

CHAPTER: III

THEMATIC STUDY OF AL-QAHIRA AL-JADIDA

Mahfouz has been influenced by Taha Hussain, Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, Ibrahim Abdul Qadir al-Majini, Tawfiq al- Hakim and Yahya Haqqi in his literary career.

The novel *al- Qahira al- Jadida* deals with the various aspects of life as love, faith and death and above all the means of life. The struggle between men and women also forms an important aspect of his novel. He is preoccupied mainly with the liberty and deals with the relationship of the citizen to the state, of the child to the father, and of the woman to the man. His aim was to seek the identity of his own country in the space-time of his existence and the sphere of his self.

Al-Qahira al-Jadida (New Cairo, 1945) is a novel of existentialist satire. In this novel, Mahfouz attempts to depict the life and customs of a group of university students in Cairo over a nine-month period, from December 1933 to September 1934.

The central characters are four senior students, Ali Taha, Mamun Ridwan, Ahmed Badir, and Mahjub Abd al-Dayim, all in their early twenties. Because they graduated from the College of Arts in the same year as Mahfouz, and like him the first two were philosophy majors, we may conclude that their attitudes and actions mirror Mahfouz's view of his own society. Mahfouz also portrays the life and influence of the upper middle class, mostly of Turkish origin, their corruption, and their control of power in the Egyptian government and society. Underlying this portrayal of Egyptian society is the conflict between good and evil, between principles and lack of them, and the reaction of different people to this struggle.

Al-Qahira al-Jadida reflects the rise of an Egyptian intelligentsia; since the establishment of an Egyptian university in 1908, many students had been revealed to a variety of intellectual concepts that were mostly Western and included

materialistic philosophy and socialism, both of which were unfamiliar to the native Islamic culture and traditions. While they were being taught about the democracy of the west, especially British democracy, they found to their complete irritation that the British, who considered the Suez Canal vital to the defense of India, controlled their country's institutions, refused them independence, and manipulated the political process for their own interests. Although the British had recognized Egypt as an independent sovereign state in 1922, they still held responsibility for its defense and for the protection of minorities and foreigners. The constitution of 1923, which truly offered the people more freedom, in fact gave the king more power. The situation was annoyed by wide spread corruption. Connections, bribes, and prestige were the primary means of finding government employment –the only hope of college graduates in an undeveloped country where agriculture

was hated and which left completely the farmers. Egypt was almost a caste society. At the top social hierarchy were the minority aristocrats, especially the Turko-Egyptians, at the bottom stood the farmers, and in the middle were small businessmen, professionals, and craftsmen.

Education was diverse; one could not easily recognize the influence of the old-fashioned religious learning at al-Azhar or the secular education at the university. As a result, Egyptian society since the turn of the century had witnessed the growth of contradictory, even ambiguous ideas and attitudes. On one hand, Muslim groups summoned the renovation of the Islamic ideals, which have played a great role in the life of the Egyptians. Opposite them stood the Western-educated Egyptians who chose secular ideas, some even embracing atheism. There were also eager patriots who advanced the notion that Egypt is for the Egyptians. And there were the opportunists who could not care

less about moral national ideals as long as they could attain their own interests. The conflict of these ideas was intensified by one of the bad constitutional and economic crises Egypt had ever suffered. An important indication of change was the admission of women to the university, an incident unparalleled in an Islamic society. It against this background, the Cairo of 1934, that Mahfouz wrote *al-Qahira-Jadida*.

The novel opens with the four friends engaged in casual preservation about the new female students, commenting scathingly on their physical appearance and discussing whether they are ambassadors of learning or love. When one affirms that God created them to be ambassadors of love, another warns him that they are at the university, a secular institution where God and love should not be mentioned. The students debate whether woman is man's partner, with equal right and duties, and then

discuss human principles and whether they are essential for man and society.

