

ARABIC FICTION

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Modern Arabic Novel : Naguib Mahfouz

Nation and Society in the Modern Arabic Novel.

The birth of the novel. In 1988, Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz (1913-2006) won the Nobel Prize for literature. In a sense, his career spans most of the history of the novel in Arabic and is exemplary of the rise of the novel as the prestige genre in Arabic literature. In the 1860s and 1870s, Lebanese writers translated works such as Alexander Dumas' *Count of Monte Cristo* (1870), Bernadin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul and Virginie* (1872), and Jules Verne's *Five Weeks in a Balloon*. Around the same period, writers such as Salīm al-Bustānī (d. 1884) and Yaqoub Sarruf (1852-1927) wrote original novels inspired by Western works, and usually involving Western settings and characters, apparently because the limited interaction between the genders in Arab societies made it more difficult to tell love stories of the type common in Western novels. Such early works had simple characters, involved adventure and romance, and concluded with a happy ending. In the next stage, authors turned to historical novels in order to write about an Arab or Middle Eastern contexts without having to make difficult decisions about how to portray contemporary reality. One of the most important writers in this regard was Jurji Zaidan (1861-1914), whose twenty historical novels, serialized in his journal *Hilal* between 1891 and 1914, depicted episodes in Islamic history. The next stage involved the writing of novels that involved realistic settings in contemporary Arab societies and involved complex Arab characters. By this stage, the Arabic novel took on a life of its own.

Historical novels. Naguib Mahfouz's work followed similar stages. Born in 1911, he studied philosophy at Cairo University and was influenced by the logical positivism of Auguste Comte. As a student in the university, he began writing articles on philosophy and literature for *al-Majallah al-jadidah*, a journal published by the socialist thinker Salama Musa (1887-1958). His early work was heavily indebted to the conventions of English and French novels. His first major works were three historical novels set in Pharaonic Egypt: *Abath al-Aqdar (Khufu's Wisdom)*, 1939), *Radubis (Rhadopis of Nubia)*, 1943), and *Kifah Tiba (Thebes at War)*, 1944), following in the tradition of Jurji Zaidan but focusing on Egyptian history in particular and on Pharaonic rather than Islamic history. These novels were allegorical, referring to contemporary Egyptian politics indirectly; the tyranny and caprice of the Pharaoh in *Radubis* are clearly intended as a commentary on the rule of King Farouk (1937-1952). It is said that Naguib Mahfouz originally intended to write a long series of historical novels modeled on Sir Walter Scott's oeuvre, but later abandoned the plan.

Cairene society. In the next stage of his novelistic career, from World War II through the 1950's, Mahfouz treated contemporary Egyptian history, society, and politics, focusing on the city of Cairo, as Dickens had done for London and Balzac and Zola for Paris. *Khan al-Khalili* (1945), *al-Qahira al-Jadida (Cairo Modern)*, 1946), *Zuqaq al-Midaqq (Midaq Alley)*, 1947), *Bidayah wa-Nihayah (Beginning and End)*, 1951) all dealt with Egyptian society immediately before, during, and after World War II. His magnum opus, however, was his Trilogy, published in 1956-57 but clearly written earlier, each part of which bears as its title the name of a street in the traditional quarters of Cairo: *Bayn al-Qasrayn*, *Qasr al-Shawq*, and *al-Sukkariyya*. The trilogy is a grand saga that follows a single family through several generations, beginning with the nationalist fervor that led to the revolt of 1919, and ending in 1944. Combining insightful accounts of Egyptian political history with brilliant characterization and the perceptive treatment of Egyptian societal norms, it established Naguib Mahfouz as a major literary figure and the premier novelist of Egypt.

