

The "Absurd" in Naguib Mahfouz's plays

By Mustafa Riad

In the late sixties and early seventies, Naguib Mahfouz tried his hand at a number of one-act plays that were widely regarded as experiments in the tradition of the absurd. Mahfouz, who wrote his major novels in the realistic tradition, seems to have undergone a turning point in his career by the late fifties. *Awlad Haritna* (1959) was a far cry from his realistic masterpieces that had preceded it: *Bayn El Qasrain* (1956), *Qasr El Shouq* (1957), and *Al-Sukariya* (1957). This controversial novel, cast in an allegorical form, was followed by works still swerving from the technical ideals of realism in the more concentrated form of the short story in his collection: *Donya Allah* (1963), *Bayt Sayi' Alsum'a* (1965), *Taht Al-Mazala* (1969), *Khamarat Al-Qot Al-Aswad* (1969) and in his politically disguised novels: *Al-Shahaz* (1965), *Al-Lis wa Al-Kilab* (1961), *Tharthara fawq Al-Nil* (1966).

A more audacious step was Mahfouz's adaptation of the tradition of the absurd in a number of one-act plays published side by side with his short stories in *Taht Al-Mazala* and *Al-Garima* (1973).¹

Taht Al-Mazala opens with the title short story that sets the key to the other short stories and plays of the collection. While a number of people stand silently in the shade of a bus stop, some waiting for the bus, others sheltering from the rain, they witness a series of outrageous events that take place right before their eyes: chasing and beating up a thief who turns later to be a talented orator and an agile dancer who wins the admiration of his pursuers, a fatal car accident, a couple over the body of the dead man who minutes earlier crawled out of the broken car. A policeman is watching the scene but does not interfere in any way and is heedless of the demands of the people that he act.

A tomb is then quickly erected to inter the bodies of the car casualties as well as those of the lovers. A judge appears on top of the tomb and reads out some rulings while men and women dance around the tomb. A murder is committed and the severed head of a man rolls down the street. The bystanders appeal to the policeman again who finally addresses the audience of these terrible events, holds them responsible for the murder and proceeds to shoot them all.

Fatma Moussa asserts the key position of "Taht Al-Mazala" in the collection and looks upon it as a guide to the understanding of the one-act plays. According to Moussa², the short story evokes a strange, irrational world vision/universe dominated by violence and misunderstanding (29).

Al-'Alem also sheds light on the power of this short story to present the human predicament focusing on the role of the passive policeman who only acts when the equally passive bystanders get involved with the crime they witnessed. Ironically, he turns against them and destroys them all (20). Such an irrational scene involves the reader himself who shares "the bystanders' consternation and amazement at the developing events ... their apathy and non-involvement, which leads ultimately to their common destruction" (Mikhail 84).

Absurdist elements may be traced in the prevalent mood, plot and character of "Taht Al-Mazala". Firstly, it presents a world that lacks "central explanation and meaning" (Esslin 389), where the tableau presented by Mahfouz reaches a climactic point that brings together the conflicting threads of action and emphasizes the senselessness of the scene:

والرعد والمطر واشتد كل شيء وبلغ غايته. القتل والرقص والحب والموت (11)

All actions intensified and reached a climax. Murder, dance, love, death, thunder and rain]³.

Secondly, this senseless world gives rise to the two contradictory facets, positive and negative, whose description can be traced in Esslin's analysis of the absurd milieu in drama: "on the one hand there is the feeling of deadness and mechanical senselessness of half unconscious lives" (390) that is the target of satire.

On the other hand, the tradition of the absurd is concerned with “the ultimate realities of the human condition, the relatively few fundamental problems of life and death, isolation and communication ...

[in such a way as to make] its audience aware of man’s precarious and mysterious position in the universe” (392). This is made possible by focusing on the position of universal man deprived of any certainties (391). The action of “Taht Al-Mazala”, accordingly, is limited neither by a particular time nor place. The participants in action as well as non-action face up to the aforementioned issues in their precarious world.