Mahfouz uses this conversation to expose his characters' moral and intellectual tendencies. Mamun Ridwan is an Islamic fundamentalist and an avid reader of books, believes there is nothing but God, Heaven and Islam on earth, while Ali Taha an atheist and a hardcore materialist, believes in science and socialism; Ahmed Badir, a working journalist, believes that man should stand as a mere observer and never get involved, and Mahjub Abd al-Dayim, a protagonist, believes religion and principles have no meaning. Having introduced the four, Mahfouz provides a full report about each, covering his life, family, moral behavior, relations with woman, and even his job opportunities.¹ Thus; we are faced from the beginning with

1)Najib Mahfouz, *al-Qahira al- Jadida*,5-10;Ali B.Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian novel*, 1912-1971,151-52,171,174;Hamdi Sakkut,*Egyptian novel*,115-119.

nondimensional, fully developed characters whose actions have been prearranged by the author; there is no room for them to grow and visible their changing attitudes. Even more striking is that after presenting them, Mahfouz suddenly gives up Mamun Ridwan, Ali Taha, and Ahmed Badir to concentrate on Mahjub Abd al-Dayim, while the other three become visible only now and then in connection with him. Years later, he acknowledged the serious drawback of starting with fully developed characters, controlling their actions and focused on the life and career of only one of them.²

Mamun Ridwan, a conservative young man and a true Muslim believer, seems to have learned a great deal about religion and morality from his father, a teacher in a religious institution. He is diligent, honest, and very serious about putting his religious beliefs into practice, so much so that some of his

2) Abd al- Muhsin Badr, *Najib Mahfouz: al-Riwaya al- Adat*, 291.

friends calls him the expected Mahdi or the Muslim Imam. He avoids participation in political activities and, unlike his classmates, refuses the existence of an “Egyptian question” that is, the problem of throwing off the British authority and achieving full independence. For him there is only one question, that of Islam in general and Arabism in particular. The three pillars of his belief are God, virtue, and Islam. Mamun is not influenced by the trend of secularism at the university or by the concepts of psychology, sociology, and metaphysics. Mamun has developed a hot temperament that in some instances drives him into fits of absurdity. Also, he tends to do everything passionately and thus appears as an enthusiastic. Yet he is kind, loving, and simple. He is engaged to a relative who, like him, has been raised in a traditional home which adhered to Islamic traditions. He visits her only in the presence of members of her family and in fact never even thought of attempting to meet her

alone. Much to his disappointment, his fellow students do not listen to his call for Islam or Arabism; instead, they are concerned with the Egyptian question, the 1923 constitution, and the boycott of foreign goods.

His colleague Ali Taha is similar to him in character, but not in ideology. He is a handsome young man with a noble countenance-- intelligent, sociable, well-educated, articulate, and truthful and like Mamun, firm in his principles. But he is also an atheist who has adopted the philosophy of materialism; he believes that the core of existence is matter, and that life and spirit are complex interactive materialistic forces. To be sure, the pious Mamun often tells him that this philosophy cannot solve a single problem, but Ali Taha will not change his mind. He finds himself drawn to Auguste Comte³ and accepts his view

3) Auguste Comte (1798-1857) was a French philosopher. He was a founder of the discipline of sociology and of the doctrine of positivism.

that there can be only one God--society--and one religion--science. He argues that, like the religious believer, the atheist too has principles and ideals, and that good is more deeply rooted in human nature than is religion. It is good that created religion, and not the opposite. He often says that he once was a good believer without reason, but now is a righteous rationalist who does not believe in tales. This implies that Ali Taha had obtained faith in his youth but after being showing to the ideas of great European philosophers, he gave up it for rationalism. Yet despite his having grown up in an Islamic society, encircled by religious men, this faith must not have been deep because he lost it so easily.

Moreover, Ali Taha dreams of social reforms, looking for an earthly rather than a heavenly utopia. He attempts to interest his colleagues in socialism but fails. Mamnun contends that Islam contains a reasonable kind of socialism because it imposes

the *zakat* (religious tithe), which could guarantee social justice if practically implemented. If Ali Taha wishes a universal order based on true happiness, justice, and brotherly love, he says, he should try Islam. The indifferent Ahmad Badir answers that he is a member of the Wafd party, which has capitalistic aims, and therefore he cannot be a socialist. Ali Taha describes himself as a socialist, atheist, a respectable man, and a platonic lover. It may appear unusual that he is a socialist, for in fact he comes from a well-heeled family. His father gave him a hundred pounds to start a weekly *magazine* calling for social reform; he has even abandoned his job at the university library and stopped working for his master's degree (as Mahfouz did), in order to devote his time and energy to the struggle for Egypt, to transform it from a nation of slaves to a nation of free men.