New approaches. In the late 1950s, Mahfouz turned to more experimental and introspective forms, adopting techniques such as stream-of-consciousness narration. In *Awlad Haritna* (literally "The Children of Our Alley," but translated as *The Children of Gebelawi*, 1959) is an allegorical novel about religious history, the 114 chapters of which match the number of surahs of the Qur'an. The inhabitants of the alley represent society as it experiences a series of prophecies, and the heroes of the alley represent prophetic

figures such as Adam, Cain and Abel, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and the final prophet, the man of science and rational inquiry. Gebelawi ("Mountain Man") represents God. Published in Beirut in 1959, the work was banned in Egypt as blasphemous. Other works from this period continued to focus on contemporary Egyptian society and politics. In *Al-Liss wa'l-kilab* (*The Thief and the Dogs*, 1961), Mahfouz studies in depth the mind of one protagonist, a disenchanting revolutionary idealist, and makes extensive use of stream-of-consciousness narrative. *Tharthara fawq al-Nil* (*Chatter on the Nile*, 1966) describes the escapist and morally questionable character of a group of intellectuals who gather for parties on a Nile houseboat. *Al-Karnak* (1974) treats the fear and oppression caused by the eavesdropping, informing, secret arrests and torture engaged in by Nasser's police state. *Yawm Maqtal al-Za'im* (*The Day the Leader Was Assassinated*, 1985), the last of these works, describes the politics surrounding the assassination of Sadat in 1981. Subsequently, Mahfouz wrote novels that drew on key works of Arabic and Islamic literary heritage, such as *Rihlat Ibn Fattuma* (*The Travels of Ibn Fattuma*, 1988), which draws on *Rihlat Ibn Battuta* (The Travels of Ibn Battuta (d. 1369)), the most famous medieval Muslim travel account, to create an allegory about political and economic systems. Similarly, his *Arabian Nights and Days* draws on *The 1001 Nights*. By the 1980s, he was being outstripped in innovation and creativity by younger generations of writers such as Gamal al-Ghitani. Mahfouz was stabbed in the neck in 1994 by a Muslim fundamentalist but continued to write and to attend literary salons despite declining health and hearing problems. He died in Cairo in 2006 at the age of 94.

Miramar. In Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Miramar* (1967), the reading for this week, the central conceit is the use of a building, a pension house in Alexandria, as a microcosm of Egyptian society. The various inhabitants of this small boarding house represent social types, examples of Egypt's various classes, along with their associated professions, political views, and cultural perspectives, set against the complex historical layers of Egyptian society. *Miramar* portrays Egypt under Nasser's regime in the early 1960s, not long after the 1952 revolution, when revolutionary discourse was alive and well but dissent was evident among those who had witnessed the heavy-handed tactics of the government rule through a one-party system and were disillusioned by corruption and the contrast between ideals and political realities. *Miramar* tells the story from the point of view of multiple narrators, a technique that Faulkner had used it to such effect in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and which subsequently was emulated in Arabic literature not just in *Miramar* but in a number of other Arabic novels such as the Palestinian Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *The Ship* (1970), just as it was imitated in many other world literatures.

Questions

Read *Miramar*. Think about the following questions, and answer three in writing.

Briefly describe the characters who live in the Miramar hotel. What classes and backgrounds do they represent?

Most of Naguib Mahfouz's novels and short stories are set in Cairo, and many in the traditional quarters near where he grew up. Why is this work set in Alexandria?

Why is the central setting in the novel a pension house? What does this say about the boarders in the pension?

What does the character of Zohra represent in the novel? What does the attention she gets from the male characters represent?

What is the overall message of *Miramar* about Egyptian culture and politics?

What role does religion play in the work?

Reading

Naguib Mahfouz, *Miramar*.

Further Reading

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Modern Arabic Novel : Tayeb Salih

The Colonial Predicament in the Modern Arabic Novel

Tayeb Salih. Tayeb Salih was born in a village near El-Debba in northern Sudan in 1929. He attended school in Port Sudan and Omdurman, and the University in Khartoum. After working briefly as a teacher, he traveled to London and completed a degree in international relations at the University of London. Remaining in England, he wrote a literary column for *al-Majalla*, an Arabic-language publication in England and worked for the Arabic Section of the BBC for many years. He subsequently became the director of Qatar's Ministry of Information, and then worked for UNESCO, based in Paris. He retired to London, where he died in 2009.

Works. Tayeb Salih began publishing literary works in the 1960s. He published a collection of stories, *The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid*, in 1960, and the novella *The Wedding of Zein* in 1962. His most famous and accomplished work, the novel *Season of Migration to the North*, was serialized in the Lebanese journal *Hilal* in 1966 and published as a complete work in 1967. He began working on a trilogy of novels but finished only the first two, *Daww al-Bayt* (The Light of the House) and *Mariud* (or *Bandarshah*), in 1971 and 1976. Most of his works are set in his native region in northern Sudan and describe traditional society in villages by the Nile, as well as the effects of outside political decisions and colonialism on such communities.

