

A Critique of Arabic Literature and Society:
 Naguib Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days*
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The Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz has a deep interest in both literature and history, yet he questions the manner in which both of these entities are perceived. He strives to change literature by example and through his metaphorical treatment of topics related to literary theory. He also aims to change both the relation between literature and history and the perception of Arabic literature in general. In his novel, *Arabian Nights and Days*, he provides a critique of Egyptian and Arab society and of the manner in which many people in these two groups perceive their place in history. He also provides a critique of contemporary Arabic literature, both in terms of its appreciation by native audiences and its interpretation by foreign ones. Specifically, he encourages the development of new fictional conventions and the use of multiple interpretive perspectives that are dependent neither on outmoded Arab conventions nor on dominant Western approaches. To demonstrate Mahfouz's combination of Arab and Western techniques and his message of change in both literary and non-literary contexts, I will analyze his use of multiple narrative voices and his rupture of unilinear temporality.

Mahfouz is keenly aware of the misconception that people in the West have of Egypt in particular and of the greater Arab community in general. He is familiar with the biased view of Arabs as 'others' who are inferior and he experienced the direct effects of British colonization in Egypt (Selden 190; Said 36). While there are no direct references to Western culture in this novel, the portrayals of certain Middle Eastern cultural aspects appear to stem from a Western perspective. This is evident in the creation of characters' identities based on opposites, negatives, and oppositions with what Western readers would consider "more civilized" groups (Said 52).

An important idea in Mahfouz' novelistic work is the idea of contrapuntalism. In order for contrapuntalism to be applied to a work of literature, both the narrative within the work and the criticism about it must negotiate between the subordinate culture and the dominant system to which they pertain (Robbins, Pratt, Arac, Radhakrishnan, Said 12). It is necessary to use different forms of narration which constitute variations in the treatment of a theme between which a counterpoint is established (11-12). Contrapuntalism is important because it brings together stories that imperialist and nationalist narratives have isolated. It obligates readers to consider opposing perspectives when analyzing a text (Steele 336). It also shows the ability of imperialism to propagate its own narrative and to prevent other narratives from emerging (Robbins, Pratt, Arac, Radhakrishnan, Said 10).

Relevant to the conflict between imperialist and nationalist influences is the revolutionary tendency of much of the literature of the third world. This tendency is reiterated in Mahfouz's belief that literature should have a revolutionary function and that writers should be critical of

negative elements in their societies (Mehrez, *Respected* 65). However, Mahfouz's literature distinguishes itself not only by reacting to circumstances, but also by contributing to a sense of crisis in the Arab world. In the opinion of one critic, it does this by "producing the very historical categories and concepts, including those of rupture and discontinuity, which enable the critical understanding or interrogation of the contemporary; and by defining the historical conditions that allow the contemporary to take place or to make sense" (Makdisi 98). Hence, this trend helps to achieve not only the representation of crisis, but also its actuality (98). In Mahfouz's novel, this is evident on a fictional level in the depiction of a society in turmoil as well as in the portrayal of activities forbidden by Islam such as sexual promiscuity and the indulgence in alcohol and hashish. On a meta-fictional level, it can be seen in the use of literary techniques that deviate from the Arabic tradition.

The narrative style of *Arabian Nights and Days* is an important element in Mahfouz's creation of a literature of crisis. While he uses a variety of novelistic techniques associated with the Western literary tradition, he uses others that are associated with Arabic literature and Islam. In addition, he uses multiple narrative voices—a technique common to both Arabic and Western literature—to question and subvert the greater narrative process. Mahfouz achieves this by using various stories told by or about different characters—often in the form of different chapters. These multiple narratives create a polyphonic text in which they are able to expose their own authorial voices and function as alternative historians (Mehrez, *Egyptian* 14-15). By using characters immersed in an Arab community, Mahfouz attempts to portray the historical, political, and ideological

context in which these stories are possible and necessary. Such stories provide a commentary on history and on the erroneous perceptions of Arabs by the West (8). On a meta-textual level, they subvert the official history by presenting history from a new perspective (7). Like most of Mahfouz's novels, the stories in *Arabian Nights and Days* aim to portray Egyptian society and individuals and to understand the situation in present day Egypt in relation to its history (Somekh 246).

