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Politics, Absurd and Grotesque in Nağīb Maḥfūz’s Theatrical Plays

Summary

Nağīb Maḥfūz never concealed that in his writing, apart from native Arabic patterns, he derived inspiration from the European literature. He did not also hide that dramas and poetry were among his favourite readings. However, it must be underlined that his favourite form of expression was mainly epic, and his achievements within this literary genre in a justified way clearly dominated reflections over his works. Perhaps, in part, that is why so rarely and in the form of curiosity we recall that Maḥfūz is also an author of eight theatre plays. Without clear justification, his dramas are usually marginalized, passed over in silence or treated as a specific expression of an artistic excess without much sense. The article tries to draw attention to the dramatic works of the writer, showing their multidimensional value in the perspective of literary form and their subject matter.

Keywords: Nağīb Maḥfūz, theatre, drama, absurd, grotesque, politics

Nağīb Maḥfūz is mostly associated with a novel, pictures from the life of the old Egypt, colourful and vivid characters, whose adventures, deeply linked with the Egyptian reality, are a witness of the era and, through their humanistic nature, contain a universal and general human dimension. The Egyptian master of storytelling astonishes us not only with his language style, sophisticated narrative, rich personalities of characters and the way he composes the whole plot, but also with an especially perspicacious insight into social moods. Essentially, the works by Maḥfūz are a literary witness of the spirit of the time the author lived in. His short stories and novels bring deep reflection over the condition of a human being, society and state in certain political reality because it is politics, broadly understood, that constitutes a clear point of reference in the works of the Egyptian Nobel Prize winner. In his conversation with Ğamāl al-Ğīṭānī, the author said: “You will find politics in everything I write. You may find story that is devoid of

love, or anything else, but not of politics, because that is the axis of all our thought".¹ Politics defined and understood in many different ways was an impulse to reflection, which brought fruit in the form of literary works being on the one hand the author's discussion with reality, and on the other hand his own opinion about it. While looking for the truth about Egypt and the world contemporary to him, he constantly strived for optimal way of artistic expression, which would fully reflect his creative thought, harmoniously combining the dimensions of content and of form. Maḥfūz never concealed that, apart from native Arab patterns, he derived inspiration also from the European literature. Many times, he mentioned his fascinations with Russian, French and English artists. He also did not hide that dramas and poetry were among his favourite readings. As an artist he never limited his both creative and cognitive horizons to one genre or movement. With a lightness and artistry of a true master, he freely played among various styles passing from realism to grotesque. However, it must be underlined that the author used mainly epic, and his achievements within this literary genre in a justified way clearly dominated the directions of reflection over his works. Perhaps, in part, that is why so rarely and in the form of curiosity we recall that Maḥfūz is also an author of eight theatre plays. Without clear justification, his dramas are usually marginalized, passed over in silence or treated as a specific expression of an artistic excess without much sense. Nehad Selaiha writes about it with a visible regret and unhidden grievance in the Introduction to the English translation of the collection of Maḥfūz's four dramas, emphasising the necessity to revise such an approach and, above all, to carefully explore the artist's dramatic output.² It seems that recent years bring some hope in this matter; however the Egyptian author's dramatic works still remain poorly known.

Nağīb Maḥfūz many times mentioned his experience with theatre and literature designed for stage. In his interview for "Al-Masrah" magazine in 1979 he said: "My relationship with theatre as a spectator goes back to distant past. In my childhood, I went with my father to a few plays by Ar-Rayḥānī and Al-Kassār. (...) When I started my literary education, theatre plays naturally took an important position on my reading list. I read everything what I could get from the works by Greek authors, Goethe, Shakespeare and others. (...) I gave as much attention to dramas as to poetry, novels and short stories."³ Despite his unconcealed inclination to theatre, for many years of his literary career, Maḥfūz did not attempt to face drama as a form of artistic expression. Numerous times, he very positively spoke of theatrical achievements of Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, whom he greatly admired and respected both as an artist and as a man, but Maḥfūz himself stuck to prose.⁴ Several times, he suggested that in the light of such a huge talent as al-Ḥakīm, his own dramaturgic attempts would come off poorly, what would make him feel bad. However, it turned out that theatre itself demanded Maḥfūz, seeing in his novels an attractive and

¹ Nağīb Maḥfūz as cited in Gamal al-Ghitani, *The Mahfouz Dialogs*, transl. H. Davies, Cairo 2007, p. 116.

