

Literature and Modernity: A Study of Naguib Mahfouz and Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh

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Abstract

The paper highlights the literary works of Naguib Mahfouz of Arabic literature and Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh of Persian literature. It shows that these two writers engaged in highlighting their countries journey towards modernity by adopting the new literary genres of western literature. Short story and novel, as newly introduced literary forms to Arabic and Persian languages have been adopted by them to be their medium of expressions. By producing various well acclaimed short stories and novels, they both served the purpose of advancement of their literature and became the mouthpieces for their society and culture at the time change and transformation. With their literary productions they strived hard to guide their society towards modernity. Their short stories and novels document the socio- cultural nuances and political happenings of Egyptian and Iranian society from throughout the twentieth century. Decades long literary careers and their marvellous pieces of writings make both of them exceptional in the fields of literature and culture.

Key Words: *Egypt, Iran, literature, Arabic, Persian, Society, Modernity and Tradition.*

Introduction

Naguib Mahfouz of Egypt and Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh of Iran two notable literary figures of twentieth century have seized their time and space through their writings at the juncture of change and discontinuity. Twentieth century Islamic world witnessed heavy upheavals at all fronts including political, social and religious. The whole century seems to be fraught with the clash of different types of ideologies which generated various kinds of perceptions, concepts and theories towards human lives and their goals. Intellectuals became divided on the basis of ideas into several groups and blocks: If some tried to hold back the fast changing society saving from powerful wind

blowing from the west in the name of modernity while some others advocated with all their might to fly with them to achieve the advancement. Literature in the Islamic world too faced the same onslaught and it was forced to go through changes to fit the time and its requirements. In this backdrop the Arabic and Persian literatures are cases to be analysed. As, it has been read and said about the classical literatures of both the languages in terms of richness and contributions to the societies. But developed forms of western literature jolted the Arabic and Persian world too in terms of literature's role towards society. Various intellectuals from both the countries have followed the footsteps of west by accepting the newly discovered literary genres such as short story, drama and novel. In the list of such noted writers who served the modern developed genres in Arabic and Persian, the names of Naguib Mahfouz and Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh figure in the forefront. For Both the writers, novel and short story newly added forms to the prose literature of Arabic and Persian have been attractive enough to be their field of intellectual practice. They both focussed on their respective societies which they not only documented at the time of change but also advocated for modernity. Thus the paper will try to figure out the contributions of both the writers to bring their ideas and advocacy into light.

Naguib Mahfouz and His Works

Naguib Mahfouz, a writer, a novelist, a screen play writer and a civil servant is the only Arabic literary person from the Arab World who has been awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 1988. Having born in Gamaliya District of Cairo on 11 December in 1911, he spent his early life along with his seven siblings, in the same crowded district, which figures time and again in many of his works like Cairo Trilogy. He was brought up in a family tilted towards religion which was preserved by his mother Fatima and his father Abd al Aziz Pasha. Particularly his mother, the daughter of Sheikh Mustafa Akecip from Al-Azhar, towards whom he was deeply attached, especially after the death of his father, he stayed with her after the marriage of his brothers. His mother gave him rare-Azhar, books, and accompanied to visit the ancient Egyptian antiquities and showed the mummies; Egyptian history later became a major theme in many of his books.¹

Later in 1924, the family shifted to Abbasiya from where he started his early education from Madrasa *Bain al Qasrain Al Ibtediya* (the primary school of between the palaces). Continuing his education he completed his secondary schooling from *Madrsa al fuad al Awwal* (Fu'ad 1 School) and he earned his graduation degree in philosophy from Philosophy Department, Cairo University in 1934.²

¹ El Enani, Rasheed *Naguib Mahfouz, the pursuit of meaning*, p 3- 31. Routledge, London, (1993)

² <http://www.elaph.com/ElaphWeb/ElaphLiterature/2005/8/84131.htm>

Inspired by Abbas Mahmud Al Aqqad and TahaHussain he started writing in his early life and kept publishing the stories and articles in the papers such as *al Risala*, *alHilal* and *al Ahran*. Though he preferred the literary writing to be his career option but his interest in philosophy remained unmoved for his spiritual gain. Therefore he kept quenching his thirst for philosophy by reading the works of noted philosophers like Henri Bergeson and others extensively. He published his first short story in 1934 and later a collection of short stories named *Hums al Junoon* came in the market by 1938.³