Mahfouz claims that the Arab culture possessed its own novelistic tradition beginning with *A Thousand and One Nights*—more commonly titled *Arabian Nights* in English translations—long before its heightened contact with the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Mahfouz, *Arabic Novel* 66). He also borrows from the aforementioned work in terms of title, themes, characters, and the use of multiple narrative voices. In the beginning of the novel *Arabian Nights and Days*, the sultan Shahriyar has threatened to murder the object of his desire, Shahrzad, if she does not please him sufficiently to offset the tedium from which he suffers. Shahrzad, who is borrowed from *Arabian Nights*, has a reputation for cruelty that is based on, among other things, the routine killing of young virgins who fail to amuse him. While Shahrzad, whose character is borrowed from the same ancient text, is ultimately saved by producing a male heir for the sultan and becoming his wife, the sultan's willingness to wait until the birth to pass judgment is due to her success in entertaining him with a series of stories. The diversionary function of her stories is identical to that of the stories told in *Arabian Nights*. Furthermore, in each case, the multiple narratives serve the purpose of prolonging—and potentially altering—the fate of their narrator.

In *Arabian Nights and Days*, Shahrzad's stories are never narrated and are alluded to only occasionally. However, the novel's chapters parallel her stories in two ways. The first of these is their function as multiple sub-narratives of a greater meta-narrative. Each chapter is titled after the character whose perspective it represents. The characters include people from various socio-economic levels such as Ugr the barber, Ma'rouf the cobbler, Sindbad the merchant, Abdul Qadir the doctor, Abdullah al-Balkhi the sheikh, Dunyazad the sister of the sultana, and Shahriyar the sultan, as well as various members of the government bureaucracy such as governors of the quarter, private secretaries, and police chiefs. Each of these characters is an archetype which represents a different level of the social hierarchy and a different aspect of city life (Jayyusi 14).

The second parallel between Shahrzad's stories and the novel's chapters is their effect on the sultan. One result of her stories is the sultan's decision to delay her execution. Since this gives her time to bear a son and, consequently, to win the sultan's hand in marriage, it ultimately puts a stop to his execution of innocent virgins. However, her stories also worsen the sultan's despondency. When his vizier suggests that his emotional condition is only temporary, the sultan responds, "No, it is one of the conditions of being—and did Shahrzad's stories tell me of anything apart from death?" (Mahfouz, *Nights* 55). The novel's chapters, while not narrated directly to the sultan, provide a commentary on the problems in his kingdom. Although the sultan is saddened when he learns of these problems, he makes positive reforms his government and, in doing so, diminishes the suffering of his people. The power of Shahrzad's stories is due to their diversionary function of drawing the sultan's attention away

from the frustrations of his daily existence. Conversely, the power of the novel's chapters can be attributed to the manner in which they present to the sultan the terrible reality of his kingdom and the urgent need for change. In effect, they subvert his erroneous perception of society. Their function parallels that of Mahfouz's writing, which is to provide an alternative view of Arab culture.

Another element borrowed from the Arab tradition is the use of stories that span multiple chapters, which parallels narrative techniques used in the Qur'an. Neither *Arabian Nights and Days* nor the Qur'an follows a monotonous diachronic sequence. Instead, they both proceed according to dramatic requirements which indicate where different parts of the story should be located. In the Qur'an, a single story may span several suras or divisions (Mahfouz, *Arabic Novel* 66). Likewise, in Mahfouz's novel, some sub-narratives continue from one chapter to the next. In such cases, there is a clear narrative continuity at the end of the first chapter and the beginning of the subsequent one. Also, the transition from one sub-narrative to the next occurs after the beginning of the second chapter. This narrative technique is significant both as an example of Arabic literary heritage and as a deviation from the expectations of a reader.

