

The Allegorical Significance of Naguib Mahfouz's *Children of Our Alley*

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When the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz won the 1988 Nobel Prize for literature, the Swedish Academy laid strong emphasis on his unique novel, *Children of Our Alley* (*Awlad Haritna*), describing it as "an allegory of humanity's historic destiny under the great monotheistic founders of religion." Using the narrative framework of a Cairo alley, the work delineates the spiritual and social history of man from Genesis to the present day. The main characters represent God and Satan, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. In thin disguise, the prophets are portrayed as social reformers striving to save their peoples from tyranny and oppression. Mahfouz then boldly allegorizes the "death of God" in the modern world at the hands of a new prophet, the magician who personifies science.

When the novel was serialized in the daily newspaper *al-Ahram* in 1959, it generated a mixed reaction of deep admiration and intense hostility. In the introduction to his translation of the work, Philip Stewart describes eloquently its reception in Egypt: "It is not often that preachers lead their flocks into the streets to shout for the banning of a novel hailed by many as a masterpiece, nor that the editor of a great newspaper has to rely on his friendship with the Head of State [Nasser] to ensure that a serial is published uncut to the end."¹ Mahfouz faced the outcry of religious zealots, who unleashed their tempestuous fury at the "godlessness" of the work and its deviation from the Koranic story. In their outrage, some of them demanded that Mahfouz be brought to trial, asserting that his "profane portrait" of Muhammad verged on heresy. As a result of fiery sermons by the clergy of al-Azhar mosque against the novel, no Egyptian publisher dared to print it in book form. It was only in 1967 that it was published, slightly expurgated, in Beirut. This unprecedented furor is now frequently compared to the uproar over Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, which religious fundamentalists regard as an insult to Islam by a blasphemous apostate.

But the fierce attack on Mahfouz's allegory was clearly based on a narrow-minded misinterpretation of the work, whose main thrust is not anti-religious. As prototypes, the masters of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are metamorphosed into the successive heroes who inhabit separate quarters of the alley. Their aged ancestor, the patriarch Gebelawi (mountain-dweller), is the master of the Big House at the top, who represents God the Creator. The naked religious ideas are clothed in a tangible form that can be grasped by the

¹ Naguib Mahfouz, *Children of Gebelawi*, trans. Philip Stewart (London: Heinemann, 1981), "Translator's Introduction," p. vii. All citations refer to this edition. Page numbers are inserted parenthetically.

mind and sustained imaginatively. The concepts in the allegory are brought to life through the characters and scenes of Cairo, presumably in the nineteenth century. Mahfouz uses the familiar flavor of the city to create the illusion of reality. It is through this air of verisimilitude that the events in the novel become entirely plausible. The legend has the hard convincing texture of authenticated fact, with hardly any supernatural incidents or miraculous actions. Perhaps the only unrealistic element is the longevity of the ancient ancestor, who survives at least five generations. As for the other protagonists, they appear to be ordinary people who rise to help their fellowmen. They are involved in dramatic conflicts, which sustain our interest until the very end. Like all allegories, this novel is based on the doubleness of levels: the literal meaning and the deeper allegorical significance. The veil of allegory in *Children of Our Alley* is thin and transparent enough for the reader to establish a legitimate relationship between the two levels. Mahfouz provides several clues, including phonetic and thematic resemblances, to indicate that the main outlines of the story are drawn from certain events in the religious history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The situation at the beginning of the first section, entitled "Adham," parallels the biblical account in Genesis, evoking strong associations of the paradisaical experience before the fall of Satan and Adam. The focus is on the awesome presence of the patriarch, whose towering figure appears larger than life to incarnate, in Mahfouz's words, "a certain idea of God that men have made" ("Introduction," vii). Surrounded by his sons, Gebelawi "searched them with his piercing eyes; then he stood up and went over to the great door on to the terrace and gazed out at the huge garden . . . With his great height and breadth he seemed superhuman, a being from another world" (5). Even though the initial dialogue takes place in the "drawing-room," the writer's recurrent allusions to the "sky" and the "heavens" enhance our awareness of the supernatural dimension. The action starts when, in a spirit of pride and defiance, Gebelawi's firstborn, Idris (Iblis means Satan in Arabic), rebels against his father's will and insults him, inflaming the wrath of the patriarch, who throws him immediately out of the House. "The days and nights passed in the desert, and Idris fell deeper and deeper into disgrace . . . He would prowl round the house, hurling the foulest insults at it" (14). Driven by overwhelming desire for revenge, he entices his brother, Adham, to betray his father's trust, which leads to his expulsion from the House, together with his wife, Omayma. Outside the gate, Idris, drunk and dancing with malicious glee, reveals his true nature as "the incarnation of evil" (31).

