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Theme and Image in Najīb Maḥfūz's Novels of the 1960 's

By *Bermawy Munthe*

The theme of a novel is one of its most important elements. Robert Pewn Warren says, "The theme is what a piece of fiction stacks up to. It is the idea, the significance, the interpretation of persons and events, the pervasive and unifying view of life which is embodied in the total narrative."¹

Najīb Maḥfūz, the most outstanding contemporary Egyptian novelist of Arabic literature, had a new theme in his works of the 1960's. Some critics say that Najīb Maḥfūz had a clear preoccupation, which is the search for a universal ideology of truthfulness and psychological satisfaction.² This vision is actualized clearly in his novels of the 1960's *al-Liṣṣ wa al-Kilāb* (The Thief and the Dogs, 1961), *al-Summān wa al-Kharīf* (Quail and Autumn, 1962), *al-Ṭarīq* (the Search, 1964), *al-Shahḥādh* (the Beggar, 1965), *Tharthara Fauq al-Nīl* (Chattering on the Nile, 1966) and *Mirāmar* (the name of a pension, 1967).

In these novels, it seems that Najīb Maḥfūz devotes himself to the expression of the most internal aspect of the human being. He focuses his theme on depicting the prominence and tragedy of different kinds of spiritual or existential problems of human beings in the Cairo setting after the Second World War and the 1952 Revolution. What Roger Allen says might be true that these novels depict the emphasis shifts from the complex fabric of society itself to an equally complex world of the individual and the sense of alienation felt by modern man when faced with the pressures of life in today's world.³ These tragedies, spiritual

¹ Robert Pewn Warren, *Understanding Fiction*. (New York: Meredith Corporation, 1959), 273.

² Rajā al-Naqqāsh, *Udabāu Mu 'āṣirūn*, (Baghdad: Dār al-Ḥurriya li al-Ṭiba'a 1973), 137.

³ Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: an Historical and Critical Introduction*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 59.

catastrophes and malaise are embodied in an ambiguous illustration which has been an essential element in Najīb Maḥfūz's writing. It is always tempting and often fruitful to seek for symbols and metaphors in his work.

This essay is an attempt to figure out the main trend of Najīb Maḥfūz's thematic trend and its images by studying these novels.

II

On the one hand, it might be true that the social theme of the novels of the 1960's is not altogether absent. This theme can be understood in these novels. On the other hand, the novels tend to emphasize the more specific theme. Here, he is concerned with existential problems of the human being, namely anxiety, loneliness, the worthlessness of life. Sasson Somekh says that the general trend that concerns the author is a deepening spiritual malaise.⁴ Further, he states that meticulous concern with external reality gradually gives way to an over growing introspection.⁵ 'Abd Allah 'Awad al-Khabbāsh says that these novels are considered as social and philosophical novels.⁶ Briefly, the shifting of the theme from pure reality towards metaphysical considerations is the prominent feature of these novels.

In the novel *al-Liṣṣ wa al-Kilāb*, Najīb Maḥfūz provides a down-to-earth setting and motivation. The interest in the external circumstances is reduced, but the more intimate aspects of the crises are given prominence. Moreover, the story has a strong air of mysticism as well as reference is repeatedly made to search for certainty.

Here, Najīb Maḥfūz illustrates the story with the theme of the social reality of contemporary Egypt. *al-Liṣṣ wa al-Kilāb* depicts its protagonist, Sa'īd Mahrān, as a thief who is just released from prison after getting amnesty on the anniversary of the Revolution. He wants to become an honest man, but cannot find help to achieve the goal. Sa'īd feels betrayed not only by his wife, who has deserted him while he was in prison, but also by Ra'uf Ilwān, a journalist who has abandoned his former radical position toward society and the rights of the poor in favour of a life of prosperity. Further, *al-Liṣṣ wa al-Kilāb* portrays the character as he comes to believe that his mission of revenge is aimed at

⁴Sasson Somekh, *The Changing Rhythm: a Study of Najīb Maḥfūz's Novel* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1973), 156.

⁵Ibid., 157.

⁶'Abd Allah 'Awad al-Khabbāsh, *Sayyid Quth al-Adīb al-Nāqid*, (algeria: Shirka al-Saḥāb li al-Nashr wa al-Tauzī, nd), 60.

all traitors and bullies, and his action is considered as a legal social protest although his struggle ends in his destruction.

Clearly the hero is in a state of anxiety which has two aspects, namely loneliness and the awareness of impending death. Because the thief murdered a man, he is doomed. Moreover, his loneliness is almost total; he is an outcast from the law-abiding society. He is rejected by his own gang because now another leader has taken control. The latter used to be the thief's henchman but he betrayed him and took his place; the thief's wife left him and married the new gang leader and his little daughter no longer recognizes her father.

