prefer the excitement of a life of conflict. Ultimately, the battle scenes begin to take on the aura of epic: "Hassan joined Qassem in his struggle, and not one of his blows failed" (348). After all this battle and bloodshed, Hassan and Qassem comment ironically:

"Soon we will have victory, and our alley will say farewell to its age of blood and terror."
"Down with terror and blood," said Qassem. (350)

Like Mohammed, Qassem should be the last prophet in this process. ("What have you left for the one coming after you?" laughed Yahya. Qassem thought this over for a while. "If God gives me victory, the alley will not need anyone else after me." (296)) Indeed, Qassem gives them the prescription for breaking out of the cycle of domination and rebellion, in his victory speech (p. 359). It is up to the people themselves to maintain the rule of peace and justice. However, already there is the hint of trouble ahead: ". . . there were some of the Al Gabal who harbored feelings they did not make public. . . And there were some like them among the Al Rifaa. And indeed there were those of the Desert Rats who succumbed to pride and arrogance, but no voice was raised to disturb the peace while Qassem was alive." (360-61)

Perhaps this section suggests Mahfouz's disillusionment with any system that depends on worship of an individual or an individual revelation -- a cynical view of human nature? A rejection of religion? An indictment of Islam for failing to achieve what it promised?

* * * * *

V. Arafa

Consider the murder of Gabalawi (400) -- Arafa seeks out Gabalawi, unlike the previous heroes, and unlike any since Adham, he wants to see the book of Gabalawi's will (394).

"With God/magic, anything is possible" (391)

"Gabalawi is dead!" (404)

Science/magic will now replace Gabalawi (God) (408)

We know even less about Arafa's parentage than about our other heroes (367, 369) -- does this have symbolic meaning in relation to the allegory of science? Significance in regard to the novel's concerns with inheritance?

The novel ends with hope (448) -- is it real, or feigned?