² Cf. Nehad Selaiha, *Introduction*, in: Naguib Mahfouz, *One Act Plays 1*, Cairo 1989, pp. 9–22.

³ Nağīb Maḥfūz as cited in Maḥmūd Kuhayla, *Dawr ad-drāmā al-masraḥiyya fī tağribāt Nağīb Maḥfūz al-ibdā'iyya*, "Masraḥunā", 19.12.2011, No. 231, p. 22.

⁴ Cf. *Asātidatī li-Nağīb Maḥfūz*, ed. Ibrāhīm 'Abd al-Azīz, Al-Qāhira 2002, pp. 73–75.

interesting material for staging. In 1958, the crew of Al-Masrah al-Ḥurr (The Independent Theatre) staged the adaptation of *Zuqāq al-Midāqq* (“Midāqq Alley”) arranged by Amīna aṣ-Ṣāwī and directed by Kamāl Yāsīn.⁵ The spectacle was a great success, which only encouraged artists to work on the staging of the first part of the famous trilogy titled *Bayn al-Qaṣrayn* (“Palace Walk”). Soon Egyptian theatres staged adaptations of Maḥfūz’s other works such as: *Al-Liṣṣ wa-al-kilāb* (“The Thief and the Dog”), *Bidāya wa-nihāya* (“The Beginning and the End”), *Qaṣr aṣ-Ṣawq* (“Palace of Desire”), *Hams al-ḡunūn* (“Whisper of Madness”), *Ḥān al-Ḥalīlī* and *Mīrāmār*. They enjoyed lesser or greater popularity and gained both positive and not very high assessments from critics. It is rather hard to say that this relatively big number of stage adaptations of the author’s works was a factor influencing his decision to get closer to the theatre language. It is worth mentioning that Maḥfūz’s experience with working on film production as a scriptwriter was not very successful. He said: “To be honest I was not happy writing scripts. As a writer you are a master of your own work, and this was a kind of common creation. You say to „go right” and another person claims that it is better to *go left*”.⁶ The individualism and vision of artistic work were more important for the writer than the financial profits and success in the film industry. Eventually, as he recalled himself, he participated in the production of around 30 films.⁷

The thought of writing a drama grew in the artist for some time and was connected with particular aesthetic and life experiences. It finally became a need to search for a new language or a new medium, rather than a simple pursuit of ambitions. Maḥfūz said: “Absurd movement which appeared in the European literature and flourished in the ‘60s drew my attention. I liked the works that expressed it, especially by such authors as Ionesco, Sartre Albert Camus. My admiration to this movement was influenced by the harmonization of a content and form. The narrative form got the shape of absurd or grotesque and the similar thing occurs in relations to content. When I read the play *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett, I wrote for “Al-Masā” newspaper a critical article, in which I interpreted it, explaining what it was about. Maybe Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm was the first one who wanted to follow this movement in Arabic literature, writing the play *Yā ṭāli’ aṣ-ṣaḡara*. I did not try to write in this style because I do not like writing only for the sake of following or copying. Then, the disaster of 5th June 1967 came. I felt that I lost balance and that a simple realistic form was not enough to express this situation, which, in my opinion, was close to grotesque. In the period between 1967 and 1970, something pushed me to the movement of absurd. I believed that it best expressed the situation we lived in.”⁸ In 1969, the author published the collection of short stories titled *Taḥta al-miḡalla* (“Under the Umbrella” or “Under the Bus Shelter”), containing five dramas: *Yumīt wa-yuḥyī*,

⁵ Cf. Maḥmūd Kuḥayla, *Ad-Drāmātūrḡiyā ‘inda Naḡīb Maḥfūz*, www.arrafid.ae/arrafid/p21_12-2012 (17.10.2015).

⁶ Naḡīb Maḥfūz as cited in Gamal al-Ghitani, op. cit., p. 133.