One example of this is the tale of Ma'rouf the cobbler. His story begins in a chapter named after him with a description of his difficult living conditions: "His earnings were meager and his wife Firdaus al-Urra was greedy, covetous, and ill-tempered, a woman of strength and violence. His life was hell, divided between the daily toil and marriage (Mahfouz, *Nights* 194). The story describes his gradual transition from weakness and poverty to power and

wealth as a result of his discovery of the legendary ring of Solomon. Through his possession of the ring and his performance of various miracles, he gains the respect of people who once looked down on him, including members of the government bureaucracy and even the sultan himself. Ultimately, he is elevated to the position of governor of his quarter in the city. His story spans parts of two chapters—one bearing his own name and a subsequent one titled “Sindbad.”

The chapter “Sindbad” begins by narrating several of Ma’rouf’s political measures which constitute a reform of the government under his authority. When the sultan’s vizier questions the appropriateness of allowing someone with no former administrative experience to govern, the sultan responds by saying “Let us venture upon a new experience” (Mahfouz, *Nights* 207). While Ma’rouf’s name is only mentioned twice at the beginning of this chapter, the consequences of his decisions are evident throughout it. One example is Sindbad’s escort to the sultan by the new chief of police. This chief of police had formerly been branded a madman, but under the new name of “Abdullah the Sane” (207), he is given a government post by Ma’rouf. Both he and Ma’rouf represent a new government that is trusted by the general populace. In addition, they provide two examples of how people of humble origin have risen to positions of influence and prestige. In a political and cultural context, this shift suggests the change which Mahfouz views as necessary for the realization of the Arab Renaissance and for the resolution to the crisis of Arab modernity.

The crisis which Mahfouz’s work aims to influence is related to the search for modernity in the Arab world,

which, in turn, is based on the concept of modernity established by Europeans (Makdisi 96). The texts that pertain to Arab modernism have all been produced in reaction to certain ruptures with the past in the form of localized crises such as revolutions or civil wars. They also respond to “the shared Arab experience of imperialism—including its recent configurations—and with other shared Arab crises, including the ongoing confrontations with Israel, Europe, and the United States” (97). Arab nationalism also contests both political and narrative strategies, which in the words of one critic, are

based on narrowly conceived nationalism, on teleology, on a unilinear sense of history, and on modernity as defined either by capitalist institutions or by socialist revolutions that both hold open the promise of what turns out to be a perpetually deferred future happiness. And hence it stakes its claims both in opposition to the West as well as to the various Arab states as they actually exist. (Makdisi 98)

It is important to note that Mahfouz’s novels reject both the return to a mythic past associated with the Arab traditionalists and the great leap forward suggested by the Arab Renaissance. They focus on the “highly unstable and contradictory present, one that defies the convenient and false reassurances of new and old political, religious, and literary dogmatism” (Makdisi 99). In the Arab modernist view, these conditions can only be escaped when Eurocentric understanding of “modernity” and “tradition” is left behind and new views of history are constructed in which Arabs are acknowledged to the same degree as other groups of people (99-100).

In much of his writing, Mahfouz functions as an underground historian (Beard 105; Mehrez, *Egyptian* 16). While one of his goals is to present the history of his own country and region from a perspective with which many Western readers are unacquainted, he also comments on the relationship between literature and history. He indicates that they are not homogeneous entities and that different techniques are shared and mixed among them (Mehrez, *Egyptian* 2). According to one critic, "History" is defined as "a relation of incidents (in early use, either true or imaginary, later only those professedly true), a narrative, tale or story" (2). "Story," on the other hand, may refer to "a narrative true or presumed to be true" or in a meaning that is now obsolete, "to record historically; to relate the history of; in later use, to tell as a story, to tell the story of" (2). The concepts of "story" and "history" have a mutual influence on each other and the boundaries between them are constantly shifting (1).