The second section recounts the story of "Gebel" (mountain), a snake-charmer, who represents Moses in the legend. The old Gebelawi has now retreated to his secluded mansion, closed his doors and cut himself off from the world, making no effort to rescue his descendants from the suffering inflicted upon them by cruel rulers. The "people found no way to avoid the meanest kinds of work. Their numbers grew and their poverty increased and they were plunged in misery and filth. The stronger took to bullying, the weaker to begging, and all of them to drugs. A man would slave and suffer to earn a few morsels which he then had to share with a chief, not in return for thanks, but for cuffs and insults and curses. The chiefs alone lived in ease and plenty . . . while the ordinary people were trodden underfoot" (74). In this bleak atmosphere of anguish and bondage, Gebel comes to identify himself with

their predicament, leading their struggle for deliverance and justice. The patriarch appears to him in the dark, urging him to fight oppression and "destroy injustice" by force: ". . . your people are my people, and they have rights in my estate which they must take. Their honour must be defended, and their life must be good" (115). With Gebel as their shrewd and staunch leader, they emerge triumphant, having extracted their share from the chiefs by guile and violence. Ruling over them to the end of his life, he "remained a byword for justice and strength and order amongst his people" (136).

In the third section, Mahfouz plays variations on the biblical story of Christ's life, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. The protagonist here is Rifaa, whose name has connotations of "rising" and "elevation." The son of a carpenter, he is "an attractive young man, with an air of gentleness and friendliness" (140). Because violence is alien to his sensibility, he reflects the spirit of love and mercy, peace and compassion, rejecting any quest for power or property. Alone in the desert, he hears the strange voice of Gebelawi in the dark calling him his "beloved son" and urging him to act through his "inner strength" for the salvation of his people. Unlike Gebel, who believed that happiness wouldn't be possible "unless the estate was shared out equally so that each man received his due," Rifaa embraces spiritual values and denounces material wealth: "The estate is nothing, father; the happiness of a contented life is everything. Only the demons hidden deep inside us come between us and happiness" (160). Hence his main concern is to purify the soul, exorcise evil spirits, heal the sick, and preach the doctrine of love. This innocent man is eventually betrayed and dragged to the desert, where the executioners murder and bury him. There is a rumor in the alley that "his body had remained in the desert until Gebelawi himself had carried it away, and that it lay hidden under the soil of his luxuriant garden" (196). Rifaa's life becomes a glorious story repeated by his disciples and chanted "to the music of the fiddle." For a short while, the Rifaaites take control of their quarter in the alley, distributing their share of the estate's income among themselves equally. Some of them imitate their master's way of life, shunning marriage and adopting ascetic values.

In the fourth section, entitled "Kassem," who typifies Muhammad, the novelist follows traditional religious sources about the life and ideology of the Prophet so closely that at times there is perfect fusion between the literal and allegorical levels. Apart from minor deviations, the echoes from Koranic verses are conveyed with precision. Kassem is firmly established as the messenger of Gebelawi who epitomizes the heroic tradition of honor and courage, virtue and wisdom, mercy and compassion. In spite of his personal happiness, he feels intensely for all the people of the alley who "dreamed of happiness and time scattered their dreams like rubbish" (223). Appalled by their misery and poverty, he experiences the same grief and anguish which have tormented Gebel and Rifaa before him. During a period of meditation in the desert, Kassem encounters Gebelawi's servant who has come to tell him that the patriarch is aware of his descendants' plight: "He informs you that all the people of the alley are equally his children, that the estate is equally their inheritance, that chiefs are an evil that must end and that the alley must become an extension of the Big House" (228).

This revelation also includes the message that Kassem has been chosen to bring about equality and justice. When he is asked later whether he will rely

on force like Gebel or will choose love like Rifaa, Kassem responds: "Force when necessary and love always" (235). It should be noted that his militancy, manifest in constant battles with the greedy and corrupt chiefs, reveals him as more of a revolutionary than his predecessors. He strives to establish an era of mercy through the power of the sword, hence his ultimate victory over the oppressive rulers. Under his leadership, the inhabitants live briefly in peace and brotherhood. But, as is the case with Gebel and Rifaa, Kassem's revolution is undermined and nullified by his successors in office.

Finally, in the fifth section emerges a new prophet, the scientist, whose name is Arafa, which implies "knowledge". He is portrayed as a magician who strives day and night to produce an explosive that can be used as a weapon against the rulers who "threaten goods, livelihood, love and peace" (300). In his code of thought, it is futile for the people of the alley, living for so long in bondage and despair, to keep clamoring for help from their ancestor who has never been seen since the days of Adham. For him, it is "all-powerful magic" that "may one day be able to put an end to the chiefs and build houses and bring abundant food for all the people of the alley" (310). In a spirit of skepticism, he refuses to accept blindly the popular beliefs about the old patriarch and decides to get into the Big House in the hope of finding a secret document that might shed light on the mystery. In this ill-fated endeavor, he inadvertently causes the death of the illustrious forefather, which leads to tumultuous waves of grief and rage throughout the alley.