He is in love with Ihsan, a high school senior who is aware of her attractive beauty but no less aware of her poverty. Her

father, Shihata Turki, operates a small cigarette shop but could not support the family without the extra income her mother brings in. Yet perhaps her biggest problem is her parents' loose moral principles. Indeed, they immorally sought to marry her to a dishonest but rich man, offering their daughter for his money. But Ihsan shunned this shame and apparently found true love when she met Ali Taha. Her parents oppose him, feeling he cannot support her, but she ignores their objections. Unfortunately, her love for Ali Taha does not last, and eventually she leaves him to further her own selfish goal.

After briefly describing Ahmad Badir, who takes the attitude that as a journalist he should act only as an observer, reporting the problems of his society without getting involved in them, Mahfouz turns to the fourth student, Mahjub Abd al-Dayim, who is the focus of the novel from chapter 5 onwards, while his classmates are concentrated to secondary roles,

appearing only to interact with him. Tall and thin, he is neither handsome nor ugly, but one notices above all the look of insolence in his face. He has many concerns, especially sex, which he considers the only reason for woman's existence. From the moment he sees Ali Taha's fiancée Ihsan, he lusts after her. Indeed, he does not even find it disgusting to engage in sex with a dirty-looking young woman who makes her living by picking up cigarette butts; she is simply an available female. Often he says ironically that his family bequeathed him nothing to make him happy, and it is not fair to be left anything that will make one miserable. Mahjub is a solipsist. He is extremely selfish that his own happiness is of primary importance. At best, he is a cynical, ironic young man who has no use for religion or science; his ultimate objective in life is to attain pleasure and power through any and every means. In brief, he is a degenerate rascal, a nihilist poor of moral values. But he keeps his gloomy,

immoral ideas to himself; illuminating only interests he believes are fashionable, like atheism and free expression.⁴

Mahjub is also envious, disloyal, and self-destructive, blaming his misery on poverty. His father is a mere clerk who earns eight pounds a month yet manages to send him three pounds a month for his tuition and living expenses. What a good loving man this poor father is, taking food from his own mouth to support a wasteful and ungrateful son. But Mahjub Abd al-Dayim always appears short of money, able to give only the cheap common Egyptian meal of fava beans. What laments him most is that he does not have money to spend on his physical lusts. Thus, he is always revolting against society, with its values and moral principles. He cannot understand why he was born poor while others were born rich. He grieves the disparity of wealth in his own town, al-Qanatir. He is ready to sell his

4)Mahfouz, *al-Qahira al-Jadida*, 24, 29; Hilary Kilpatrick, *the Modern Egyptian Novel: A study in social criticism*, 73-75,213-14.

soul to the devil, if the devil will help him attain the niceties of life and reach the top of the social ladder. Eventually he meets the devil, who leads him to the top and then causes him to fall, ending his career in an appalling shame.

The devil's disciple is Salim al-Ikhshidi, a native of his home town and secretary to the cabinet minister Qasim Bey Fahmi, who is due to become the director of the minister bureau. Mahjub meets him at the railway station while on his way to al-Qanatir to see his father, who has been half-paralyzed by a heart attack. He learns that when al-Ikhshidi was a student at the university, he was active on campus in politics and student affairs and even distributed leaflets against the 1923 constitution. Suddenly, he stopped his extramural nationalistic activities on the premise that "learning is only for the students." There were rumors that he would be arrested for his activities, but nothing of the sort happened. Instead, as soon as he

graduated, he was appointed secretary to Fahmi, having been chosen over many qualified graduates. How did he acquire this position? Utterly without principle, he discovered that he could attain his ends by selling his soul to the devil. What aggravates Mahjub's sense of deprivation is that al-Ikhshidi is well enough off to travel first-class, while he can hardly afford a third-class ticket.