History and literature complement each other and work together to enhance people's understanding of society (Mehrez, *Egyptian* 4). Literature often fills the silences left by the official history, but, at the same time, it creates silences of its own (7). Modern storytellers, who are often involved in the production of counterculture, participate in the rewriting of the dominant historical record from a new perspective. They produce "a discourse on the discourse and as such their writings are not innocent, they are not 'value-free'; rather they are interested, with a purpose, and are therefore of a political and ideological nature" (Mehrez, *Egyptian* 7). These tendencies are apparent in Mahfouz's work.

Mahfouz's treatment of the themes of modernity and history can be seen in his rupture of the unilinear

temporality associated with the Arab Renaissance. The Arab Renaissance treats history as an uncomplicated flow toward a completed state of modernity (Makdisi 98). Mahfouz's view, on the other hand, is more in keeping with Arab modernism, which presents modernity as a contemporary condition instead of as a future goal. According to one critic whose opinions are similar to those of Mahfouz, Arab modernism is a complicated and ongoing process that will be "a forever incomplete mixture of various scales and 'stages' of development, as a forever incomplete mixture of styles, forms, narratives, and tropes, as a process whose 'completion' implies and involves a continuous lack of completion" (111). These theoretical concepts have several parallels in the novel. The idea of the complicated, multi-threaded process of modernization is paralleled by the intermingling of different sub-narratives, the intervention of genies in the lives of humans, and the intersection of dreams with reality. The idea of a multi-staged development can be seen in the continual dismissal or assassination of employees at different levels of the government bureaucracy, the employment of cobblers and madmen in influential government posts, and ultimately, the sultan's abdication and his abandonment of both his family and city.

One example of a rupture of the unilinear temporality is implicit in Shahriyar's return to his city after a long departure and in his inability to comprehend the changes that have occurred. After awakening from a dream at the end of the novel and finding himself lying and weeping in the desert in the outskirts of the city he once ruled, he is apprehended by the police chief Abdullah the Sane, who inquires about the cause of his sadness. His reply, "All

creatures weep from pain of parting" (Mahfouz, *Nights* 228), suggests the parting from the glorious past associated with the Arab traditionalists. When Abdullah inquires as to whether he has a place of abode, Shahriyar answers negatively. This response implies his homelessness within his own city. It also parallels his shift from position of seeming omnipotence to one of utter powerlessness. Abdullah, after offering Shahriyar a new place to rest under the shade of a palm tree, makes a final soliloquy whose overtones underscore the purpose of the book:

It is not an indication of truth's jealousy that it has not made for anyone a path to it, and that it has not deprived anyone of the hope of attaining it, and it has left people running in the deserts of perplexity and drowning in the seas of doubt; and he who thinks he has attained it, it dissociates itself from, and he who thinks he has dissociated himself from it has lost his way. Thus there is no attaining it and no avoiding it—it is inescapable. (228)

While there is no explicit reference in this quotation to the concept of Arab modernity, there are significant parallels. The absence of a path to truth could imply the lack of unilinear progress to goal of modernity. The difficulties associated with the pursuit of truth and the impossibility of recognizing it suggests its elusiveness, which is reminiscent of the elusiveness of modernity. Furthermore, the inability to consciously attain it or escape it parallels the idea that it is a current condition rather than a future goal. This also suggests that, such an ideal form of modernity is no longer attainable and that, in order to more fully recognize the existence of Arab modernity, it may be necessary to reconfigure one's expectations of it (Makdisi 111). When

Shahzad openly expresses her affection for him and her desire for him to stay, he reiterates his isolated status by saying, "I no longer look to the hearts of humankind" (Mahfouz, *Nights* 218). Shortly after making this statement, the sultan abandons his throne and his family and embarks on a personal spiritual journey in which he confesses his sins and is ultimately led to forget the past.