After graduating in 1934 in philosophy, till the age of sixty in 1971 he served at several government departments in different ministries. The list may include a secretarial post at Cairo University till 1938, then from 1939 to 1954 he held a position of civil servant at ministry of Islamic Affairs. Later he was appointed director of the Foundation for Support of the Cinema in the state Cinema Organization. From 1969-71 he was a consultant for cinema affairs to the Ministry of Culture. From here he moved to the Ministry of Religious Endowments to render his service as a parliamentary secretary to the minister. Simultaneously, He worked as a board member of *Dar al Ma'aref* publishing house. Then he was invited to be a writer emeritus at *al-Ahram* newspaper in 1971, where he continued to write a weekly column that was published in Arabic *al-Ahram*, and in English *Al-ahram Weekly* until shortly before his death.⁴ A collection of these columns was published for his ninetieth birthday celebration in 2001 as Naguib Mahfouz at SidiGaber.

Apart from the government positions he held in his life, his literary and cinematic engagement is known world over. During his literary career, he produced more than 34 novels and many short stories along with uncountable articles in newspapers and magazines. Having a focus on novels, which is his area of interest, his writings may be divided into four major phases according to the theme and topics addressed by him. Firstly he took into account the historical theme, in which he produced three novels: *Abath al Aqdar* (The Mockery of Fates, 1939), *Rdubis* (Radubis, 1943), and *Kifah Tibah*, (The Struggle of Thebes, 1944), focussing on Pharaonic and ancient past of Egypt. But soon he shifted his attention towards the recent developments of the country where he saw a lot of hues and cries among the masses which compelled him to write on socio-political themes of the time. The famous and world acclaimed novels like Cairo Trilogy (1955), Mideq Alley (1947), Khan al Khalil (1945) and Cairo Modern (1945) belong to this second phase. In third phase he becomes allegorical, as state seems to be cruel towards writers and intellectuals. This phase of Symbolism of Mahfouz's writing includes his most controversial novel *Auladu Harratena* (The Children of Gabalaawi, 1959) here he criticizes Nasser and his regime. Through this

³Badavi, M *MA short History of Arabic Literature* , p 36-76 Clarendon Press, London (1993)

⁴ <http://www.naguib-mahfouz.com/life.htm>

way of writing he produces the novels like *Al lissu Wal Kilab*, (The Thief and the Dogs ,1961), *Al Siman Wal Kharif*, (Quail and Autumn ,1962), *Al Tariq*, (The Search ,1964), *Al shahhaz*, (The Beggar, 1965), the chatter on the Nile ,1962), Miramar (1967), *Al Hubbta Tahtal Matar*, (Love under the Rain ,1973). The fourth and last phase begins in the period of President Sadat who brings *Infeteha* policy regarding economic opening and many relaxations are made towards intellectuals and literary personalities. Thus Mahfouz enjoying freedom, writes many novels which include *Ibn Fatouma* (1983), *Al Maraya* Mirrors (1972), *Hazrat al Muhtaram* (Respected Sir, 1975), *Malhamah al Harafish* (The Harafish, 1977), *Asrul Hub* Love and the Veil (1980), *Afrahul Qubah*, Wedding Song (1981), *Al Baqi min al Zamane Sa'at*, One hour remains (1982), *Rehalat Ibne Fatumah* The Journey of Ibn Fattouma (1983).

Regarding these monumental works M M Badavi says he is “the chronicler of twentieth century Egypt, and its most vocal social and political conscience. With titles taken from the names of streets of old Cairo, the novels offer a panoramic vista of the Egyptian lower and lower middle classes, with the minute details of their daily lives vividly and lovingly portrayed. Unlike Lawrence Durrell’s Alexandria, Mahfouz’s Cairo has more than mere romantic imaginative validity: it is a recognizable physical presence. Its powerful impact upon the lives of the characters is as memorable as that of Deckons’s London, Dostoevsky’s St Petersburg, or Zola’s Paris”.⁵

Naguib Mahfouz actively engaged with almost all major socio political issues, debates and discourses of his time and unambiguously advocated his own ideological understanding. He had a vision for his nation that got modernized but still there are some basic fundamentals which had not changed yet. Mahfouz got excited with the glorious past of Egypt ever since his debut as a writer. Though a Muslim by birth and brought up in an Islamic atmosphere, he was very much enthusiastic about the Pharaohs. Mahfouz’s reading was not confined to any particular area; it flowed into society and culture, classic and modern literatures, religious and non religious writings, whereas history and philosophy acquires the central stage of his interest areas. His intellectual fascination towards Arab intellectuals was unmatched. He read, consumed and digested different ideas of Salama Musa, Tahah Hussein, Mustafa and Aqqad. The only touching stone for his own ideas was “Egypt” and hoped for all the goods to come to it.