Paradoxically, it is only after Gebelawi's death that Arafa perceives his real significance to the people, whose lives become barren and meaningless without him. For them, it is a great tragedy to lose such an indispensable symbol of hope and faith. Overwhelmed by feelings of shame and guilt, Arafa wishes ardently to atone for his misdeed and aspires "to reach such a degree of magic that he would be able to restore Gebelawi to life" (323). Instead of realizing this impossible dream, he is forced through intimidation and blackmail to supply the despotic rulers with a devastating chemical weapon which serves to tighten their grip on power. Thus, Arafa's explosive devices, designed originally to save the people from tyranny and slavery, are used as a tool to suppress and destroy them. The novel ends on a note of gloom, engendered by the corruption of Arafa through his alliance with the oppressive forces which finally annihilate him. But the darkness is redeemed by a flash of hope as we see his friend searching frantically in a heap of rubbish for Arafa's last notebook which contains the formulas for progress and happiness. Young men of the alley begin to learn the art of magic "in preparation for the promised day of deliverance." "Whenever they suffered injustice they said: 'Oppression must cease as night yields to day. We shall see the end of tyranny and the dawn of miracles'" (355).

In this philosophical allegory, Mahfouz boldly explores areas of religious thought where most Egyptian writers fear to tread even in the contemporary age of relative liberalism. Through a system of symbols, he conveys his own interpretations of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, free from the distortions of dogmatic theologians who have twisted the fundamental tenets of religion. Stripping the prophets of their holiness, the novelist reduces them to the primary traits essential to their significance as prototypes. By putting them in the familiar context of Cairo, Mahfouz demystifies their messages and

achieves great symbolic intensity, making evident the identification of the characters with their functions in the novel. As the ideas flower immediately out of the different situations, the literal and allegorical layers of meaning impose themselves on the mind and senses simultaneously. The delight given by the timely fiction of the allegory determines our understanding of the timeless reality it represents. The actions and counteractions of the protagonists create the impact of a real struggle of great urgency and intensity, which serves to imprint the universal concepts upon the mind.

Roger Allen regards *Children of Our Alley* as "something of an anomaly in [Mahfouz's] novelistic output."² There can be no doubt that his use of the allegorical mode marks a dramatic departure from his technique of social realism which is often compared to that of Dickens and Balzac. Nevertheless, apart from the inner layer of allegory, the novel provides an evocative account of old Cairo, using names of well-known districts and places, with close attention to physical detail and topographical accuracy. There is a dynamic picture of the city, with its chaotic streets, squalid slums, boisterous cafés, and hashish parties. The people come alive before us, as do their habits, manners, jokes, songs, clothes, and furniture. They are delineated with great competence and love, so much so that the setting of the work betrays a spirit of nostalgia for a bygone era which has now almost vanished. As in his earlier novels, "Mahfouz's description of Cairo and the lifestyle of its inhabitants stands proudly alongside those of Dickens' London, Zola's Paris and Dostoyevsky's St. Petersburg."³

Furthermore, *Children of Our Alley* has much in common with such early works as *Khan al-Khalili* (1945) and *Midaq Alley* (1947) in terms of social protest. The afflictions of the poor and the dispossessed are depicted with passionate intensity and bitter resentment, which reflect the writer's deep concern with questions of equality and justice. His social philosophy is accentuated explicitly in the "Prologue," where the people of the alley say sadly: "There is our ancestor's house. We are all his children and we all have a right to his estate; why should we be hungry and wretched?" (1); "we are as poor as beggars . . . we live amidst filth and flies and lice . . . we have to be content with crumbs . . . we go about half-naked" (2). The fictional scribe states: "My job is to write down the complaints of those who are oppressed or in need . . . I have gained a heart-breaking knowledge of many people's secret sorrows" (3). Such statements set the tone for the rest of the work. It is noteworthy that, in his youth, Mahfouz was deeply influenced by the Egyptian thinker and writer Salama Musa, a Fabian socialist and friend of George Bernard Shaw. "From Salama Musa," he says, "I have learned to believe in science, socialism and tolerance."⁴ This firm belief is clearly reflected in *Children of Our Alley*, which transcends the afflictions of the oppressed and downtrodden in contemporary Egypt to explore universal and timeless aspects of the human predicament throughout the ages.

² Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Louvain: University of Manchester, 1982) 59.

³ "Scribe of the Nile," *The Middle East* (December 1988) 40.