⁷ Ibid., p. 133.

⁸ *Naḡīb Maḥfūz, Ṣaḡḥāt min muḏakkirātihi wa-aḏwā’ ḡadīda ‘alā adabihi wa-hayātihi*, ed. R. an-Naqqāš, Al-Qāhira 1998, p. 336.

(“Death and Resurrection”), *At-Tirka* (“The Legacy”), *An-Nağāt* (“The Rescue”), *Mašrū‘ li-al-munāqaša* (“A Draft Proposal”) and *Mahamma* (“The Task”). The collection from 1973 *Al-Ġarīma* (“The Crime”) included the drama *Al-Muṭārada* (“The Chase”), and the volume *Aš-Šayṭān ya‘ iz* (“The Devil Preaches”) from 1979 contained two theatre plays: *Al-Ġabal* (“The Mountain”) and *Aš-Šayṭān ya‘ iz*. Maḥfūz’s plays were very quickly staged. Soon after the volume *Taḥta al-mizalla* was issued, the director Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm decided to put on stage the three plays published in it: *Yumūt wa-yuhyī*, *At-Tirka* and *An-Nağāt*. Prominent actors starred in the plays; there were among others: Sanā’ Ġamīl, Ġalāl aš-Šarqāwī and ‘Āyda ‘Abd al-Azīz. Nihād Šulayḥa wrote that the excellent cast and literary popularity of Maḥfūz ensured the success of the spectacles.⁹ However, the success among audience did not translate into positive assessments and high opinions of critics. Maḥfūz’s plays were criticized for being intellectual exercises or dialogued stories, without noticing their theatrical potential.¹⁰ As a matter of fact, the writer did not become discouraged by this coldly received debut and, as he had indicated earlier, he published three more theatre plays. Eventually, however, after 1979, he never got back to writing dramas.

From the perspective of time, one can ask a question why Maḥfūz’s works were so criticized and whether they were really as poor as it was claimed then. What is interesting is that the above mentioned dramas were not published in separate collections and were parts of subsequent volumes of short stories. We can assume that Maḥfūz somehow incorporated them into a broader project, where they took place next to the prose works. It seems that the author treated them as an integral element of his artistic communication, in which the division into literary genres was not very important. It could have been a completely peripheral issue for him. Of course, we can also presume that Maḥfūz was not entirely confident debuting in drama and, therefore, he included it into the cycle of prose, in which he felt freely, trying to somehow mitigate the assessment of readers and critics. No matter what was the truth, this seemingly trivial editing issue could have had a great significance and influence on the reception of his works. Critics, used to reading Maḥfūz’s realistic prose, faced a difficult challenge to assess quite a surprising literary proposal. On the one hand, the writer derived clearly from the stylistics of absurd and grotesque, on the other hand, in one volume, he combined prose with drama. Maybe, there was too much innovativeness and individualism going beyond the frames of the Egyptian literary mainstream of those times. Only after some years, Sāmī Ḥašba admitted that the critical tone of opinions on Maḥfūz’s theatrical plays was too severe and not fully justified.¹¹ Nevertheless, the first assessments had an impact for many years on the way the dramas of the Nobel Prize winner were perceived, creating unfair stereotype.

Organizing the reflection over the subject of our studies, we often strive for clear and straightforward systematization of our knowledge based on genealogical qualifications,

⁹ Cf. N. Selaiha, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 11.

chronological scheme etc. In the case of Maḥfūz's theatrical plays, such a treatment may bring the risk of too reductionist approach, which omits some features and excessively highlights the others to show some general rule of a synthetizing nature. Therefore, I treat my deliberations only as a stimulus to further reflection on dramatic output of the Egyptian writer, leaving an open space for the development of optimal way to describe the complex of phenomena contained in it.