On seeing his sick father, Mahjub is less concerned about his condition than about the possibility that his father may not return to work, and that he will lose his monthly payment. His father's assurances that he will get some gratuity from the government give him no comfort. Seeking relief from his financial situation, he turns to a distant relative of his mother, Ahmed Bey Hamdis, Who enjoys both position and wealth. Much to his disappointment, Hamdis refuses his request. Indeed, why should a man who has risen from the ruins of poverty to

become a member of the upper middle class care about Mahjub and his needs? Frustrated, he plans to take advantage of Hamdis's pretty daughter, Tahiyya, as an act of revenge. He leads her to a lonely spot near the site of the pyramids, intending to attack her, but she becomes angry at his unseemly behaviour, and he retreats in humiliation.

Things go from bad to worse for Mahjub. Lack of money reduces him to one meal a day, leading him to fear that he may starve, yet he finds it demeaning to ask his friends for a loan. Since Hamdis will not help, he seeks out Salim al-Ikhshidi at his office at the ministry. Mahjub relates his problems, and al-Ikhshidi responds that since he knows English and French, he should seek work as a translator for the magazine *al-Najma* (The Star). The editor is his friend, and Salim will prevail on him to give Mahjub a job. But Mahjub needs money now, not later. Furious at himself and the world, he shouts, "the world shall

pay for the agonies I am suffering!’’ Desperate, he turns to his classmates and is relieved when Mamun Ridwan lends him some money.

Mahjub has yet to face real life in a corrupt society where dog eat dog seems to be the dominant principle. If Hamdis and al-Ikhshidi could rise from poverty to power, he thinks, why he should not do the same. So, after his graduation, Mahjub goes to seek al-Ikhshidi’s help in finding a government job and is told that there is a price for everything if he is willing to pay. Mahjub needs a connection, al-Ikhshidi says, and there is none better than the powerful businessman Abd al- Aziz Bey Radi, but the job will cost him half the first two years’ salary. If Mahjub is unwilling to pay this bribe, he should contact Dawlat, the famous songstress, who enjoys wide-spread influence in government circles but is more expensive than Radi. If he cannot pay to get a job, his best chance is to meet with Ikram

Niruz, a very rich and influential high-society woman, the founder of the Blind Womens' society. She has strong government connections but is also extremely egotistical, adoring publicity and prestige. Since she is to host a party for blind women, Mahjub should interview her; an article for *al-Najma* praising her achievements on their behalf may be the magical key to his dream of obtaining a government position.

At the party, Mahjub comes face to face with the world of the aristocracy, a world of money, power, and luxury, miles apart from his own. He is encircled by high society women wearing beautiful, luxurious dresses and having alien perfumes. They not only exhibit their luxury but openly show disrespect for their traditions by conversing in fluent French rather than Arabic. The party teems with men who have climbed the social ladder through unprincipled means, including gambling and pandering. One of the guests reportedly once lost a wager in

which his wife was the stake; another, on discovering that his wife had taken their chauffeur as a lover, asked her to choose between them, whereupon she chose the chauffeur. Here al-Ikhshidi and people like him fit right in. The only one out of place is Mahjub's colleague Ahmad Badir, who is present to cover the party. Eventually, Mahjub meets the hostess, who addresses him in French and tells him that his hopes of a bright future depend on the article he intends to write about her. But what surprises him most is that the party turns out to be merely a beauty contest, with girls paraded on the stage. As he soon discovers, the contest is rigged and the sole purpose of the party is not to help the blind women, but to entertain the members of high society.

At this point, instead of allowing the narrative to flow naturally, Mahfouz introduces a rather contrived plot twist to lead the protagonist to his downfall. Al-Ikhshidi tells Mahjub to

forget about the article he is supposed to write about the socialite Ikram Niruz; he has a new plan for him. He promises Mahjub an appointment as secretary to the cabinet minister Qasim Bey Fahmi, provided he will marry Fahmi's mistress and allow him to continue their relationship. The minister, in return, will provide a luxurious flat and all expenses for the newly married couple. Mahjub, opportunistic and unprincipled, readily agrees, not knowing that the bride-to-be is none other than Ihsan Shihata Turki, the former fiancée of his friend Ali Taha. That she has become mistress to a rich and powerful cabinet minister is a surprise for which Mahfouz offers the reader no motivation. Early in the novel she informs Ali Taha that she is through with him, but only later do we learn why. Apparently, Fahmi for long had an eye on Ihsan. He chased her day after day, taking her for rides in his car and buying her beautiful clothes. Finally, she succumbed to his advances, largely because of her unprincipled

parents, who, knowing that Fahmi was rich and could lessen their poverty, cheated them into believing that he would marry their daughter. Clearly Ihsan, like Mahjub, had the disposition for immoral behaviour; she was ambitious, selfish, and offensive, with a totally twisted sense of values. Like him, she disliked her poverty and low social status and believed that the only way out of misery was to achieve luxury and prestige, even at the expense of selling her soul to the devil.