By using the appropriate word, the novel *al-Liṣṣ wa al-Kilāb* is a complex parable. "Dogs" in the title of the story signifies the police hounds which in the end surround the thief. But, this is also the term used by the thief for the police themselves. In a broader sense, it signifies all of those who betrayed him. In a conversation between the thief and his lover, the prostitute, he says, "The majority of our people are not afraid of thieves, nor do they hate them; but they instinctively hate dogs."⁷

Najīb Maḥfūz's setting of the theme in his *al-Summān wa al-Kharīf*⁸ is the subject of the contemporary political situation. 'Isā Dabbāgh, the hero of the story, is an ambitious high ranking official in the Wafd government. However, after the Revolution he is dismissed.⁹ It seems that there is a sharp awareness of the political scene, as it will be repeated in his next novel *Tharthara Fauq al-Nīl*.

The novel reveals the crises of conscience and commitment. It implies that man needs a position which makes him live in peace and he needs a position which makes depends on it, because the losing position in one's life means a spiritual catastrophe.¹⁰ After his promising career is in ruin following the 1952 Revolution, 'Isā al-Dabbāgh becomes an "outsider" of his society. He cannot find a way to make his peace with the new society and realities because he cannot compromise with them. In other words, he cuts himself from the mainstream of society, thereby destroying himself as a person.

⁷Najīb Maḥfūz, *al-Liṣṣ wa al-Kilāb*, 126.

⁸Sasson Somekh considers that the novel comes as close as any being a straight forward political novel. See *The Changing Rhythm...*, 159.

⁹Najīb Maḥfūz, *al-Summān wa al-Kharīf*, Cairo: Maktaba Miṣr, 1974), 55-56.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 126-127.

In addition, the novel clearly illustrates the character's malaise. Soon after he is dismissed from office, his fiancée breaks their engagement and marries his cousin who is associated with the new regime. The very sad thing is that he is no longer recognized as a father by his daughter.¹¹ Eventually, he meets a prostitute and moves in with her. But, when he discovers that she is going to have his baby, they part company.

It seems that the novel describes its theme in symbolic style; it might be in the content it its atmosphere. What "Isā al-Dabbāgh faces symbolizes the psychological problem of modern man. Rajā al-Naqqāsh says that the problem which is treated has its own background. This problem has similarity with the dehumanism which touches our time, namely, the feeling of the outsider or the feeling that the human being is dismissed from the world.¹² Muṣṭafā Alī 'Umar says that 'Isā al-Dabbāgh represents the characteristic of the young Egyptian generation before the 1952 Revolution when many educated young people are involved in political parties; especially the Wafd as a major party. Furthermore, the atmosphere of the room which is full of the smell of cigarettes and the dark walls in the room¹³ are a symbolical portrait which against 'Isā al-Dabbāgh waiting for the dark future.

The social illness is well illustrated in *al-Ṭarīq*. Najīb Maḥfūz portrays his character, Ṣābir, in a journey of looking for his lost father because his mother told him to do so on her death bed, also because he hoped that his father might have property. But in the way of search, he becomes interested in two women, one of whom cause him to kill her aged husband and later he kills the women. Finally, he is sentenced to death for these crimes when he finds a clue to the identity of his lost father.

The spiritual malaise is clear in *al-Ṭarīq*. It describes a fruitless search which is presented even more saliently in his theme in the most allegorical technique. Sasson Somekh says, "... the novel has many indications of being a double-layered story; in other words, the lost father who is sought by Ṣābir is more than a flash and blood one."¹⁴ Ḥilmī Muḥammad al-Qā'ūd says that Najīb Maḥfūz illustrates the human being's problem in the world supported by religious and spiritual lights.¹⁵

¹¹Ibid., 179-1980.

¹²Rajā' al-Naqqash, 'Udabā' Mu'āṣirūn, (Baghdad: Dār al-Ḥurriya li al-Ṭibā'a, 1972) 127-128.

¹³Najīb Maḥfūz, *al-Summān wa al-Kharīf*, 50.

¹⁴Sasson Somekh *The Changing Rhythm...*, 157.

¹⁵(Ḥilmī Muḥammad al-Qā'ūd, *Mausim al-Bath 'an Huwiyya*, (Cairo: al-Hai'ah al-Miṣriya al-Amma li al-Kātib, 1978), 138.

The fatherson relation might symbolize a search for the empirical and metaphysical truth.