Putting all these together it can be argued that Mahfouz believed in an ideology of building a nation upon the bricks of its whole history and cherish the values it left around. Moreover, he expounded a nationalism that sought perfection, and continuously advocated for a nation that could take into account the deeper and

⁵Badavi, M *MA short History of Arabic Literature* p 137.Clarendon Press, London, (1993)

indigenous factors more than a peripheral and emotional attachment of the society. For Mahfouz Egypt is not a country for its majority based identity but he argued for a government that would be sensitive to the issues of all of its citizens irrespective of religious and linguistic and other parochial divide and be willing to win their confidence in all possible manners. The writings of Mahfouz in some way or the other were defining the features of the ideal Egypt he dreamt of.

Jamalzadeh and his works

Mohammad-Ali Jamalzadeh, a pioneering Iranian intellectual and father of modern Persian prose fiction and the short story genre, was born in Isfahan in 1892. Over his long and productive life, which spanned from Iran's Constitutional Revolution in 1906 to the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Jamalzadeh witnessed and influenced many pivotal events in Iran's modern history. The 1921 publication of his landmark short story collection *Once Upon a Time*, with its colloquial language, mastery of Persian idioms, and penetrating socio-political commentary, marked a turning point for modern Iranian fiction. In his prolific career until 1997, Jamalzadeh authored novels, short stories, essays, research, reviews, and memoirs reflecting his unique perspective as a "product of two worlds."⁶

The Persian language, culture, history, and customs shaped his worldview, including memories of his time in Iran during revolution and turmoil. His Western education, knowledge of European languages and research, and advocacy for the Enlightenment also shaped him. Throughout his life, as evident in his writing, he dedicated himself to bridging these Eastern and Western worlds, working to advance modern education as a means to combat ignorance, poverty, oppression, and injustice for the Iranian people.

Jamalzadeh began writing historical, social and political essays for the Berlin-based journal *Kāveh* from 1916 to 1922. His first contribution was an article condemning Britain and Russia's policies in Iran before and during World War I, titled "When a Nation is Reduced to Slavery." Also during this period, he published his first book in Berlin, *The Worthy Treasure, or the Economic Situation of Iran* (1916-17). This book covers Iran's physical geography, commerce history, customs, transportation, mines, arts and crafts, reforms, finances, weights and measures, the postal and telegraph system, life in the capital, and other useful information about the country.

Jamalzadeh wrote mostly fiction during the period of intense politicization and turmoil in Iranian society between 1941 and the 1953 coup. However, he resumed his critical

⁶<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad-Ali-Jamalzadah>

writing about society and politics in the early 1960s when issues like land reform had been raised. In 1960, he published "*Āzādi o ḥayṭiyat-e Ensāni*" (Freedom and Human Dignity), an anthology of prose and poetry on these subjects from Western and Persian literature. This was followed by "*Kāk o ādam*" (Earth and Man, Tehran, 1962) and "*Zamin, o arbāb o dehqān*" (Land, Landowner, Peasant, Tehran, 1963). His book "*Kolqiyāt-e māIrāniān*" (Our Iranian Character Traits), first published serially in 1965 in the magazine *Masā'el-e Irān* (Problems of Iran), compiled writings on Iranians' traits by foreigners and Iranians throughout history. It was published in book form in 1967 with the aim of shedding light on Iran's social problems and providing self-critique to pave the way for solutions. However, the book was later criticized by the government and eventually banned in Iran.⁷

The first of Jamalzahe's novel was in the year 1942 novel *Dār al-majānin* (The Mad house), an engaging story set in a mental asylum populated by quirky characters defined by their philosophies, habits, and idiosyncrasies. While illuminating the abnormalities of these characters, Jamalzadeh also criticizes the society that drives sensitive individuals to seek refuge in asylums rather than remain free. However, this social commentary is secondary; the driving force of the novel is its droll humor. The allusions are clear enough, and the author's love and respect for the late SadeqHedayat are touching. The book also contains a good selection of quotations from classical Persian poetry about wisdom and insanity.⁸