Season of Migration to the North. This complex work is considered by many critics to be the best Arabic novel. The narrator, a young man who has spent the last seven years in England studying an obscure English poet, returns to his native village of Wad Hamad hoping to work toward the progress of his nation in the post-independence era. He is puzzled by the presence of a stranger among the villagers, the enigmatic Mustafa Sa'eed, who, it turns out, was also educated in England. The bulk of the novel is made up of Mustafa Sa'eed's narration of his story to the narrator. The narration in the novel is quite complex, as is the treatment of time, and the two characters are at some points difficult to distinguish. *Season of Migration to the North* is a commentary on colonialism and its aftermath, and it has rightly been described as an example of Africa's writing back to the colonial powers. Several critics have noted that it reverses, in a sense, Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*: rather than portraying Western colonists going up the river Congo into the heart of the colony, it portrays a colonist going from the river Nile to the heart of the Empire, London. Mustafa Sa'eed plays upon and exploits the exotic fantasies the English have about Africa and Arabs, and becomes a brilliant lecturer in economics, the science that was supposed to magically cure the ills of the developing world and improve international relations overall. The work draws in innovative ways on a number of European literary sources, in addition to *The Heart of Darkness*: *Othello* (mentioned explicitly in the text), Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus*, and Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*.

Questions

What do the narrator and the character of Mustafa Saeed have in common? What happens to their identities in the course of the novel? What message does this convey to the audience?

Describe Mustafa Saeed's relationships with women in Britain. How does this reflect on the relationship between the culture of the colonizers and that of the colonized?

The relationship between Mustafa Saeed and Jean Morris is particularly intense and has been likened to that between Othello and Desdemona in Shakespeare's play *Othello*. Compare and contrast the two relationships. What roles do they serve in their respective works?

In *Season of Migration to the North* what are the results of colonization? How are Sudan and Britain related during the colonial period and after independence? What is problematic about the relationship?

How does the novel portray women and marriage in the village in Sudan? What does the character of Bint Majzoub reveal?

Explain the last scene in the novel. Does the narrator drown or not? Why or why not?

The colonial experience is described as an infectious disease at several points in the novel. How is this idea borne out in the plot?

What roles does education play in the novel? How does the novel differ from a typical European *Bildungsroman*? In many Arabic novels portraying a similar attempt to cross cultures, education provides a miraculous but simple fix, allowing the protagonist to benefit from Western knowledge, cultural advancement, and technology while remaining loyal to his authentic native culture. How does education in this novel differ?

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* portrays a young British man's journey up the River Congo into the heart of Africa, the dark continent, while *Season of Migration to the North* depicts the opposite journey of a young Sudanese man to London, the heart of the colonial power. Compare and contrast the two works.

Reading

Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*.

Further Reading

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Modern Arabic Novel : Ahlam Mostaghanemi

The Colonial Predicament in the Modern Arabic Novel .

Ahlam Mostaghanemi. A female Algerian novelist born in 1953, Mostaghanemi lived in Tunisia as a child, while her father, Mohammed Cherif, in the Algerian resistance against the French, continued to participate clandestinely in the war of independence (1954-1962) across the border. After Algerian independence, her family returned to their native city, Constantine, and she joined the first generation of modern Algerians to complete their education in Arabic. When she obtained a B.A. in literature at the University of Algiers in 1973, she was already a recognized writer, having published the collection of poetry *'Ala Marfa' al-Ayyam (In the Harbor of Days)*. She went on to receive a doctorate in sociology from the Sorbonne in 1982. Her thesis, *Algeria, Women, and Writing*, completed under the supervision of Jacques Berque, was published soon after. Mostaghanemi published her first novel, *Dhakirat al-jasad (Memory in the Flesh)* in Beirut in 1993 but wrote it earlier. She has published several novels since then, including *Chaos of the Senses* (1997), *Passerby a Bed* (2003), and *nessyane.com (The Art of Forgetting)*, (2009), and most recently *Black Suits You* (2012). She now lives in Beirut, Lebanon, where she settled after marrying a Lebanese journalist.

