ABSTRACT

Arabic literature can be traced back almost two thousand years. Poetry has always been its most prominent genre, but there is also an ancient tradition of narrative that expresses itself in a wealth of different oral forms. In Egypt, the collection of stories called The Arabian Nights, a series of tales of Indian, Iranian, and Iraqi origin, was brought to its final and most developed form. This coincided with an ancient Egyptian tradition of storytelling which has remained vivid and alive to this day, the public storyteller having been a cultural institution for ages.

The birth of the Egyptian novel, however, could not take place until the modern era, when five preconditions had been fulfilled: 1) the influence of European literature, where the novel developed into a major genre in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; 2) the establishment of Egyptian printing works and pressrooms in the nineteenth century along with the rise of newspaper production; 3) public education and the spread of literacy; 4) a gradual liberation from oppression by foreign powers, starting with the reign of Muhammad Ali in the aftermath of the Napoleonic occupation in the early 1800s; and 5) the emergence of an intellectual class with broad international learning.

Thus an Arabic Renaissance finally arose; its janus face turned as much to the past as to the future. The concept of Nahdah in Arabic literary criticism and historiography, meaning a "rising up" or revitalization, refers in part to a period of neo-classicism, an awakening of old literary traditions following a time of decline or stagnation since the eleventh century. The term also refers to creativity, new syntheses, modernization, dynamic experiments, and progress. The Egyptian novel matured in great works by twentieth century writers such as Muhammad

Muhammad Husayn Haykal’s novel *Zaynab*, published in 1912, is often regarded as the first true Arabic novel, but there were many forerunners. The most important successor, however, was born about the time of the completion of Husayn Haykal’s work. The development of the modern Egyptian novel is reflected by - and reaches a peak in - the half century of work by Naguib Mahfouz, Nobel Laureate in 1988, the first writer in Arabic to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Naguib Mahfouz was born on December 11, 1911, in the old Gamaliya quarter of Cairo, the youngest of seven children in a family of five boys and two girls of a civil servant. He mourned his lack of normal sibling bonds, which is reflected in the portrayal of fraternal relationships in much of his work. But his childhood was a happy one—the family was stable and loving, with religion playing a very important role in their life—and there are many signs of Mahfouz’s affection for his early childhood in his work. The setting of his books, and he came of age in an era of intense nationalist activity against British role.

He spent his first nine or ten years in Gamaliya, which plays an important role in his earlier, realistic novels such as *Midaq Alley* and *The Cairo Trilogy*, and figures symbolically in later books like *Children of the Alley* and *The Harafish*. The alley of his childhood is a kind of microcosm of Egyptian society in his works. The family house, also, seems to have inspired Mahfouz and serves as the model for the Abd al-Jawad family house in *The Cairo Trilogy*. Mahfouz recalls the various rooms and secret places in these novels, including the roof, which becomes a scene for family gatherings and the meetings of lovers.

The 1919 Revolution also had a lasting effect on Mahfouz, leaving
him with his first real sense of nationalist feeling and greatly influencing his writings. Interestingly, he later became disillusioned with the Revolution of 1952, though he took issue with its practices, not its principles. He voiced his criticisms clearly in some of his writings of the 1960s (in novels like *Miramar*), but unlike many other intellectuals of the time was never arrested by Nasser.

Around 1920, his family moved to Abbasiya, a new suburban district, which like Gamaliya is frequently evoked in his novels and short stories. This is where, like Kamal in *The Cairo Trilogy*, Mahfouz experienced love for the first time.

Mahfouz began writing in primary school, when he was a fan of detective, historical, and adventure novels. In secondary school he moved on to the innovators of Arabic fiction—Taha Hussein, Muhammed Husayn Haykal, Ibrahim al-Mazini—who served him as models for the short story.

Despite his penchant for writing and his early facility with mathematics and the sciences, Mahfouz elected to study philosophy at Fuad-I University (now Cairo University) in 1930, graduating in 1934. His interest in philosophy was partly inspired by the writings of Abbas al-Aqqad. Beginning in secondary school and continuing through his university years, he published more than forty articles in various magazines and newspapers, most of which dealt with philosophical and psychological issues and were heavily influenced by Henri Bergson.

By 1936, having spent a year working on an M.A., he decided to become a professional writer. Mahfouz then worked as a journalist at al-Risala, and contributed to al-Hilal and al-Ahram. The major Egyptian influence on Mahfouz's thoughts of science and socialism in the 1930s was Salama Musa, the Fabian intellectual.
As a novelist he started writings with historical fiction, publishing three novels in between 1939 and 1944; namely *Abath al-Aqdar* (The Game of Fates, 1939), *Radubis* (Rhodopis) and *Kifah Tiba* (Thebe’s Struggle).

From 1934 until his retirement in 1971 at the age of sixty, he worked in a variety of government departments as a civil servant. He held a secretarial post at Cairo University until 1938, when he moved to the Ministry of Religious Endowments to work as a parliamentary secretary to the minister.