Thus, Mahjub and Ihsan pay the price for satisfying their voracity and ambition to join the corrupt upper class- he by becoming a pimp, and she a whore. He occupies a large, well furnished office at the ministry, has a private telephone, and addressed with all respect by minor officials as Mahjub Bey. He and Ihsan move into a comfortable flat in an exclusive district, enjoying the status they so longed to attain, while Fahmi takes care of all their expenses. In return, on certain weeknights

Mahjub has to leave the flat to allow Fahmi to enjoy the company of his wife. Satirically, he is soon rewarded with a promotion as director of the minister's bureau, practically outranking al-Ikhshidi himself. Alas, poor al-Ikhshidi! He thought by arranging Mahjub's marriage to Ihsan he could win promotion to the highest position at the ministry, but he has been outmaneuvered by the very man he tried to use to attain his selfish needs. Mahjub, now a member of the rich and influential upper class, considers him successful, for he equals Ahmad Bey Hamdis in wealth and status. He moves in the circle of the aristocrats, mostly of Turkish origin, and enjoys their luxurious parties, often aboard yachts on the Nile.

In the end, however, a surprising series of events shatters Mahjub's dreams and brings him down. His father unexpectedly visits, rebuking him for neglecting his parents and marrying without having the courtesy of informing them. Their argument

is interrupted by the president ringing of the doorbell, after which Fahmi's wife dashes in, demanding angrily to know where her husband and Ihsan are making love. She raps at the bedroom door, telling her "honorable minister husband" to "come out of this brothel" When Mahjub interferes, she yells, "Shut up, you dirty pimp!" Finally the door opens and Qasim Bey Fahmi comes out, showing no sign of shame or regret. He pleads with his wife to lower her voice and behave appropriately. She responds angrily, "you dare, Excellency, to tell me what is appropriate and what is not? You think it is appropriate to be caught red-handed in the bedroom with the wife of this insolent pimp. Would you be pleased if your son and daughter knew about your appropriate behaviour? Then she leaves, warning her husband not to try to make up with her. Mahjub's father, totally surprised by what he has heard and seen, realizes that his son has lost everything. He turns his back

on his son and, leaning on a cane, drags himself out of the door. When Ihsan comes out crying and asks what has happened, Mahjub says that their dreams are shattered, but he does not show regret or admit his fault. His rise and fall becomes a public scandal; Qasim Bey Fahmi resigns his position in the cabinet, while Mahjub is demoted and transferred to Aswan. Since scandal forms the major event of the novel, it is worth nothing that it was printed in 1953 by the Story Club in Cairo under the title *Fadiha fi al-Qahira* (Scandal in Cairo), perhaps for more profitable marketing.

Essentially, Mahfouz seeks here to represent the distinct mores of the upper and lower middle classes in Cairo in the 1930s. The upper class enjoyed power, wealth, and prestige but was morally corrupt. The lower-middle-class struggled to improve their lot but found that all avenues to success were closed unless they compromised their principles and emulated

the upper class. From the outset, Mahfouz confronts us with an absolute moral dichotomy between these two classes; one adheres to traditional societal principles of ethics; the other is devoid of moral principles, totally depraved. At one end of the social range stands the upper class, represented by the cabinet minister Qasim Bey Fahmi and others; at the other end are hapless men like Mahjub Abd al-Dayim. But many members of the lower middle class, including Mahjub, Salim al-Ikhshidi, Ahmad Bey Hamdis, and even Ihsan Shihata Turki, have no doubts about violating accepted moral principles, which they see as an obstruction to their ambition to get ahead in society.

Mahfouz would have us believe that Mahjub and Ihsan fall into immoral behaviour because of their poverty. This is rather lame rationalization; people behave immorally not because they are poor, but because they are unprincipled. Indeed, Mahfouz points out that Mahjub's parents are poor, but they are also

moral and decent. Surely there were other students like Mahjub who came from poor families and struggled for whatever job they could find. He and Ihsan have no right to use poverty as an excuse for corruption.