Maḥfūz's theatrical plays, no matter how they differ from one another, have an important point of reference: politics. Politics is not perceived here as a simple game of power and its maintenance, but it is understood as a way of building and functioning of a particular community. Thus, the image of the condition of the Egyptian society in a broad dimension, including mechanisms conditioning and organizing its life, became a subject of the artistic reflection and commentary. Maḥfūz clearly indicates what a direct impulse for him to speak up and formulate his communication exactly this way was. The experience of the lost war of 1967 shocked the whole Egyptian society with its elite at the head. A lot of artists entirely suspended their artistic activities for some time, undergoing a painful stage of a shock. It turned out that the event, and actually the range of military and political events, overturned their whole order. It is worth mentioning that the consequences of the Arab disaster of 1967 show simultaneously how tight the relations between cultural life and social and political life were – in Egypt and in different parts of the Arab world in the period preceding this notorious date. In the political dimension, we can talk about the difficult test that showed devaluation, or actually ineffectiveness, of Nasser's doctrine, which was strongly promoted and propagated as the most effective way to build Arab position in the regional and global system. In the cultural perspective, this political failure revealed shallowness and superficiality of the idea, whose ambition was to create a modern, proud and aware of its values society. Suddenly, the sense of the whole system, and even the model of interpersonal relations based on it, could be questioned. Maḥfūz, as an insightful observer of Egyptian everyday life, very strongly experienced this difficult history lesson. In his first after-war collection, he tried to capture the mood of that period and decided to do it using a wide range of instruments given by the literary convention of grotesque and absurd. Fāṭima Mūsā wrote that the collection titled *Taḥta al-miẓalla* surprised the readers with its style and atmosphere of fear, anxiety and confusion.¹² Maḥfūz created a unique theatre of anxiety. He broke the fossilized decorum, showing the impairment of the system, fragility of social relations, superficiality, ineffectiveness, and even oppressiveness of the doctrines adopted. He went beyond the narrative placed in the mimetic reflection of real world. He used poetics of dream, surrealism and psychologism.

The play titled *Yumūt wa-yuḥyī* is the clearest and the most straightforward attempt to get over a failure of 1967. The allegoric characters: the Man, the Woman, the Giant, the Doctor and the Beggar are presented in the symbolic, slightly unreal space composed around the palm, waterwheel and Pharaonic mustabas. This specific entourage, despite its

¹² Cf. Fāṭima Mūsā, *Naḡīb Maḥfūz wa-taṭawwur ar-riwāya al-'arabiyya*, Al-Qāhira 1999, p. 163.

mysterious and quite gloomy character, is not anonymous. It clearly refers to the Egyptian reality. The whole action of the play takes place in this single unchanged location.

Maḥfūz composes the play as a sequence of four subsequent meetings, during which the Man talks with the Woman, the Doctor, the Giant and the Beggar. The passage between the sequences is quite harmonious, although maintained in the convention of an oneiric vision. Each stage reveals the character of the Man, gives broader picture of his experience, feelings and ambitions and shows the gradual process of self-reflection stimulated by the meetings.

The beaten Man is lying under the tree, when the Woman approaches him and gently wakes him up. They start the conversation:

“Woman: Are you better now? (The man does not answer, but looks his normal self)

Woman: Take a deep breath. It’s a fine day today.

Man: Nothing is fine. Nothing at all.

Woman: The weather is, at least. It’s all right.

Man: Nothing will ever be right or fine from this day onward.”¹³

The last sentence may be treated as a motto of the whole work. The main hero of the drama is its sender and receiver: the Man, because his life is totally overturned. The conversation with a Woman means a confrontation of two world orders, or two visions of life. The vision of the Woman assumes reconciliation with fate, consent, compromise and emersion in the immanent warmth of a family. Despite being tempted by the Woman’s proposal, the Man sees the world as a space for fulfilling life mission or task which is to keep the glory of ancestors. The failure increases his sense of responsibility and respect toward great works of the past. At the same time, the failure overturns his world and order. He does no longer know what life and death are. He does not know who a hero is: “a warrior or a man of peace.”¹⁴