Memory in the Flesh. Written ca. 1985, this work is considered one of the best Arabic novels by a woman writer and was awarded the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 1998. In it, Mostaghanemi portrays four decades of the history of Eastern Algeria, and the city of Constantine in particular, from the nationalist revolt against the French occupation in Eastern Algeria in 1945 to the 1980s, two decades after independence. The novel has two main characters: Khalid, the narrator, who writes the novel as a memoir, and Ahlam, a younger woman, with whom he has an affair. The two are bound both by the nationalist struggle and art. Ahlam's father, Si Tahir Abd al-Mawla, was Khaled's commander in the resistance, and after Khalid lost an arm in battle, Si Tahir sent him to safety across the border in Tunisia and entrusted him to register his newborn daughter with the name he had chosen: Ahlam (literally "dreams", also the name of the author). Khalid was thus a surrogate father to her in her infancy, something more important because her real father was killed before he could leave the guerillas he was leading to see her. Khalid and Ahlam also share in being creative artists; he is a painter and writer, and she is also a writer. The novel's most obvious—and perhaps surprising—complexity is that it tells Ahlam's story through the narration of Khalid, even though the novel is autobiographical in many aspects.

Colonialism and independence. Algeria's colonial experience was longer and more intense than that of any other Arab nation. France invaded Algeria in 1830, long before the British entered Egypt in 1882, and Algeria remained under French control for over 130 years, gaining independence after a bloody war 1954-1962. The French actually annexed Algeria, declaring it a department of France rather than an overseas colony, and encouraged the settlement of French citizens there. There were many revolts and acts of resistance, including the 1945 revolt in Eastern Algeria which figures prominently in the first chapter of *Memory in the Flesh*. The French crackdown on rebels was quite ferocious, and the war of independence, though eventually successful, produced an enormous number of casualties, causing it to become known as the war of a million martyrs. After independence, Algeria, like many newly independent Arab nations, adopted a single party system that stunted democratization and ensured that the military would remain dominant in the government. The adoption of an isolationist political stance and a socialist economy failed to produce the prosperity and social progress that many Algerians had hoped for. A major theme in *Memory in the Flesh* is the corruption of political appointees and the military officers in the post-independence period.

Themes. *Memory in the Flesh* is complex in its themes, commenting as it does on nationalism,

colonialism, language, memory, cultural identity, literature, and art. It refers pointedly to the development of a female writer, describing the novel that Ahlam, the main character, had written by the age of 26, and to the Francophone Algerian poet and novelist, Malek Haddad (1927-1978), who exerted a formative influence on Mosteghanemi. Intertwined with this is the story of Khalid, who turned to painting after losing his arm. Both use their art as a coping mechanism, and through it, they develop a passionate affair that is never consummated but nevertheless is the apparent cause of the novel's existence. The six chapters of the novel move between Constantine and Paris several times, portraying the life of an exiled Algerian intellectual in the metropole and his conflicted relationship with the homeland. Mostaghanemi succeeds in developing the main characters as rounded individuals while still using them to represent conventional social types.

Questions

What is the significance assigned to names in the novel? The heroine was originally given the name *Hayat* ("Life"), she was almost named *Manubiyya* after a Tunisian saint, and her father gave her the name *Ahlam* ("Dreams"). What is the significance of the act of renaming her? What is the significance of each name?

Dreams are mentioned continually throughout the novel. What message does the work convey about them?

What is special about place in general and the city of Constantine in particular in the novel?

What is the work's critique of Algerian nationalism after independence from France in 1962?

What is the role of a writer or painter, and what does he or she accomplish by creating a work of art?

What does the novel reveal about language? What roles are played by French, literary Arabic, and the Arabic dialect of Constantine?

The novel refers several times to the saying "Mountains do not meet, (but people do)." This ordinarily means, "It's a small world," referring to an actual or possible meeting with an acquaintance far from home under unexpected circumstances. How is it used and interpreted in the novel?

Bridges appear constantly in the novel. Why? What do they represent, and how are they related to the main plot and characters?

How is Algerian nationalism related to Arab nationalism? What role does the character of Ziad, the Palestinian poet, play in the work?

Reading

Ahlam Mostaghanemi, *Memory in the Flesh*.