Jamalzadeh's second novel, *Qoltašandivān* (Tehran, 1946), tackles the eternal struggle between good and evil. The opening neatly describes a small street in Tehran and its residents, who resemble people across the country. The chapters examine two inhabitants on this little street: first the hero, HājiShaikh, an honourable and patriotic wholesale tea and sugar dealer, a former *Majles* deputy. The villain is *Qoltašandivān*, a ruthless opportunist who stops at nothing for personal gain. The villain first tries marrying his compromised daughter to HājiShaikh's son, but the upright Hāji refusal compels the villain to wait for his time for revenge. During World War I, with HājiShaikh's trade disrupted, the villain orders him to buy and store huge sugar in a good a quantity. Months later, acute shortages bring desperate people to HājiShaikh's door, knowing he has sugar. But he cannot sell it, the villain won't claim it, and Hāji dies disgraced, unable to prove his innocence. Meanwhile the villain profits, builds an

⁷Jamalazadeh, Syed Ali. Heston, W. "*Isfahan is the half world: memories form from a Persian boyhood*" Princeton University Press 2014.

⁸<https://en.mehrnews.com/news/113578/In-memory-of-Jamalzadeh-Father-of-Perisan-prose-writing>

orphanage, and hosts lavish parties, dying peacefully wealthy and honored, though his wealth came through ruining a good man.⁹

Jamalzadeh's *Rāheāb-Nāma* (The Drainage Controversy, 1948) stands out for its social criticism and humour, vividly portraying different social classes through excellent style and language. The novel is set in a Tehran cul-de-sac with six households. The problem is a blocked water channel, leaving the neighbours without water. The hero, an Iranian student at home for summer vacation from Europe, calls a meeting and is authorized to arrange repairs. After endless troubles and paying all expenses himself, the job is done. But the neighbours balk at reimbursing him, unfamiliar with business principles. With his allowance gone, the student cannot return to Europe. Disillusioned by his compatriots' lack of good neighbourly relations, he leaves home for a room at a shrine, far from any neighbours. Unlike Jamalzadeh's other novels, *Rāheāb-Nāma* is concise, coherent, and focused. The opening sketches—of a sweltering Persian summer day, the bustling bazaar, and the tranquil shrine—are portrayed masterfully. Throughout, Jamalzadeh demonstrates admirable knowledge and insight into middle-class family dynamics.¹⁰

The two-volume work, *Sar-o-tahyekkarbās* (Cut From the Same Cloth, Tehran, 1956), also known as *Esfahān-Nāma*, begins with an account of the author's childhood in the first chapter. The rest of the book focuses on episodes from the life of the author's friend, which, while fascinating, leave us wanting to learn more about the author's own later years. The various stories and anecdotes included in both volumes, about the hypocrisy of an *ākund*, and *Bāj-e Sibil* (extortion), illustrating the thuggish character of army officers, are in fact independent pieces superimposed on the narrative. Taken as a whole, *Sar o tahyekkarbās* is the most erudite work by Jamalzadeh. Meditations on philosophy, metaphysics, religious instructions, mysticism, and their expression in Persian ethics and literature are to be found throughout.¹¹

Conclusion

In the light of these literary works of both the writers it becomes clear that the modernist literary figures of the Arabic and Persian languages have challenged the tradition bravely. These works which span the whole twentieth century document the socio-political undercurrents of the time and society's journey towards modernity. The

⁹<https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/jamalzadeh-ii>

¹¹<https://www.angelfire.com/rnb/bashiri/Authors/Jamalzadeh.html>

¹⁰ IBID

authors criticized the political establishment of their respective countries and they tried to show them a path forward. They became the real mouth pieces for people and their sufferings at the time when the society was standing at the cross road of change and transformation. They advocated for the western modernity to be followed and implemented in their respective countries for the advancement of their country. Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz through his monumental works argued about Egyptian identity which he believed to be stronger than Arab and Islamic tag. He advocated for this ideology to be harbinger for the development of his country and its people. Iranian Jamalzadeh a modern intellectual who spent huge span of his life in Eoroupe showed a great deal of those ideas to be implemented back home. His works highlighted the loop holes in socio-political conditions of the Iranian society and served the purpose of modernization of Persian language in a huge way. These two intellectuals of the Islamic world remained a mile stone for the cause of change and transformation.

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