Letting go of the past and embracing the present is one of Mahfouz' overarching goals and reinforces the rupture of unilinear temporality. It is implied numerous times throughout the novel by the repeated assassinations of corrupt government officials, their replacement by new people whose corruption ultimately leads to their own deaths, and the sultan's decision to install poor people in positions of power. It is also evident in the sultan's conversation with Sindbad the merchant about his travels. When the sultan inquires about what Sindbad has learned during his travels, the latter responds with the admonition, "to continue with worn out traditions is dangerous" (Mahfouz, *Nights* 213). In the most obvious sense—on both the textual and the meta-textual levels—this statement serves as a critique of the government. However, it could also be a subtle implication about the need to adopt new approaches in both the creation and interpretation of Arabic literature. The sultan seems to heed Sindbad's warning, for later in their conversation he acknowledges that "Traditions are the past and of the past there are things that must become outdated" (214). While these lessons are narrated within the context of Sindbad's experiences, they can be applied to the dilemmas faced by society as a whole.

The need to let go of the past is also implied by the sultan Shahriyar's transcendent dream-like experience near the end of the novel. In this episode, he is transported to a heaven-like city where he is summarily escorted to the royal palace and married to the queen. When he tells the queen of his unprecedented happiness after what appears to be several years of marriage, she says to him, "You will know true happiness when you forget the past completely" (Mahfouz, *Nights* 226). Shortly thereafter, his curiosity leads him to enter a forbidden chamber where he is suddenly seized by a giant. After begging for mercy, he is placed on the ground and his dream abruptly ends. At this point, Shahriyar finally sees himself for what he is—an aging vagabond living in the periphery of the kingdom he once ruled. The problems depicted in this sub-narrative, as well as in other parts of the novel, focus on themes such as the nature of madness, the alienation of modern man, and his search for consolation, all of which are principal concerns of Mahfouz (Allen 36). They also involve dilemmas between "love or career, happiness or power, peace of mind or wealth" (Malak 6). On a symbolic level, these dilemmas represent the conflicts between "cardinal and enduring values on the one hand and superficial and ephemeral ones on the other" (6-7). The implicit lessons in Shahriyar's experience underscore the values associated with the quest for Arab modernity.

In *Arabian Nights and Days*, Naguib Mahfouz focuses on the necessity of change and implies the importance of circumspection. In the local context of his native Egypt, and in the broader context of the Arab region, he emphasizes the need to acknowledge and resolve current social, cultural, and political dilemmas. While he is able to reconcile the influences of science, socialism, Marxism, and

religion in his own thought, some of his critics are unable to do so. Most of the people whom Mahfouz acknowledges as his cultural influences, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Darwin, and Karl Marx, are associated with Western culture and are regarded as atheists and materialists by Islamists (Najjar 139). One of the few Arab thinkers whom Mahfouz cites as an influence is the Christian intellectual Salama Musa. However, this person has socialist and secularist leanings and is suspected by Islamic critics of seeking to destroy Islamic culture to be replaced with Western culture and materialism (142).

While *Arabian Nights and Days* can easily be appreciated on the basis of its fanciful depiction of an exotic culture, it also contains important elements which relate to Mahfouz's goals regarding literature, culture, and history. These include a mixture of literary techniques from both the Arab and the Western traditions, the use of multiple sub-narratives, and the rupture of unilinear temporality. Through his treatment of these topics, he also implies the lack of fixed point of reference for the reader and the lack of a decisive conclusion, in regard to both the outcome of the plot and the development of modern Egyptian and Arabic cultures. In regard to Arabic literature and culture, Mahfouz rejects both the return to the mythic past associated with Arab traditionalists and the great leap forward proposed by the Arab Renaissance (Makdisi 99). He exposes the futility of clinging to outmoded conventions on the fictional level and attempts to influence the development of new conventions for writing on the meta-fictional level. While his writing and thought embody elements of both Eastern and Western cultural systems which, at times, appear to be in conflict, he underscores the need to view controversial situations in literature, culture, and history from multiple

perspectives. One application of this is for Arabs to disassociate themselves from Western principles in the process of structuring and evaluating their own literature and society. Another application is for foreign readers and other cultural observers to interpret Arab literature and society from a non-Western perspective.

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