However, an Egyptian local trait intrudes on the setting of this universal tableau: the presence of a policeman, first watching passively then engaging in the scene in quite an unpredictable manner, introduces a common scourge in authoritarian police-run states. Mahfouz presents the figure of a policeman, who is not only a law-enforcing official but also a figure vested with almost absolute authority. The Bystanders are cruelly and senselessly murdered by the policeman who stands aloof from the crowd watching the chaotic scene without intervening, then directing his suspicions at the bystanders:

مضى يتحقق من شخصياتهم وهو يبتسم ابتسامة ساحرة قاسية ثم سألهم
- ماذا وراء اجتماعكم هنا ؟
تبادلوا نظرات إنكار وقال أحدهم:
- لا يعرف أحدنا الآخر
- كذبة لم تعد تجدى

تراجع خطوتين ... سدد نحوهم البندقية. أطلق النار بسرعة وإحكام. تساقطوا واحداً في إثر الآخر جثثاً هامدة (16)

He proceeded to check their identities with a cruel sarcastic smile. Then he asked ,

- What is the purpose of this gathering ?

The bystanders looked at each other in an attempt to deny a charge. One of them spoke,

- We do not know each other.

- A useless lie.

The policeman took two steps to the back, aimed his rifle and shot them quickly and efficiently. They fell lifeless one after the other].

The plays that follow the title story vary in their share of realistic and non-realistic elements as well as their presentation of ultimate universal realities and local colour. However, they are, according to Rasheed El-Enany, “a substantial departure from [Mahfouz’s] habitual way of recreating external reality in his work up to that time” (201). Even when setting and characterization promise a realistic handling, there emerge certain surreal and expressionistic techniques in some of these plays such as “Al-Tarika”) and “Yumeet wa Yuhyi”.

The stage in “Yumeet wa Yuhyi” seems to be expressionistically divided between life and death as it is divided into two areas:

المسرح منقسم إلى قسمين. قسم أمامي وهو حوالى ثلثي المساحة وهو مضاء واضح المعالم. فى وسطه نخلة مغروسة، وفى جانب منه ساقية صامتة. القسم الخلفى مرتفع درجات على هيئـة مصطبة، تغشاه الظلمة، وتلوح به أشباح راقدة، نيام أو موتى. (131).

The stage is divided into two areas: the front area which takes up nearly two thirds of the total space is brightly lit and clearly visible; in the centre of it stands a palm tree, and on one side we see a silent waterwheel. The back area which lies in the shadow is occupied by two steps resembling the Pharaonic mustabas; there we dimly detect the silhouettes of recumbent figures suggesting sleep or death (Seleiha 123)

Ironically, the action of the play torn between the elemental forces of life and death, does not present a simple conflict. The action apparently revolves around a young man (unnamed as all other characters in Mahfouz’s experimental drama are) who reels under the blows of an unseen mocking enemy. He is supported and

comforted by an unnamed woman and then confers with three nameless characters: a doctor, a giant and a beggar. The Doctor finds out that the Man is victim of the plague that spreads throughout the country. The Man is shown to have all the symptoms: uncertainty, beating about the bush, indecision, fanaticism, inability to face truth, exaggeration and a feeling of helplessness.

The Man next meets the Giant who manipulates him in order to coerce him into accepting an alliance with him. It is an alliance that allows the Giant full domination over the young man and his homeland. The Giant's proposition is rejected; however, the young man's helplessness mounts as his attempt to communicate with the ancestors fail. The Blind Beggar's encounter with the young Man discloses another facet of a corrupt world. The institution from which the Blind Beggar escaped is run by a dictator; the beggar describes him as,

كان عادلاً وأميناً ورحيماً ولكنه مغرم بالنظام لدرجة الهوس، ويطبقه بدقة فلكية، ولا يقبل مراجعة (165).

