

Naguib Mahfouz

and the Nobel Prize

This year the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz - the first time it had been given to an Arab author. Mahfouz, who was born in 1912, has been famous in the Arab world since the fifties. Novels such as *The Cairo Trilogy* and *Midaq Alley* brought him recognition as the father of the Arab novel. He was beloved by a broad spectrum of readers, and especially by progressive nationalists, for his rich narrative style and social realism. Mahfouz began by drawing his material from the daily reality in the popular quarters of Cairo. His early works focused on the life and problems of the poor classes, while jeering at the hypocrisy of those who became rich and powerful at their expense. He often challenged standing preconceptions, as in his novel *The Children of Gebelawi*, published in 1959, which in allegorical form dealt with religion in the context of everyday life in Cairo.

Later, however, Mahfouz's literary focus became more diffuse, while his political views put him in contradiction with the national democratic movement fighting imperialism and Zionism in the area. Thus, his receiving the Nobel Prize now raises a set of questions which are addressed by Dr. Faysal Darraj in the following essay entitled «The Nobel Prize for Literature - Awarded to the Great Writer or to his Petit Status?».

Finally the Nobel Prize crosses the mountains, plains, valleys and lanes to find Naguib Mahfouz. By doing so, it surprises everybody. Why does the prize choose a literary acme after sinking to the level of hardly significant writers? Do we have to take this as a literary verdict and an objective evaluation after it having long ago become a political ideological judgment.

Reaching Naguib Mahfouz, the prize creates confusion - not because the author of *The Thief and the Dogs* does not deserve it, but because the Nobel prize itself has long been divorced from all sense of objectivity, since it went to a marginal Israeli writer, bypassing Aragon; since it went to Pasternak, Solshenitzen, Walesa, Sadat and Begin, meanwhile avoiding Graham Green, Peter Weiss, Vasco Pratolini and Chinghiz Aitmatov!

For a very long time, the Nobel Prize has chosen the side of racism, anti-communism and Zionism. Consequently, it has not been throwing water on explosives, but scattering burning matches here and there. The moment it came close to complete scandal, it sought refuge in the persons of Neruda, Sholokhov and Marquez, not to honor talent and humane positions, but to make use of honest names as a cover on its path to Agnon and his likes. If things followed their real names, we could take the prize seriously; we would consider it a literary prize which has come to a great writer. But when names have been divorced from their meaning, we become confused and obliged to look at the different faces of Naguib Mahfouz to pinpoint the particular face which got the prize. As soon as we come across a suitable face, we fail to see the criteria of the prize and find it only an enigma, nothing more.

Why has the grand prize come to Naguib Mahfouz? We may immediately say that he deserves it and has for over thirty years. It may also be said that it is due to the progress of the



Arabs and the development of their literature; it is a break in the Zionist-imperialist wall; or it comes with the time of «detente» and «unity of the world»... or through the role of translation which has made Mahfouz readable in the different languages of the world. Yet these justifications, chosen at random, do not change the situation at all. Neither has worthiness cropped up this year, nor has Arab progress suddenly materialized. Besides, translation has never been the royal path leading to genuine evaluation.

We are fully aware that Naguib Mahfouz is much worthier of the Nobel Prize than a long list of its other winners. Yet we are also aware, without a shadow of doubt, that the current political context was the ultimate condition which pushed the prize into Mahfouz's pocket. The world we are living in has already rid itself of the burdens of objectivity and common sense, from the moment capitalism monopolized science, the mass media and propaganda, as well as the issuing and generalization of verdicts.

The Nobel Prize, in the objective sense of the term, will add nothing to Naguib Mahfouz except its title and financial weight. He was a great novelist before the prize and will remain so after it. The question revolves around another point. Has the prize come to Mahfouz for his literary worthiness, for his political «moderation,» or for both? Was it to honor the works of an Arab novelist, or of an Egyptian writer who lived through the reign of Sadat without a word of protest; who experienced the time when Sadat was awarded the same prize after his treason, without uttering a word of objection; who lived through the «normalization» of relations between Egypt and the Zionist state, and kept silent? We may naively ask: Would Naguib Mahfouz get the Nobel Prize if he were anti-Zionist? Including Arab literature in the list of «world literature» through the Nobel Prize means nothing but the