In 1945 he requested transfer to the Ghuri Library, near his birthplace Gamaliya, where he managed the Good Loan Project, an interest-free loan program for the poor. This was a very happy time for him; he had plenty of opportunity to observe the life of the area and to read western literature, including his favorites: Shakespeare, Conrad, Melville, Flaubert, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Proust, O’Neill, Shaw, Ibsen, and Strindberg. From the 1950s he worked as secretary to the Minister of National Guidance, director of the Film Censorship Office, director-general of the Film Support Organization, advisor to the General Organization for Film Industry, and finally as advisor to the Minister of Culture.

Mahfouz’s central work in the 1950s was the *Cairo Trilogy*, an immense monumental work of 1,500 pages, which the author completed before the July Revolution. The novels were titled with the street names *Palace Walk*, *Palace of Desire*, and *Sugar Street*. Mahfouz set the story in the parts of Cairo where he grew up. They depict the life of the patriarch el-Sayyed Ahmed Abdel Gawad and his family over three generations, from World War I to the 1950s, when King Farouk I was overthrown.
Tharthara Fawq al-Nil ("Chatter on the Nile"; 1966) is one of his most popular novels. His written works covered a broad range of topics, including socialism, homosexuality, and God. Writing about some of these subjects was prohibited in Egypt.

The Children of Gebelawi (1959, also known as "Children of our Alley") one of Mahfouz's best known works, has been banned in Egypt for alleged blasphemy over its allegorical portrayal of God and the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, until the ban was released in 2006. It portrayed the patriarch Gebelaawi and his children, average Egyptians living the lives of Cain and Abel, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed.

In The Thief and the Dogs (1961) he depicted the fate of a Marxist thief, who has been released from prison and plans revenge. In Arabian Nights and Days (1981) and in The ‘Journey of ibn Fatouma’ (1983) Mahfouz drew on traditional Arabic narratives as subtexts. Akhenaten, (Dweller in Truth, 1985) is about conflict between old and new religious truths. Many of his novels were first published in serialized form, including Children of Gebelawi and Midaq Alley.

Mahfouz’s other novels include Al-Shahhadh (1965; The Beggar), which consider Egyptian society under Gamal Abdel Nasser’s regime; Afrāḥ al-qubba (1981; Wedding Song), set among several characters associated with a Cairo theatre company; and the structurally experimental Hadith al-sabah wa- al-masa (1987; Morning and Evening Talk), which strings together in alphabetical order dozens of character sketches. Together, his novels, which were among the first to gain widespread acceptance in the Arabic-speaking world, brought the genre to maturity within Arabic literature.
Mahfouz’s achievements as a short-story writer are demonstrated in such collections as *Dunya Allah* (1963; *God’s World*). *The Time and the Place, and Other Stories* (1991) and *The Seventh Heaven* (2005) are collections of his stories in English translation. Mahfouz wrote more than 45 novels and short-story collections, as well as some 30 screenplays and several plays. *Asda al-sirah al-dhatiyyah* (1996; *Echoes of an Autobiography*) is a collection of parables and his sayings. In 1996 the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature was established to honour Arabic writers.

An attempt on his life in 1994—he was stabbed in the neck outside his home by a religious fanatic—left him able to write only with great difficulty for half an hour a day—and thus he wrote the very short fictions based on his dreams that he called “*Dreams of Convalescence,*”.

From the late 1940s to the early 1980s he also worked on some twenty-five film screenplays, an activity that seems to have influenced the use of such devices as montage and flashback in his prose writings. Over thirty Egyptian films have been based on Mahfouz’s novels and short stories, but he was never interested in adapting his own books for the screen; the screenplay adaptations were done by others.

He was invited to be a writer emeritus at *Al-Ahram* newspaper in 1971, and he continued to produce a weekly column that was published simultaneously in Arabic in *Al-Ahram* and in English in *Al-Ahram Weekly* until shortly before his death. A collection of these columns was published for his ninetieth birthday celebration in 2001 as *Naguib Mahfouz at Sidi Gaber: Reflections of a Nobel Laureate, 1994–2001: From conversations with Mohamed Salmawy*.

Mahfouz has received the Egyptian State Prize twice for his writings. In 1988 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The Swedish Academy of Letters, in its citation for the prize, noted that
Mahfouz “through works rich in nuance—now clear-sightedly realistic, now evocatively ambiguous—has formed an Arabic narrative art that applies to all mankind.”

In 1989 Mahfouz received the Presidential Medal from the American University in Cairo, which also awarded him an honorary doctorate in June 1995. In 1992 he was elected an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and in 2002 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Naguib Mahfouz died in Cairo on 30 August 2006 at the age of 94, in the presence of his wife Atiya and his daughters Faten and Umm Kalthum.

Naguib Mahfouz began his career as a novelist with historical fiction, publishing three novels in between 1939 and 1944. It was the beginning of a gigantic plan for forty projected novels. The author’s aim was to employ the novel form to relate the history of Egypt from the earliest times up to his own day. In these he succeeded to some extent: the expressed the Egyptian or Islamic nationalism and desire to assert the glory of the past or to escape from the oppressive gloomy present in *Abath al-Aqdar* (The Game of Fates, 1939). There is implied criticism of the tyranny of king Farouk in *Rhodopis* (*Radubis*) and a pronounced feeling of nationalist resentment against the foreign occupation of Egypt in “Thebe’s Struggle” (*Kifah Tiba*).