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 astronomical precision and no questions asked. (Seliha 171)].

The Blind Beggar, therefore, runs away for revolting, according to him, "165) خير من أن تكون حجراً" [is better than being a stone (Seliha 172)], and freedom "164) أفضل من الأمن نفسه" [is better than security itself. (Seliha 170)].

The woman claims to have the ability to offer the young man the only real solution to his problems, " (الدنيا) 133) ليتك تنقع بصدري ملاذاً لك من متاعب"

[take refuge in my bosom from the troubles of the world and be content (Seliha 136)].

On the other hand, the young man seems to be in the middle of a fight which he intends to pursue to the end while invoking his ancestors, lying dead in the background and drawing up ideals of dignity, courage and pride. He brushes aside the love offered by the woman and prepares for another round of fighting.

The aftermath of the June 1967 war might have misled the critics who commented on this play. Al-'Alem, for instance, extols the heroism of the young man who refuses to compromise and is determined to make war and breathes life into the dead who rise to stand by him in a decisive battle (23).

Similarly, Al-'Ashry offers a simplistic interpretation in which the young man has nostalgia for heroism, sacrifice and laying down his life for the sake of his country; whereas the woman has nostalgia for love, fertility and reproduction (20). The plot yields easily to this interpretation and all the other characters may be allegorically explained thus offsetting the character of both the young man and the woman. To quote Nehad Seliha,

The Giant is a transparent symbol of the USA, or simply, the Western Powers; the aggressive mocker in the wings is an embarrassingly obvious theatrical objectification of Israel, the 'Plague' is a metaphor in the tradition of Camus' La Peste of Nasser's dictatorship, with Nasser himself as the ironically doubtful benevolent dictator. (13)

However, the transparency of these characters does not necessarily offset the characters of the man and the woman. Actually, these two characters are far from heroic. The woman does not feature as the traditional female figure who inspires the hero with courage and audacity. Instead, she opens the play, amidst the din of battle, with lines that call for peace not war,

الفتاة: يا رب السماوات .. متى تختفى هذه الأصوات من الوجود .. متى تشرق شمسك على أرض ناعمة البال،
قريبة العين؟ (131)

[God in heaven ! Will these sounds never be still ! Will your sun never shine on a tranquil contented earth ! (Seliha 133)]. On the other hand, doubts are cast on the integrity and efficiency of the man; he is a jester and a braggart who provokes his enemy without taking proper precautions,

الفتاة: لقد أشعلت غضبه بمزاحك.
الفتى: المزاح من آداب حياتنا فكيف يكون جزائي ضرباً أليماً موجعاً !
الفتاة: طالما حذرتك من المغالاة فيه.
الفتى: ولما أردت الدفاع عن نفسي خذلتني يداي. (135)

[Woman: It was you who kindled his anger with your jest.

Man: I thought jesting was an acceptable aspect of human dealings. Why should I be savagely beaten for it then ?

Woman: I often warned you not to overdo it.

Man: When I asked to defend myself, my hands failed me (Seliha 135)].

The woman has insight into his character and she can see that nothing other than his wounded pride motivates him.

These first impressions cleverly inserted by Mahfouz gain in strength as the man meets the doctor, the giant and the beggar. Through these characters he learns about the corrupt system of which he himself, a braggart jester, forms part. Still, he ignores the current problems that call for his attention; rather, he takes refuge in his pride in a glorious past and falls back on the support of the dead lying in the shadows behind him. It is ironic that his address to the dead is always echoed back to him denying him any satisfactory answer (136-137).

The play ends in a tableau that features a march of the dead walking like zombies led by the man in the direction of the enemy. Doubtful of the wisdom of such action, the young woman listens sadly one more time to the din of war and looks far away (167).