⁴ Quoted by Sasson Somekh, *The Changing Rhythm: A Study of Najib Mahfuz's Novels* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973) 38.

The book suggests that greedy and despotic rulers have deprived common people of their rightful share in the wealth of the earth, so that since the Fall the vast majority of the human race have always lived in misery and destitution. It is the tyranny and corruption of social and political orders which have engendered poverty and degradation, hatred and hostility, conflict and war. Through various means, which ranged from violent strife to self-sacrificing love, the three great prophets have attempted to save their peoples from these evils. The socioreligious upheavals they have initiated represent a sense of continuity and escalation in the endless battles to liberate the masses from oppression and exploitation. But the teachings of these prophets have been consistently undermined and distorted by their successors who have formed unholy alliances with the rulers. The short-lived victories of Gebel, Rifaa, and Kassem in the novel raise serious questions about the adequacy and efficacy of their doctrines, which have failed to provide permanent solutions to end human suffering in this world.

This leads us to the crucial issue of Gebelawi's total isolation behind closed doors in the Big House, which betrays a negative attitude toward his descendants. It is true that he conveys messages to his chosen men, urging them to fight for freedom, equality, and justice. But there are recurrent references to the people's plaintive cries that the patriarch appears indifferent to their suffering. They often "looked towards the Big House, calling upon their ancestor to come out of his isolation and set right what had gone wrong with their affairs" (128). This mournful lament, which sounds like a ritualistic refrain in many parts of the novel, inspires haunting doubt about God's nature, raising different possibilities in the reader's mind: that he is not good and just by human standards; that he is not in perfect control of human society; that he takes no heed of man's fears and aspirations; that his ways are beyond human comprehension; or that he does not exist. Such hypotheses can, however, be theologically refuted by the doctrine of free will, based on the assumption that man's reason has insight into the ethical law and can distinguish between good and evil.

Children of Our Alley also reveals Mahfouz's profound interest in science which can be traced back to his early studies of materialistic philosophy at the University of Cairo. This interest finds expression in other novels such as *al-Karnak*: "Science and scientific methodology are things we must accept from Western civilization without any argument"⁵; or the *Trilogy III*: "science should today replace the priesthood and religion of the ancient world . . . every era has its own prophets; the prophets of our times are the scientists."⁶ These statements call to mind Arafa's assertion in the allegory that his magic does give him "a power ten times that of Gebel and Rifaa and Kassem put together" (302). He points up a philosophy of pragmatic utilitarianism and rational materialism, using science to harness the energies of nature for the mastery and benefit of man. In his context of thought, science can produce weapons to defeat tyranny and establish social justice. As a positive force, it is an infinite

⁵ *Al-Karnak in Three Contemporary Egyptian Novels*, translated with a critical introduction by Saad El-Gabalawy (Fredericton: York Press, 1979) 130.

⁶ Quoted by Somekh, 138-39.

reservoir of possibilities, which can create a paradise of peace, ease, and abundance for all on earth. The novel intimates that in the modern era, science has supplanted religion as an instrument of social revolution, holding out the promise of progress and prosperity.

But, instead of enhancing the well-being of humanity, it has been corrupted and abused by the forces of tyranny, particularly the superpowers, which have coerced scientists into providing them with devastating weapons to suppress the human race and exploit the resources of the world. Besides, one of the worst aspects of science is that it has unwittingly led to the death of religion by undermining the validity of spiritual values. The demise of God has created a tremendous vacuum in the lives of people who have always regarded him as the mainspring of courage and hope in times of weakness and need. In spite of his inscrutable nature and apparent indifference to their plight, they have found in him the healing power to redeem them from anguish and oppression. The breakdown of religious faith in the scientific era has deprived people of a valuable symbol, leaving them in a state of inertia without purpose or direction. The annihilation of this symbol negates a basic need in human nature, creating a sense of nothingness, a sense of barrenness and futility that verges on despair.

At the end of his allegory, however, Mahfouz vaguely suggests the possibility of spiritual revival. The old Gebelawi may be brought back to life if a new generation of humanistic and militant scientists can find the right formula for happiness and prosperity which has eluded their predecessors. By saving man from repression and physical need through a new social and economic order, they will help purify his soul and release his energies to soar heavenward and aspire toward God. This implies the belief that poverty and degradation cause human beings to be earthbound and deny their yearning for the supernatural. The writer, therefore, appears to visualize a new utopia based on the unity of being, where there is no sharp division between body and soul, science and religion, reason and faith. But it is important to assert that such a concept is far from being explicit in the conclusion, which remains elusive and obscure. It is safe, however, to state that the novel as a whole conveys a remarkable expression of scientific skepticism based ultimately on faith.