Mahfouz described the development of his country in the 20th-century. He combined intellectual and cultural influences from East and West - his own exposure to the literature of non-Egyptian culture began in his youth with the enthusiastic consumption of Western detective stories, Russian classics, and such modernist writers as Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka and James Joyce. Mahfouz’s stories are almost always set in the heavily populated urban quarters of Cairo, where his characters,
mostly ordinary people, try to cope with the modernization of society and the temptations of Western values.

Most of Mahfouz's early works were set in al-Gamaleyya. *Abath Al-Aqdar (Mockery of the Fates)* (1939), *Rhadopis* (1943), and *Kifah Tibah (The Struggle of Thebes)* (1944), were historical novels, written as part of a larger unfulfilled project of 30 novels. Inspired by Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) Mahfouz planned to cover the whole history of Egypt in a series of books. However, following the third volume, Mahfouz shifted his interest to the present, the psychological impact of the social change on ordinary people.

*Abath al-Aqdar* depicts a monarch who exploits his people and is finally overcome by the son of a commander chosen by the people to rule. The novel dwells on the greatness of the Egyptian people and prescribes the deposition of the king to remedy such situations.

*Radobis* is the story of a playboy king who neglects the affairs of the state and devotes himself to the charms of the singing girl Radobis. The people revolt against him and kill him. The connection with the country’s monarch is clear.

In the third novel *Kifah Tiba*, the national aim is clearer than in the two previous ones. It depicts the period of Egypt’s occupation by the Hyksos and the revolt against him leading to his banishment.

To have taken history not only seriously but also literarily is the central achievement of Mahfouz’s work and, one gets the measure of his literary personality by the sheer audacity and even the overreaching arrogance of his scope. To articulate large swathes of Egypt’s history on behalf of that history, and to feel himself capable of presenting its citizens for scrutiny as its representatives: this sort of ambition is rarely seen in contemporary writers.
I must confess that I have not read even a portion of the bulk of Naguib Mahfouz’s work. He has written over 40 novels, hundreds of articles and screenplays and many more short stories. Nonetheless, it clear that his writing has a certain clearness, a way of looking into the heart of man and despite the honesty of it, leaving us with ambiguity and uncertainty. He makes it clear to us that the people are not always what the seem to be and what seems to be moral to one person is trespassing and ultimate sin to another. Moreover, people in his works seem to hover without difficulty between righteousness and a world of shadows. This view of reality and all that is comprises, seems to be the bulwark and foundation of his work and especially these historical novels. Mahfouz creates an intricate pattern of verbal irony which he weaves into the very texture of the novel and maintains throughout.

Mahfouz writes in a classical and lucid Arabic style, interspersed with colloquial Egyptian and proverbs throughout the Arab world. Some of these proverbs, which he uses to accentuate his key points, utterly defy translation. He writes not only to entertain but to treat profoundly social, political, and religious issues and their impact on his society. His overriding purpose is clear: to give a true picture of the human condition as he sees it. If his ideas are sometimes controversial, they are nevertheless stimulating and must be understood in the context of Mahfouz’s effort to treat the cultural trends of his society as they affect his own life. Moreover, despite his transparent manner, Mahfouz is dauntingly sophisticated not only as an Arabic stylist but as an assiduous student of social process and epistemology – i.e., the way people know their experiences – without equal in his part of the world, and probably elsewhere for that matter.

He is sometimes described as the Dickens of Balzac of Egypt because social realism dominates his choice of subject and style. In
essence, however, he is the Mahfouz of Egypt; his realistic styles, his interest in social issues, indeed, his whole ethos are genuinely Egyptian. He should be claimed by all Arabs because most of his novels reflect Arabic and Islamic traditions.

This work investigates to trace out the origin of Arabic novel and find out, how the Arabic Novel developed its shape and how Naguib Mahfouz produced his historical novels to the readers that jacked it to moderate and reached the zenith of success.

This thesis concentrates on the criticism of the historical novels of N. Mahfouz which portrays the rising spirit of many aspects of Egyptian’s, political, cultural, national, and social life. Inspired by the writings of Naguib Mahfouz’s historical novels namely Abath al-Aqdar, Radobis, and, Kifah Tiba, this thesis reveals the responsibilities and inspiration to the readers of the nation experiencing unrest like that of Mahfouz to rise their spirit against foreign rule. Criticizing the theme of fate vs. personal determination that runs through out the novels of Mahfouz, this thesis strengthen the positive and negative affects of dependence on fate.

The thematic significance of his historical novels, examining his treatment of social, political, and religious themes against the background of 20th century-Egypt is introduced in this thesis where I approached Mahfouz from a historical rather than a literary viewpoint, showing how he reflects the ethos of the Egyptian society as he lived in it and witnessed it, which will be benefitted by other societies of the world facing similar problems.