Further Reading

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Modern Arabic Short Story : Yusuf Idris

The short story. The short story was another of the European genres that was adopted into Arabic literature. Certainly, myriad anecdotes and stories existed throughout the history of Arabic literature, but the modern Arabic short story is undeniably related to the tradition of the European short story, of the sort authored by Balzac (1799-1850) and Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893). It only became firmly established as a standard Arabic literary genre in the twentieth century, first in Egypt and Lebanon, especially through the medium of newspapers and journals. One of the leading early practitioners of the genre was Mahmud Taymur (1894-1973), who adopted as his pen-name “the Egyptian Maupassant.” Also important was the gifted humorist and stylist, al-Mazini (1889-1949), who captured with his imaginative and elegant prose the foibles of the Egypt’s middle class in the period between the two world wars. Yusuf Idris, like al-Mazini, excels in insight, economy of expression, and ironic humor, but he adds biting social criticism.

Yusuf Idris. Yusuf Idris was born in 1927 in a village in the Nile Delta of northern Egypt. Since his father worked for land reclamation projects and often moved, he lived in a number of Delta towns and villages, and sometimes with his grandparents, before the family settled in Cairo when he was fourteen years old. He attended medical school at the University of Cairo and worked after his graduation in 1951 as a doctor at Qasr al- Ayni, the largest public hospital in Cairo. He was politically active as a student and afterwards, protesting against British domination and the corrupt government of King Farouk. He supported the Free Officer’s revolution of 1952, but was soon disillusioned by Gamal Abd el-Nasser’s dictatorial rule and was arrested in 1954 for political dissidence. He joined the Communist party in reaction, but resigned in 1956. While still a medical student, Yusuf Idris began publishing stories in *al-Masri* (The Egyptian), a Cairo newspaper, and in the popular weekly magazine *Rose el Youssef*. His first collection of stories, *The Cheapest Nights*, appeared in 1954, and he published several additional collections in the next few years. He gave up practicing medicine in 1960 in order to devote himself entirely to writing, and fought for six months in the Algerian war of independence from the French in 1961, only returning to Egypt when he was wounded in battle. He worked as an editor of the newspaper *al-Gumhuriyya* (*The Republic*) and continued to write prolifically. From then until his death in 1991, he wrote numerous collections of short stories, which remained his forte, as well as several novels and plays. It is widely reported that Yusuf Idris was surprised and disappointed when the novelist Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1989 and not he. While he showed some hubris in making this sentiment known, many would agree that Yusuf Idris was a bolder and more innovative writer than Naguib Mahfouz.

Themes and concerns. Yusuf Idris’ stories are characterized by humor, irony, sympathy for the poor and the underdog, and a focus on sex. Many stories portray the everyday hardships of peasants and the working class and denounce political oppression and the corruption and hypocrisy of the upper classes. He addresses with candor and insight a large number of topics that were considered taboo in Egyptian society, such as sexual frustration, sexual exploitation, adultery, incest, and homosexuality, along with the many injustices and hypocrisies that permeate Egyptian social and sexual mores. This distinguishes his works sharply from those of Naguib Mahfouz, which are much less bold and stick to important, but less controversial, topics. Mahfouz usually addressed problems that everyone recognized and were already discussing in public fora, while Yusuf Idris addressed problems that people did not want to talk about or were afraid to broach. His stories often appear deceptively simple, use direct, forceful language, and rely to a great extent on linguistic, situational, and dramatic irony. The collection of stories that we will read this week is actually a selection of representative stories from six separate collections published between 1954 and 1970, though its title, *The Cheapest Nights*—from the first story in the collection—is the same as that of his first published collection, from 1954.

Questions

Explain the story “The Cheapest Nights” (pp. 1-5). Why is the title ironic?

What change occurs in the story “The Errand” (pp. 18-30), how does it occur, and what effect does it have on the audience?

"The Dregs of the City" is one of the most effective portrayals of the hypocrisy of the upper classes and their abuse of the lower classes. Explain how Yusuf Idris achieves this.

What message does "The Shame" (pp. 156-76) convey about Egyptian social and sexual ideologies?

Discuss the treatment of sex in two or more stories.

Discuss the use of irony in the stories.

Discuss interesting uses of language in the stories.

Yusuf Idris was trained and worked as a doctor, and doctors and medicine appear prominently in many of his stories. Do the stories reveal an overall view of medicine or doctors?

Reading

Yusuf Idris, *The Cheapest Nights*.

Further Reading

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