

Mahfouz's grave, Arab liberalism's deathbed

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The death on 30 August 2006 of the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz - the sole Arab writer to receive the Nobel prize in literature - was marked around the world, and by many of those unable to read a word of his work in its original language. This universal moment, however, was primarily an Egyptian and Arab one, and for more even than the loss of a great writer. For Naguib Mahfouz's death is also a symbol of the demise of Arab liberalism. It is a century's story, and the "Dostoyevsky of Cairo" was the one whose books embodied it.

A century ago, the west was not worryingly eyeing the Arab world, with a fear of suicide-bombers and plane hijackers. It was colonising the Arab world - for a number of reasons: the strategic location, the Suez canal, securing trade routes, access to the Indian subcontinent, protection of minorities, exploitation of economic resources, building empires, civilising the savage Saracens.

In resisting the colonists, the Arabs were broadly divided into two camps: the rejectionists and the integrationists.

The rejectionists were predominately Islamists and Salafis: the group that saw the Arab world's humiliation and defeat as a consequence of its abandonment of the righteous path prescribed in the Qu'ran and the Prophet Mohammed's sunna.

The integrationists, on the other side of the intellectual spectrum, saw the Arabs' defeat as a consequence of their lagging behind in all aspects of modern thinking; they saw a dire need for the integration of western modernity into the traditional Arabic/Islamic culture. As one notable integrationist - Taha Hussein, the legendary Egyptian education minister in the early 20th century - put it: "it's the enlightenment".

This implied that Europe's embracing of science, art, humanism and the separation of the state from the church, and thereby the liberation of the European mind from the confines of theology, were the causes of Europe's supremacy in the 19th and 20th centuries. He, and others, argued that if the Arab - and Islamic - world embraced the thinking mould of the enlightenment, it would progress and develop - according to the European route.

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A half-century's struggle

The first five decades of the 20th century witnessed an interesting struggle between the two camps. The rejectionists established themselves under the banner of Islam. In Egypt, the struggle's central field, a number of trends converged: the Muslim Brotherhood grew from a small movement in distant Ismailiya to a sizable force in Cairene political life; Sheikh Hasan al-Banna's stature grew from that of a small city preacher to a social leader; writers such as Ahmad Amin who extolled Islamic history gained wide readership; al-Azhar's influence increased; the idea of *ihyaa al-Khilafa* (the resurrection of the caliphate) was for some time potent.

That camp did not see much room for western-style liberalism. Progress and development were a function of adherence to the divine rules prescribed in the Qu'ran and the Sunna. Even *ijtihad* (the Muslim scholar's right to seek new interpretations and applications of Qu'ranic rules) was expected to be within the confines of what the religious establishment renders allowed. Sheikh Mohamed Abdou, in the last years of the 19th century, tried to integrate modern European thinking into traditional Islamic philosophy - to his detriment. Abd al-Rahman al-Kwakibi promoted a new form of *ijtihad* ("open and unrestricted"), only to be opposed and severely attacked by some of his closest colleagues.

On the other side, the integrationists promoted western-inspired cinema, theatre, journalism, literature, political system - and more crucially a way of thinking different from that of the religious establishment. They instigated a cultural revolution in Egypt - and the Arab world - that shifted the mental mould of millions, especially in the middle class, from regarding traditions ascribed to Islam as the cultural identity and frame of living to embracing European-style liberalism - in thinking, if not in lifestyle.

There was a lot of questioning, challenging, and adventuring in the prevailing cultural production. Tawfik al-Hakim, Taha Hussein, Yehia Hakki, even the Islamic writer Abbas Mahmood al-Akkad aimed to extricate the Egyptian - and Arabic - mind out of its comfort zone and push it to the liberal edges of reasoning. At the same time, leaders in different forms of art and culture presented the forms, outlooks, and lifestyles of the west as the modern, progressive, fashionable way of living.

1956 and 1967

The struggle between the rejectionists and the integrationists came to a momentous juncture in the mid-1950s after the 1952 Egyptian revolution and the arrival in power of Gamal Abdel Nasser. The movement that overhauled the political system of Egypt seemed determined to carve its dominant doctrine into Egypt's socio-economic life. And both camps - the rejectionists and the integrationists - were lobbying.

The rejectionists, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Azhar and other political and societal forces with Islamic orientations, lost early on. And for a while it seemed that the integrationists, represented by Egypt's liberal movements, are winning. What actually happened was a very selective victory. Nasserism embraced secularism, looking outward, and the appearance of a Europe-inspired society - in its arts and lifestyle.