It is interesting to note that such an anti-heroic interpretation is supported by insights into the characters of the Man and the Woman. Fatma Moussa volunteers an observation that confers upon the action of the play a meaning that makes it rise above a limited local milieu. Moussa observes that "the man and the woman play their age-old roles: the woman is after love while the man is after ancestral glory, dignity, liberty and adventure" (29). This interpretation coincides with Saad Abdelaziz's observations on the setting, The lonely palm refers to the character of the Man who stands alone and indifferent to any outside influence which may budge him from his position.

He is entrapped by qualms that dominate his senses and thoughts ... His world only contains a silent waterwheel that stopped bringing in water and the mastabas where he takes refuge in his crisis. These mastabas represent the power that pushes him into regression and alienation ... On the other hand, he pays no attention to the girl that pulsates with love and beauty (101).

Thus, an inefficient victim of the plague leads the shadows of the past in a doubtful attempt that fails to take into consideration the problems of the present. The march of the young Man and the dead follows as the young Man learns nothing at all from his encounters but remains isolated from the challenges of the real world around him. His brave march against his enemy, therefore, does not seem to be the final solution to this conflict.

"Al-Tarika" and "Al-Nagaa" are two other one act plays in Taht Al- Mazala that share in the creation of the sense of doom and evoke in varying degrees the atmosphere of certain absurd plays where characters are tied down both literally and metaphorically while cut off from a threatening outside world.

The settings of both plays, however, are dramatically opposed. The action of "Al-Tarika" takes place in an ancient house. It is the house of a holy man who dies on the day his prodigal son responds to his call to come back home and brings along his to pass her off as his wife. The action of "Al-Nagaa", on the other hand, takes place in the living room of a modern apartment where a single gentleman receives a surprise visit from a woman who flees an unknown danger and rushes uninvited into his apartment.

A claustrophobic atmosphere created on the stage in both plays (cf. Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*), failure (the legacy is stolen, the fugitive woman commits) together with a sense of mystery surrounding the outside world are common factors in both plays. In "Al-Tarika", the prodigal son and his return home. Beyond the alleys, there is only "the open" where, the audience is told, the Old Man used to pray and eventually met his death. (181).

The legacy of the Old Man is presented by his servant: a pile of books and stacks of banknotes together with the Sheikh's condition,

الغلام: إنَّه يوصيك بألا تتفق منها مليماً واحداً قبل أن تستوعب ما في هذه الكتب (179)

[He urges you not to spend a penny of [the money] before you fully absorb the contents of those books (Seliha 35)].

The couple carelessly ignore the Sheikh's will, trample the books and help themselves to the money. As they dream of a carefree life they are surprised by the appearance of a "detective" who, under the threat of arresting the Man on the charge of murdering his father, the Old Man, swindles them of some of the money and robs them of the whole sum when the Man offers resistance. Both Man and Woman are left in the dark, tied to their chair. Rescue takes the form of the arrival of an officer accompanied by an architect for the purpose of examining the house which the Architect intends to buy, pull down and build a factory in its place. The Architect, however, is recognized by the Man and Woman as the Detective who swindled them of their money.

In "Al-Nagaa", the cosy atmosphere of a living room in a modern apartment with the main character, another unidentified Man, clashes with the external threatening world and consequently renders the setting claustrophobic. We never know the nature of the crime the unidentified woman, who took refuge in the Man's house, committed. We never learn the nature of the political activities of the man nor do we understand his worry about compromising evidence in his possession (221). Feelings of fear and guilt mount in both the Man and Woman as a police cordon surrounds the building. The predicament is echoed in the Woman's words,

المرأة: لا أهمية للتفاصيل، حسبك أن تعرف أننا مطاردون، وأن من حولنا وفوقنا وتحتنا أعداء مصممون. (231-232).

[Details are not important. It's enough to know that we are hunted, and that on every side, overhead and underneath, we are surrounded by implacable enemies (Seliha 91)].