The meeting with the Doctor is an attempt to diagnose the condition of the Man. The doctor confirming the subsequent symptoms of the disease claims that it is not a single case, but a plague. He says: “You talk as though (...) a plague spreads...”¹⁵ It is easy to guess that by the plague we should understand the concrete political ideology which conquered nearly the whole society, putting it into a specific condition. The Doctor proposes a therapy which will consist in the change of the whole lifestyle and worldview. The words that nothing will be the same again sound as echo. When the mocking laugh of the enemy is heard in the background, and the Man is thinking about revenge, the Giant appears. It embodies a global superpower which eagerly will help in the confrontation with the stronger opponent, but it has its own demands. Accepting its conditions will mean another blow and another painful experience. So the hero hesitates. It seems that

¹³ Nağīb Maḥfūz, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

the meeting with the Beggar leaves the strongest impression on the Man. This character, appearing out of nowhere, embodies, by his attitude, rebellion and constant readiness to fight for his rights because, as he says, revolting is better than being a stone and freedom is better than security itself.¹⁶ At the same time, the Beggar has fulfilled the criteria to be cured presented by the Doctor, which means that he has started to function against the rules commonly deemed as logical. Finally, the Man, changed by this meeting, declines the proposal of the Giant. Their quarrel wakes up the mustabas sleeping in the shadow, the mysterious characters that together with the hero, in one row, go in the direction of the enemy, whose identity is easy to guess.

Maḥfūz juxtaposes characters-symbols incorporating attitudes, positions and perspectives of the participants and witnesses of the bitter experience of the failure in the conflict with Israel. He avoids direct criticism, although the words of the Beggar directed to the mysterious manager of the institution which had a guardianship over the Beggar are quite pungent: "You see, it's true he was honest, fair and kind but he was also too damned fond of discipline. Almost an obsession with him. And he enforced it with near astronomical precision and no questions asked."¹⁷ It is difficult not to find even a slight assessment of Nasser's policy. However, there is no point in searching in the drama for insightful analysis of causes and mechanisms which led to the disaster. The author is rather concentrated on presenting the spirit and mind after the failure. The main ideological axis of the work is closely connected to the ethos of revolution. It is perceived as a positive change in a society, which, on the basis of its own power, strives to the satisfaction of its interests. Although they are not clearly specified, they constitute an intuitively perceived welfare of the nation. The past plays here an important role. The attitude toward it is ambivalent. The main character shows that the Past may be a motor of changes or an obstacle hiding the proper assessment of reality.

Other dramas from the collection *Taḥt al-miẓalla* strongly maintain the atmosphere dominating in the volume, although they have various subjects. *At-Tirka* is a contemporary morality play, full of allegories, with transparent plot, similarly to *Al-Mašrū' li-al-munāqaša*. The issues touched upon include cultural identity, modernity and the role of contemporary art. The heroes of these works are individuals slightly distant from reality, such as the Writer from *Al-Mašrū' li-al-munāqaša* or the marionettes in the hands of fate tangled into the course of events in the drama *At-Tirka*. Both dramas *An-Nağāt* and *Al-Mahamma* have forms similar to *Yumīt wa-yuhyī*. Maḥfūz depicts in them human passions, desires and needs on the background of unstable social and political situation. The characters of these works are usually deprived of individual features. They do not have names and their motivations are not entirely clear. They find themselves in the absurd situations resembling nightmares. The Man from *An-Nağāt* agrees to provide a shelter to the mysterious Woman running from the police. The *Young Man* from the play *Al-Mahamma* stuck in the desert falls into the hands of the unpredictable gang.

¹⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 170 and 172.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

From their vague conversations and plethora of thoughts the questions about freedom, justice and life duties emerge. They become keywords, or maybe just empty words, spells in the discussion, whose price is life. The works are dominated by the sense of danger, anxiety, and their plots are like a mirror reflection, slightly distorted though, of the dreams full of fears.

In the collection of short stories titled *Al-Ġarīma* of 1973, Maḥfūz included one drama *Al-Muṭārada*. The play is an allegoric, surrealist and universal story about human life and constant struggle with passions. The characters are symbols expressed with colours. The Black indicates death, which accompanies a man on every stage of his life. The Red embodies physicality and sensuality. The White symbolizes everything which is spiritual, ideal and often restrained, virtuous, moral, but, at the same time, succumbing to what is physical. The Red and the White compose one character, combining the dualism of the forces, tormenting a human being. They live their lives together and in different ways try to escape from the oppressive power of the Black. On all stages of their existential experience, they try to hide from it in work, career, family, home, madness and whims of middle age, and even in the marriage at elderly age. Their last common decision concerning the marriage is a boost of vitality, whose task is to convince themselves that they are still full of energy and are still escaping from death. Although the end of their lives is coming inevitably, the universal life cycle goes on. In the final scene of the drama, our attention is drawn by the mad wedding dance of the young and lively wife. She takes over the initiative and fulfils with her energy the microcosmos of the space, in which the action takes place.

