THE NOVELIST AS POLITICAL EYE-WITNESS:
A VIEW OF NAJİB MAĦFŪZ’S EVALUATION
OF THE NASSER AND SADAT ERAS

It is an accepted fact that politics dominates the work of Najib Mahfūz. He himself proclaims

In all my writing, you will find politics. You may find a story which ignores love, or some other subject, but not politics; it is the very axis of our thinking.¹

The novelist’s preoccupation with society and politics goes way back to his somewhat juvenile historical romances set in ancient Egypt, notably, *The Struggle of Thebes* (*Kifāh Tība*, 1944) which gives an account of the defeat of the Hyksos by Amasis I in 1550 BC thus liberating Egypt from a foreign rule which had lasted for over a hundred years. In later years Mahfuzian scholars have unanimously, and with the novelist’s own blessing,² read ‘the British’ for ‘the Hyksos’ and interpreted the novel as a wish-fulfilment account of modern Egypt under British rule.

*The Struggle of Thebes*, however, was to be the end of Mahfūz’s short courtship with the historical romance. His next novel, *The New Cairo* (*al-Qāhira al-Jadida*, 1945) saw him plunge himself head first into the tumultuous sea of Egyptian politics with whose unceasing waves he still contends to date, apparently with no hope of reaching a safe shore. In the novels of the realistic phase which begin with *The New Cairo* and end with *The Trilogy* (1956-57) Mahfūz portrays a panorama of Egyptian urban society roughly from the time of the national uprising against British rule in 1919 to the end of World War II. All the main social and political forces active in society during that period are amply and repeatedly represented in the novels of that phase. The Wafdists, the Moslem Brothers, the socialists as well as the non-committed are all there. In Mahfūz’s portrait of the Egyptian sociopolitical scene whose neutrality is only surface-deep, it becomes rapidly apparent to the mindful reader that of the four categories listed above only two command the novelist’s respect, namely the Wafdists and the socialists. The non-committed whose only motive in life is self-interest at any cost are eternally banished from Mahfūz’s social utopia. A classic example of this

¹ Jamal al-Ghītānī, *Najīb Mahfūz Yatadhakkar*, (Beirut: Dār al-Masīra), 1980, p. 78. See also Najib Mahfūz, *Atahaddath Ilaykum*, (Beirut: Dār al-‘Awda), 1977, pp. 92-3, where the novelist states that politics is the main axis of his work.
category is Mahjúb ʿAbd al-Dáʿím in *The New Cairo*. The Islamist version of social reform is on the other hand systematically denounced in Mahfúz's work as anachronistic and obscurantist. Significantly, the denunciation is always effected at the hands of advocates of socialism which, in association with science, is shown as the only formula for social progress.3 Mahfúz's rejection of Islamism can be easily construed from works like *The New Cairo*, *Khán al-Khalíti* and part III of *The Trilogy*.4

This leaves us with the Wafdists and socialists. There is no doubt that Mahfúz, like almost every nationalist of his generation, had a tremendous sympathy for the Wafd as the party which represented the national aspiration of independence taking on both the British and Kings Fuṣád and Fáriq successively in its fight for political independence and a true constitutional life simultaneously. Mahfúz himself was not a member of the party. In fact he tells us that he did not join 'political organizations', though he always 'participated in general popular actions such as strikes and demonstrations ...' as a member of the public.5 His identification with the Wafd and admiration for its two great leaders, Saʿd Zaghlúl and Muṣṭafá al-Nahhás is evident in his work wherever that period of modern Egyptian history is invoked, and especially in *The Trilogy*.6 It is however equally evident in the work of Mahfúz that the achievement of independence from Britain and the establishment of true democratic rule immune against royal manipulation were all that could be hoped for nationally from the Wafd. While these goals remained to be accomplished, further and more radical social and political reforms were simply not on the agenda. Significantly, both the advocates of Islamism and

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3 For a full discussion of this issue by the present writer, see 'Religion in the Novels of Naguib Mahfúz' in the *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies Bulletin*, Vol. 15, Nos. 1 and 2, 1988, pp. 21-27.
4 It is interesting to note that this subject with which Mahfúz dealt at great length in his realistic phase continues to preoccupy him until now. As recently as 1985 he published a novel entitled *al-ʿAṣš fī al-Haqīqa* in which he goes back to ancient Egyptian history having abandoned it for no less than forty years! As one would expect of Mahfúz, while the novel is about ancient history, the novelist's eyes are very much on the contemporary scene. The novel tells the story of Akhenaton, the 18th dynasty monarch who ruled Egypt some fourteen centuries before Christ and preached a new religious cult based on the worship of the one god Aten symbolized by the sun disc. Akhenaton abolished other gods and persecuted their followers and while portrayed in the novel as a man not of this world, his intolerant, divisive policies are shown to have seriously damaged his nation. Once again Mahfúz has illustrated his well-established view that religious fundamentalism is wrong and destructive and that religion should be kept well apart from government. For a detailed discussion of this novel see my book *ʿAlam Najáb Mahfúz min Khílál Riwaýát*, Kitáb al-Hilál no. 455, (Cairo: Dár al-Hilál), 1988.
5 *Atahaddath Ilaykum*, p. 32.
6 See *Bayna al-Qasrayn* (passim) for Saʿd Zaghlúl and *Qaṣr al-Shawq* (esp. Ch. 4) for al-Nahhás.