However, both feel the attachment of a common bond cemented by crime, a fight followed by sex, and an attempt to while away the time. As the police forces get ready to storm the building, the woman, unnoticed by the Man, commits . The play ends on a violent note as the police forces rush into the man's apartment to engage in a fight with an unidentified, unlocated enemy. The Man flees the apartment carrying the dead Woman, believing they are both safe.

Themes of guilt and condemnation run into two more plays by Mahfouz, "Al-Muhema" and "Al-Mutarada". In both plays the sense of time plays an important role.

The action of "Al-Muhema" is a bare desert rocky spot. The setting does not bear any local colour, nor does the plot which tells the story of a Young Man who is closely pursued by a middle-aged Man all day long and ends up with him in that desert area. The fact that certain localities, where the two characters cross paths, are identified (Midan El Qal'a, The Egyptian Museum), does not give local colour to the action of the play which consists in a conflict of wills between both characters. The Young Man objects strongly to this senseless pursuit that takes its extreme form when the Man openly plays the role of a in the Young Man's date with his girl friend. The Man shamelessly admits his practice and pleads his good intention. It is only when the Young Man, deserted by his girlfriend, feels a shooting pain in his knee that resulted from a fall earlier in the day and is incapable of walking, that the Man refuses to help him and leaves him as the night sets in.

The character of that mysterious Man does not lend itself to realistic interpretation. He seems rather to be an objectification of the wasteful life the Young Man is leading. To quote the Man,

الرجل: لا خبرة لى بشئ. أعرف كيف أسير على غير هدى، وأعرف كيف أسير فى أعقاب إنسان أحمق، وأعرف كيف أمل دوماً فى علاقة لا تتحقق أبداً (312).

[I know nothing. I only know how to walk aimlessly. I know how to follow a stupid bloke. I know how to always hope for a relationship that never materializes].

His pursuit coincides with the Young Man's destinations throughout the day. Both are apparently wandering in an aimless manner. In their last destination, however, the Young Man meets his beloved while the Man is watching the sunset, a premonition of the imminent downfall of the Young Man. This downfall is effected in the play's finale cast in the scene of a morality. The stage becomes set for the final scene:

الشاب ينظر فيما حوله بخوف، الظلام يهبط رويداً حتى يختفى كل شئ، تمر فترة قصيرة على تلك الحال، ثم تترامى أضواء من وراء الهضبة. ويسمع وقع أقدام قادمة من يمين الهضبة ومن يسارها يجئ رجلان حاملين مشعلين، يرتدى كل منهما سروالاً وصدراً أحمرين. يقفان على مبعدة من الشاب إلى اليمين وإلى اليسار ويلازمان الصمت طوال الوقت. ... ثم يتبعهما رجلان فى أردية سوداء يحمل كل منهما سوطاً وحبلًا معقوداً. يقفان عن يمين الشاب ويساره هما يحملقان فى وجهه، يوثقان يديه وقدميه بإحكام ثم يعودان إلى وقفتها ممعنين فيه النظر (313-314)

[The Young Man looks around in fear. Darkness slowly descends and envelops everything. After a short while lights are seen coming from beyond the plateau. Footsteps are heard to the right and to the left of the plateau. Two men holding torches, and dressed in red vests and trousers come on stage. They stand to the right and left of the Young Man at a distance and remain silent throughout.

They are followed by two men in black clothes each carrying a whip and a knotted rope. They stand to the right and left of the Young Man staring at him. They tie up his hands and feet tightly and return to their former position staring at him].

The two Men in Black set up a trial for the Young Man, find him guilty of wasting his life senselessly and sentence him to death. The two men/angels – modelled on Nakir and Nakir, in the Islamic tradition, question the Man and demand a record of his past life. Failing to satisfy their answers, he is taken away and is apparently doomed to damnation.

Despite the moral tone, the play possesses in hindsight echoes of the absurd. The Young Man, found guilty, is tried on insubstantial accusations from a strictly legal point of view. His accusers put his wasteful absurd existence on trial and inflict a harsh punishment on him. It is the Man who earlier drew attention to such a situation,

(الرجل: عجيب أن نرتكب جريمة ولا ندرى. (291)

[It's amazing that one commits a crime without knowing it].