Nağīb Maḥfūz included his last two theatre plays in the collection of short stories titled *Aš-Šayṭān ya'iz* from 1979. The writer again used allegory, and the issues of politics and power were still in his field of interests. The drama *Al-Ġabal* presents the image of revolution, the idea of spontaneous fight with social injustice. Maḥfūz tries to deconstruct mechanisms which make lofty words suddenly become empty slogans, and change ambitious goal into the oppressive system of keeping the power. He juxtaposes reality and fantasy, tragedy and comedy drawing a caricature or grotesque image of reality. Reality devoid of sense and true values.

Similar subject appears in the play *Aš-Šayṭān ya'iz* inspired by the story *The City of Brass* from *One Thousand and One Nights*. The Genie locked in a bottle says his story, which in an allegoric way describes the eternal human desire to possess wealth and full power. The political domination quickly demands exclusiveness and changes into a cult, and the almighty Genie is to be its guard. However, it is not easy to control him. Whenever there is a chance, he turns his back on his master, causing his destruction. The words said in the final of the play by *Ifrīt* sound like memento: "Who rules according to the principles of faith does not need Satan powers."¹⁸

All above-mentioned dramas by Maḥfūz are polyphonic works in respect of their genre. The author synthetises anti-rationalist directions in order to, as it seems, capture

¹⁸ Nağīb Maḥfūz, *Aš-Šayṭān ya'iz*, in: *Al-Masraḥīyyat*, Al-Qāhira 2008, p. 269.

and show individual and collective subconscious. It contains the truth of complexes and passions, which, independent on times and historic experiences, torment a human being and determine his condition. Also one should search there for the key to understand the contemporary world. Maḥfūz's literary pictures are very closely connected with oneiric visions revealing the subconscious, where internal world of emotional experiences and external world of existing situation mix with each other. The way in which the Egyptian writer depicts frames of mind and spirit of the characters, for whom reality stopped being a readable and understandable environment, also draws our attention. Maḥfūz's dramas are also a record of the struggle with the world and oneself in every possible way. In this context, it is worth noticing that the author does not overturn the order of things, as one could claim. He rather tries to tell about this order in an allegoric way, analysing its selected spaces.

It is to be emphasized once more that Maḥfūz chose theatrical play as a form of artistic expression intentionally. In an interview given in 1970 he said: "There is no doubt that today we live in the age of the theatre. The present moment (in our history), fraught with ideas and problems can only be debated through the theatre...The novel needs calmness, consideration and settled conditions, and because of this it must now step aside and let the theatre take control."¹⁹

The grotesque and the absurd as literary techniques offered him a space in which he decided to shape his message. Peter Brook wrote that "the theatre of the absurd does not seek the unreal for its own sake. It uses the unreal to make certain explorations because it senses the absence of truth in our everyday exchanges and the presence of the truth in the seeming far-fetched."²⁰ The Egyptian writer, seeking this truth about everyday life, avoids the language of realism, which seems to be insufficient or inappropriate for the tasks set. He construes metaphors from the elements of his own experience and the experience of the society, to which he belongs, and using them he builds his literary communication.

Naḡīb Maḥfūz clearly explained in which circumstance his dramatic works were created and after 1979 he never came back to drama again. However, it does not change the fact that his plays today constitute not only a witness of literary experiences of the author, but also these are very interesting, universal texts, which in the light of criticism defend themselves with the originality of artistic expression and topicality of the subject.

¹⁹ Naḡīb Maḥfūz as cited in Rasheed El-Enany, *The Pursuit of Meaning*, London 1993, p. 207.

²⁰ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, New York 1996, p. 63.