Yet, the Nasserite doctrine was not tolerant of liberalism as represented by freedom of expression and political/economic openness. But interestingly, Nasserism was not detrimental to Egypt's liberalism. The liberal forces seem to have developed a way of living under the regime - identifying the red lines and avoiding them; emphasising the liberal values while circumventing liberalism's political facet; touting ideas in coded messages; and accepting the risk of severe punishment at occasions. Yet despite the misgivings of Nasserism, Nasser's own legendary appeal and the wave of the secular Arab nationalism seemed to be the winning ticket of liberalism in Egypt and the Arab world.

The whole experiment came to an end when Nasserism fell in June 1967 - the Arabs' worst defeat against Israel. The subsequent decade was one of complete reversal. The secular momentum of the Nasserite era was reversed. Anwar Sadat, Nasser's successor, put his political bet on the Islamic - rejectionist - movement.

For a while the secular movement fought back - especially in the universities and the unions. But the regime's complete support for the rejectionist movement, coupled with the rise of Saudi wahabbism and the migration of millions of Egyptians to the Gulf in search for jobs, were overwhelming forces. Liberalism sought solace in isolated corners - cultural movements, small student groupings and certain economic interests. The tide of Islamism and rejectionism continued during the 1980s and 1990s under Hosni Mubarak. It still goes on today.

Mahfouz's achievement

This is the story. And Naguib Mahfouz was an anchor hero in it - for three main reasons.

First, Mahfouz himself is a representation of the story. Mahfouz hails from a middle-class Cairene family that had moved from al-Gamaliya, as historic, as conservative and as Islamic as one can get in Cairo, to al-Abasiya, an enclave of modern middle-class families. The physical movement at his childhood mirrors the mental movement of a major section of the Cairene - and Egyptian - society. His early childhood escapades were in the alleys of al-Azhar surrounded by a thousand-year old Islamic monuments and an air of piety, conservatism, traditions and history.

The rest of his life was in modern, western-inspired Cairo. Mahfouz, like many of the children of his social class at the time, started his education by studying the Qu'ran and Islamic history. He later studied western philosophy. The man's education represented that of an enlightened Arab modernist: one who has absorbed the foundations of Islam and then sailed in the sea of modern western thinking.

Mahfouz also witnessed the whole story. He started writing at the time when the rejectionists and the integrationists were debating Egypt's identity and vying for Egypt's central ground. He produced the bulk of his work during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s - the period that witnessed the surge and fall of secularism and liberalism. And he played the game in the same way as most of his contemporary liberals did - writing in coded analogies and examples, conveying his views, yet avoiding clear confrontations.

The volume of his literary production retreated during the 1980s when Islamism was the dominant power on the Egyptian street. He was stabbed in the neck, and rendered unable to

write in the 1990s, at a time when Egyptian cinema, theatre, literature, and general cultural produce were at a clear low. And he died at a time when Egypt's liberal forces are perhaps the weakest in the country's political scene.

Second, Mahfouz captured the whole story in his work. He did so at three different levels.

He conjured the "macros" of "the city" (Cairo): its look, feel, history, streets, alleys, stereotypes, glories, sorrows, scents - and how those have changed throughout the different eras.

He also portrayed the "micros": delving into the psyche of his characters, rendering their thoughts, beliefs and desires naked in front of the reader to present his view of the transformations taking place in the society. At times, the transformations were best presented through the changes taking place in one novel character at different eras and under different influences. The most notable example is Kamal - the youngest son in Al-thulathiya (The Cairo Trilogy) and who is thought to represent Mahfouz himself. Kamal, in his rise to the intellectual altars of western philosophy and liberalism, and in so doing rebelling against his conservative, traditional background, to his fall on the grounds of the Egyptian society's reality, and subsequently his withdrawal to end up a shadowy figure in a society passing him by, represents the failure of modern Arab liberalism to transform its surroundings, and its destiny as a marginal, faint societal force.

But Mahfouz not only presented the story as the background of his novels; he took a stance regarding its development. In all of his novels, Mahfouz championed the cause of the free thinker, the liberal, the outward looking, the non-traditionalist, and at times the rebel - even if that stance was often not blatantly presented. He also, almost always, lamented, in his usual analogical style, the dark future of Arab liberalism as he had seen it.

Third, Mahfouz, because of the sheer volume of his produce and their translations into tens of languages, his long life, the dramatic end of his solid writing career (the neck stabbing), the Nobel prize, and of course his genius, will remain the sole 20th-century Egyptian/Arab novelist who have told the story to the whole world. Naguib Mahfouz will remain a must-read for anyone aiming to understand the story of liberalism in Egypt in the 20th century.

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