Empirically, Ṣābir as representative of Egypt on one hand and all Arab countries in the other hand symbolizes the lost direction. They fail to reach the purpose because they miss the straight way. Muṣṭafā 'Alī 'Umar says that Ṣābir symbolizes Egyptian people in modern world who set out the face social and even ideological problem.¹⁶ The search that Ṣābir is doing is the portrait of confused Egyptian people in order to find certain principle of the state's policy. Eventually, Egypt or Arab countries lost their direction because of the way they followed was not an expected solution.

Metaphysically, man as embodied in Ṣābir's character is searching for the very internal need of a human being's life. The lost father in the novel hints at the lost faith. The character symbolizes all men who search for perfect faith to control his life and it becomes the source of values.¹⁷ But man tends to go astray and does not find his real purpose because the approach is based on materialistic and empirical search.

Further, the symbolic description is not only in the main idea but also in the setting and characters. The number of Ṣābir's room, 13,¹⁸ symbolizes the pessimistic and hopeless deed. The character Ilhām, who loves Ṣābir honestly and far from mere passions symbolizes the angel who always gives good inspiration. Karīma, on the contrary, symbolizes superficial orientation.

In *al-Shahhādah*, Najīb Maḥfūz's portrait of the hero 'Umar al-Ḥamzāwī is a successful lawyer and a happy father. However, later sudden weariness, renders him bored and unable to work or enjoy life. He loses interest in everything surrounding him.¹⁹ Later, he accepts his doctor's advice to take a holiday after consultation regarding his problem. His trip to Alexandria temporarily helps to restore his physical fitness. Later he takes to frequenting night clubs to flirt with women. Eventually, he discovers that it does not solve his problem because 'Umar's illness is not a physical problem but his real problem is anxiety and depression.

Meanwhile his old friend, 'Uthmān Khalīl who just finished serving

¹⁶Muṣṭafā 'Alī 'Umar, *al-Qissa wa Taṭawwirha fī al-Adab al-'Arabī*, (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1980), 285.

¹⁷Rajā' al-Naqqāsh, *Udabāu Mu'āṣirūn*, (Baghdad: Dār al-H'sub (.)urriya li al-Tiba'a, 1972, 160.

¹⁸Najīb Maḥfūz, *al-Tarīq*, 29.

¹⁹Najīb Maḥfūz, *al-Shahhādah*. (Cairo: Maktaba Miṣr, 1976), 8-12.

a twenty-year sentence for radical views, gets married to 'Umar's daughter. However, 'Uthmān has not refrained from his past radical activities. When later he is pursued by the police, he finds refuge with 'Umar. The police arrives and surrounds the hut. 'Uthmān is arrested and 'Umar is wounded by a stray bullet.

There are other psychological crises. 'Umar is confused between his new wealthy wife, Camellia, and his earlier one, Zainab, because his honest love is only with the first one. He adored Camellia in order to be satisfied with her wealth, which admittedly makes him have an unstable mental condition. Finally, everything surrounding him becomes meaningless, he even loses the sense of the beauty of nature.²⁰

Based on metaphoric illustration, the novel does not depict its main character as a common beggar; he is a spiritual beggar. Because his real main problem is nothing to do with material things. He is affected by contemporary political and social problems.

In *Tharthara Fauq al-Nīl*, Najīb Maḥfūz portrays his hero, 'Anīs Zakī as a junior civil servant who owns a house-boat on the Nile. A group of drug pushers, all belonging to a high social status, meet there nightly to indulge in drugs and sex. Moreover, this group is later joined by Samāra Bahja, a young female journalist, whose motive is to collect material for a play on anti-social characters. 'Anīs, a widower, is an unpredictable characters who is well-read in history and mysticism. Exhausted after an awful night drive with his friend, he goes to work the following morning. He is subsequently dismissed from his job for being insolent to his senior officer who finds him dozing during working hours.

Here, 'Anīs attempts to search for the ultimate riddle. He detaches himself from society and he immerses himself in visions. However the methods he uses to attain differ. 'Anīs is engulfed in his fantasies not by means of mystical practices but by means of hashish. He finds sanctuary not in a hut but in house-boat.

By using symbolical illustration, in *Tharthara Fauq al-Nīl*, Najīb Maḥfūz novel symbolizes the most oppressive political constraints on the intellectual class who lost direction in the illusions phenomenon. As the setting is an *'awwāma*, a house-boat on the Nile in Cairo, the house boat itself can be regarded as a means of detachment. Moreover, it is moored to the land which in this case may be considered as the haven of brutal reality. Also, it hints at the unstable condition of Egypt because there are no established roots to stand on.