We see here the moral dilemma of Egyptian society in the 1930s, which Mahfouz attempts to resolve. The moral climate is changeable, and in seeking answers to their social and moral problems, the members of the lower middle class are overwhelmed by different and contradictory concepts. The Muslim believer Mamun Ridwan maintains that lack of faith in God is the root of evil. The true believer, with God as his guide, will never behave like Mahjub. The socialist Ali Taha argues that society tempts people to commit crimes, and that it protects criminals like Qasim Bey Fahmi, who resigned his cabinet rank but was not brought to justice or punished. Mamnun seems to believe that Fahmi escaped justice because the laws of Islam are

no longer enforced; in ancient times, he would have been stoned to death. The indifferent journalist Ahmad Badir comments cynically that society tolerates crime, and that someday Fahmi will be offered another government position, in which he will continue his corrupt actions.

As a believer, Mamun poses the whole serious question of man's responsibility for his actions. This questions worried ancient and modern philosophers, who tried to determine whether there are absolute truths of justice, beauty, and goodness and whether man is responsible for his actions, good or bad. To the sophists, man is the measure of all things, which means there are no absolute truths or standards of right and wrong. Man becomes the ultimate judge of his actions, responsible only to himself. To the more conservative Greeks like Socrates and Plato, such dogmas could lead only to atheism and disorder. They argued that if goodness and justice are left to

the whims of man, then religion, morality, and even the state and society cannot be sustained. Absolute truths do exist, and man is responsible to a higher power for his actions.

Moreover, says Mamun, since God has revealed these philosophical and theological truths in the Quran and has given man laws based on them, he alone determines what is right and wrong. Man's actions become subject to God's laws, and if he violates them, man must answer not to himself, but to God. He cannot avoid judgment by blaming everything on his personal misfortune or on society. Mamun says that Mahjub has neglected the criterion of right and wrong. He has a similar view of Ali Taha, who has replaced God with socialism. Both of them have lost sight of what is sacred, and their only salvation is to return to faith in God, the foundation of a stable, moral society. Although Mamun believes that Islam is the cure for the ills of Egyptian society, including poverty and crime, he gives no

practical example to show how it can serve as a tool for reform or social justice. Islam, as he presents it, appears to be only a slogan. Although he criticizes the Friday *khutbas* (sermons) because of their traditional form, which appeals to ignorance and superstition rather than illumination, he offers nothing in their place.⁵

Likewise, socialism, which Mahfouz shows through Ali Taha to counterbalance Mamun's religious beliefs, remains merely an idea, rather than a feasible ideology offering specific solutions to Egypt's problems. Ali Taha is as committed to social reform and as idealistic as Mamun, the only difference being that he is a nonbeliever. Both men dream of a utopian world free from evil. Mamun imagines an earthly heaven where faith and the spirit can fight evil. Ali Taha, pragmatist that he is, maintains that under the conditions prevailing in Egypt and

5) Mahfouz, *al-Qahira al-Jadida*, 45-46; Shukri, *al-Muntami Drasa fi Adab Najib Mahfouz*, 200, 207

early 1930s, such a society depends on fortune and divine decree.⁶ It is interesting to see the nonbeliever socialist speak of such forces in a manner tantamount to saying God's decree will be done.

Thus, Mahfouz exposes the hopes and dreams of the lower middle class through these university students, who are fully aware of their own problems and those of their society. Each of them proposes a solution that reflects his personal convictions, but the attitudes and proposals of these intelligent young men are idealistic rather than realistic. The novel proves their perplexity and their lack of positive direction. They complain, criticize, and diagnose the maladies of their society, but none appears to have a practical plan to fight its ills. The real problem is to change the corrupt political rule controlled by unprincipled, rich, and powerful men whom these students consider a

6) Mahfouz, *al-Qahira al-Jadida*, 217: Ahmad Muhammad Atiyya, *Ma Najib Mahfouz* 146-147

hindrance to reform and progress. It is interesting that nowhere in the novel does Mahfouz suggest violence as a method of change. He has placed great hope in the educated class to effect the change but offers no practical solutions.