The feelings of fear, guilt and imminent punishment are further magnified in Mahfouz's last play inspired by the tradition of the absurd. In "Al-Mutarada", two characters: The White and the Red – names based on the colour of their shirts – appear in a series of six scenes playing different roles that span the different stages in their development: childhood, early youth, manhood and old age.

The two characters are poles apart. The Red is given to emotional outbursts while the White is given to careful thought and contemplation. This duality recalls Beckett's Estragon and Vladimir in Waiting for Godot. Judith Rosenhouse associates the Red with "the physical aspect of life including anything associated with the fight for survival and man's natural and voluptuous lusts," and the White with "man's purer side, which is usually also weaker, more passive and refined" (106).

Contrary to *Waiting for Godot*, however, the Red and the White, unlike Estragon and Vladimir, flee from, rather than wait for, a mysterious character who chases them throughout the scenes of the play. Although the Man in Black does not take part in the action of the play, he features in the background marching and cracking his whip. He may represent authority or the dominant cultural and political restrictions on life. The Red and White fear his presence as children in the playground, and as adults at work and even at home. Rosenhouse sees in him the figure of Death:

His external appearance does not change in time (in contrast with the Red and the White), but his vigour (speed of pacing) certainly increases. He seems to be a driving force throughout the play – he impels people to hide from him, to disguise themselves so that he will not recognize them ... The Red is annoyed by him and challenges him, the White tries to ignore him in youth but later on tries to think out his role in life. All these effects, in addition to the symbolic colour of his clothes add up to present the figure of Death in a modern way. (107)

Notwithstanding the real nature of the Man in Black, it is his continuous presence in the life of both the Red and the White that weighs heavily on their lives in all its stages. They feel watched and threatened. The play ends with the final defeat of the Red and the White whose legs will not support them. They fall and crawl on all fours to the exit until they disappear completely. The Man in Black slows down his pace, resumes his march in steady steps watching the dancing of a bride that both Red and White had earlier married in an attempt on their part at rejuvenation (54).

A graduate of the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University, Mahfouz is familiar with existentialist concepts that provide the starting point for the theatre of the absurd. In an interview with Mohamed Barakat, Mahfouz reveals his admiration for Becket and Ionesco among other European and American writers (209).

Mahfouz's plays, discussed above, display in varying degrees the sense of absurdity defined by Albert Camus. For according to Camus:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost hope or the hope of a promised land. The divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting is properly the feeling of absurdity. (18)

Mahfouz comes closer to this definition when he investigates the predicament of disillusioned man in such a setting. To quote Mahfouz,

أما حين تتحول الحياة إلى مشكلة، لا يصبح الإنسان شخصاً معيناً، بل مجرد إنسان ليس هو شخص بالذات يتميز عن سائر الناس بتفاصيله الخاصة وذاتيته، ولهذا تختفى التفاصيل ويختفى السرد (22).

[When life becomes a problem and man ceases to be an individual and turns to be a figure devoid of personal traits and identity, then the details and narration disappear].

The world of Mahfouz's plays is accurately described by Nehad Seliha who looks upon it as a world that "cannot be explained realistically and rationally by either good or bad reasons; it raises questions which are never answered, expectations which are never fulfilled, leaving us in the end with characters who are only identifiable by their anguish, despair and utter perplexity" (21).

Mahfouz's protagonists, however, stand at varying distances from this world of absurdity described by Camus. In "Yumeet wa Yuhi", "Al-Tarika", "Al-Nagaa", the respective roles of soldier, pimp and political activist, interact with a thinly-disguised world of absurdity. Local colour underlie the absurdity in tacit criticism of the intellectual, political and social conditions after the June 1967 defeat. The protagonists in "Al-Muhema" and "Al-Mutarada" come closer to the universal figure of the absurd hero. Traces of local colour disappear and the characters stand alone in a world devoid of meaning. The finale of "Al-Muhema", however, is inconsistent with the absurdity of the main action as it imposes a moral framework whereby the Young Man is punished on moral grounds.