In the last novel of the 1960s, *Mirāmar*, it seems that the theme of the novel concerns malaise and depression, but it concentrates more on the

²⁰Najīb Maḥfūz *al-Shaḥḥādh*, (Cairo: Maktaba Miṣr, 1976), 52-53.

search for the future of Egypt. Also, the situation depicted in the novel hints at the trend of contemporary social and political conditions of Egypt.

In the light of an allegorical story, it might be true that Zahra with her attributes, the main female character, symbolizes contemporary Egypt. The character of Zahra herself symbolizes her interest to serve all the people of the land, namely the idealist, the royalist, the Wafdist and the Communist citizens. She avoids a permanent involvement with any one of them.

As the thematic trend of Najīb Maḥfūz in the 1960s is the deep anxiety and spiritual malaise, he is deeply concerned with the element of sufism in these novels. Almost all of these novels illustrate the world of sufism as the main stream of technical treatment of the theme. Sasson Somekh says that the 'search' itself becomes a major theme in the works of the 1960's, and tiresome and unrewarding search it is.²¹ This spiritual escape makes the malaise and the problem of life easy and solvable. The emphasizing theme of this trend develops from one novel to an other. The later the novel comes out, the bigger is the role of sufism in it.

In fact, the writer deals with this theme in his short story *Za'balāwī*, 1961. It is a quest story of a person who has been afflicted by "a malady for which no one had a remedy". Hoping that Za'balāwī, one of the holy men (*al-walī*) would be able to cure his disease, the hero set out to find him. He never does find Za'balāwī, nevertheless he is determined to go on searching for him. In *al-Liṣṣ wa al-Kilāb*, having found liberty so stifling, Sa'īd turns to the ṣūfī Shaikh 'Alī al-Junaidi, whom he has known since childhood. Sa'īd finds temporary refuge in the house of the ṣūfī who accepts him with compassion and comforts him with the words of mystical love, but Sa'īd cannot see that these words have any relevance to his state and in general cannot understand them.

In *al-Summān wa al-Kharīf*, Najīb Maḥfūz portrays a person whose escape to sufism is both sincere and rewarding, for he had to give up his former hopes and ambitions and had to give up his rebellion.²² Basically, 'Isā, the protagonist, is very much interested in sufism but the man is too far from the ṣūfī tradition.²³

In *al-Ṭarīq*, Najīb Maḥfūz again is concerned with the mystical element. Al-Ṭarīq (which means road, way or path), is one of the most

²¹Sasson Somekh, 'Za-balāwī' in *The Journal of Arabic Literature*, Vol. I, 1970, 25.

²²Najīb Maḥfūz, *al-Summān wa al-Kharīf*, (Cairo: Maktaba Miṣr, 1962), 196-198.

²³Ibid., 87-88.

richly weighted *ṣūfī* terms, expressing both moral psychology for the practical guidance of individuals who have a mystic call and the whole system of rites for the spiritual training of *ṣūfī* communities.

Najīb Maḥfūz is concerned with sufism in more detail in his work *al-Shahhādah*. Here, he portrays the development of an idea which is still embryonic in his previous work, *al Ṭarīq*. The main character is a spiritual beggar, 'Umar al-Ḥamzāwī. Losing interest in his work and his family, he searches for a new meaning in life. He sets out to find the secret of life through mystical literature. Further, he starts nightly meditation in solitude, then withdraws to solitary confinement in a hut in the desert. Finally, he arrives at the conclusion that he must abandon everything and live a secluded life of asceticism and mysticism in order to be happy.

Lastly, in his *Tharthara Fauq al-Nīl*, Najīb Maḥfūz portrays his character, Anīs Zakī, involved in semisufism. Although Anīs is not a mystic, nevertheless he is an addict of mystical literature. He is searching for the 'Absolute'. As it is clear that the time in which he is living is cosmic, not historic, his vision of the past, present and future intermingle. He meets simultaneously such creatures as pre-historic man, Cleopatra, 'Umar Khayyām, and men on others planets.

III

It is clear that in each of the short novels, except *Miramār*, the focus is admittedly on the theme of the individual who is in search for the meaning of life regarding man's existential tragedy. Moreover, some of the novels have a specific characteristic with a mystical element as the main stream of treatment of the theme.

Admittedly, the image of these novels is the people who have little capability to give meanings to their lives. They go astray and lose their main direction. Moreover, they become the victim of their hallucinations.

Indeed, almost all Maḥfūz's novels of the 1960's concentrate on the spiritual crisis of the human being, which is embodied in symbolic writing.

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