As his characters, Mahfouz came from a small middle-class family; like them, he graduated from the university in 1934. It is likely that some of these students reflect his own hopes, dreams, and frustrations regarding the conditions in his country. When the events of this novel took place, Egypt was in the clasp of not only the British, but of a group of aristocratic officials, mostly Turks. These Turko-Egyptian aristocrats, whom an Egyptian writer calls “the new Hyksos,” were rich and powerful and occupied key positions in the government.⁷ Like the ancient Hyksos, they were alien to Egypt in appearance and character. These foreign fleas ruthlessly oppressed the hapless

7) Badr, *Najib Mahfouz*, 279,285.

and submissive poor farmers whom they considered slaves, and used their quasi-Egyptian status as an excuse to control both the people and their government.

Mahfouz displays their wicked attitudes and their disdain for the Egyptian people in depicting a vessel excursion, on which Mahjub and Ihsan join members of the aristocracy. After a dance, some guests sit down to gossip about the political situation in Europe, talking about the rise of Hitler⁸ and the possibility of war between Germany and France. When they advance to discuss the internal situation in Egypt, Mahjub hears someone say that Egypt can be ruled by any tyrant without severe problems. Another guest comments that any political rule would turn into dictatorship if implemented in Egypt. A third guest adds that this is a country where the beating of a member of the poor class by an effendi is considered honorable. In this

8) Hitler (1889-1945)-the Chancellor of Germany since January, 1933, and the Leader of Reich since August, 1934. He was Austrian by birth.

case, Ahmad Asim grieves; Egypt will never gain its independence. Another guest, Ahmad Iffat, says laughingly, “why should Egypt want to be independent? The leaders are quarreling to achieve governmental power, while the people are not worthy of independence”

Mahjub asks, “Does not it bother you to say such a thing about your own people?” Iffat responds, “Not one single drop of Egyptian blood runs in my veins,” evoking a storm of laughter. Suddenly enraged, not from any national feeling but because of his own sense of pride, Mahjub asks Iffat what he thinks of the speech at the Egyptian senate in which his father gloriously protected the farmer. Iffat laughed and says, “that was at the senate. But at home my father and I agree that the best way to treat the farmer is by using the whip.” Everyone laughs. Mahjub, thinking he has sheltered his “Egyptian nationalism,” wonders to himself, “How can Ali Taha reform

this noble people or realize his high ideals?’’ Clearly, the new Hyksos aristocracy is little different from the old one and even seems more uncultured. They are degenerates, hypocrites who, like Iffat’s father, feign in public to guard the farmer, while in secret they propose to beat him like an animal. To them, the Egyptian is only prey. They are corrupt and degenerate—the cabinet minister Qasim Bey Fahmi, the socialite Ikram Niruz, and even Ihsan’s parents, whose family name betrays their Turkish origin.

Members of the aristocratic class, the novel shows, lived in a society all but closed to members of the middle class, to say nothing of the farmers. If someone desired to enter this aristocratic society, he had to play the game by its rule. He had to sacrifice his own soul and moral principles to the interests of the powerful, like Salim al-Ikhshidi and Mahjub, who acted as pimps, and Ihsan, who became fahmi’s whore. In brief, it was

not easy to imitate the aristocratic class unless one not only had the disposition for corruption, but was totally corrupt. What is surprising it that one rarely finds a truly polite character in this novel? The Egyptian aristocratic class was corrupt, but could the whole upper class have been as morally insolvent as Mahfouz suggests in this novel? Perhaps in the back of his mind was the concept of the struggle of good versus evil, which he obtained from Islamic tradition and from his study of philosophy and applied to his own society.

Mahfouz's characters are all Muslims who live in certain communities in Cairo. They are decidedly urban, belonging to the upper or lower middle class. They move and act in a very specific place and time, a fact which narrows the scope of their actions. In fact, in many of Mahfouz's later novels Cairo remains the primary setting. To the present generation, this novel's value is mainly historical; many landmarks and

streets it mentions are gone. Economic realities have likewise changed; no Egyptian student today could rent a flat or buy a meal as reasonably as did Mahjub Abd al- Dayim. Life has changed in Cairo, especially for the university students, and Mahfouz himself is definitely conscious of this change.