Though Mahfouz introduces certain features of existentialist philosophy and the theatre of the absurd in his plays, his achievement is far from being purely universal as it is closely linked with a historical moment: the June 1967 defeat. In an interview with Fouad Dawara, Mahfouz gives an account of the effect of that severe shock on him,

العيب، ولكن حرصى على الانتماء أفسد عبثيتها... ويبدو مرّت بي حالات فقدت فيها توازنى فكتبت أعمالاً ظاهرها (وكلى رغبة فى تجاوزه (240 أننى لم استسلم للعيب بل صورته

[I passed through certain circumstances when I lost my balance. I wrote a number of works that were apparently absurdist. However, my commitment to a sense of belonging ruined their absurdity. It seems that I have not completely surrendered to the absurd; I rather presented it while fully desirous of going beyond it].

He gives a fuller statement on the impact of the defeat which he equated

with absurdity to Ragaa El-Naqash in an interview in 1998,

عندما ظهر تيار اللامعقول فى الأدب الأوروبى وازدهر فى فترة الستينات جذبنى، وأعجبتنى الأعمال التى عبرت عنه، خاصة كتابات يونسكو وسارتر وألبير كامى. كان سبب إعجابى بهذا التيار هو انطباق الشكل على المضمون، فالشكل الروائى يدخل فى إطار اللامعقول أو العبثى وكذلك المضمون. وعندما قرأت مسرحية "تهاية اللعبة" لصمويل بيكت، كتبت فى جريدة "المساء" مقالة نقدية أشرح فيها ما يقصده، وأفسر المستغلق منها . . . وأنا لم أحاول الكتابة فى هذا الاتجاه، لأنى لا أحب الكتابة لمجرد التقليد. ثم جاءت هزيمة 5 يونيو 1967، فشعرت أننى فقدت اتزانى، وأن الشكل الواقعى البسيط لا يصلح للتعبير عن هذه الحالة، التى كانت فى رأى أقرب إلى العيب. وفى الفترة من 1967 إلى 1970 وجدت نفسى مدفوعاً لتيار اللامعقول، لأننى وجدتته أكثر تعبيراً عن الحالة التى كنا نعيشها. (336)

when it first made its appearance in European literature and I was attracted to the trend of the absurd] my sixties. I admired the works of Ionesco, Sartre and Albert Camus. The reason for flourished in the absurd as the content. When I read admiration was that form and content coincided. The narrative form is as Al-Misaa newspaper to explain the aim of the playwright and Samuel Beckett's Endgame I wrote a review in not write imitations. difficulties of the play. ... [However] I did not adopt this trend because I do interpret the my balance and the simple realistic form was not fit Then there was the June 1967 defeat and I felt that I lost condition which, to me, was very close to the absurd. From 1967 to 1970 I felt to give voice to this the condition we lived overwhelmed with the trend of the absurd as I found in it the best expression of .[through

absurd while remaining deeply Drawing inspiration from the theatre of the

to be true to his general view of modern Arabic literature rooted in his environment, Mahfouz is seen

ما من تيار أدبى وُجِدَ هُنَا - فى المسرح أو الرواية أو القصة القصيرة - من أيام عيسى بن هشام والدكتور هيكل إلا وكان على صلة بتيار مماثل فى الخارج. ولكن التأثر بالخارج لا يمنع الأصالة، طالما وُجِدَت فى البيئة المحلية ما يدعو إلى استزراع هذه الشكل أو ذلك (دوارة 239-240).

[There is not a single literary trend that made its appearance in the our theatre, novel or short story from the time of Eissa Ibn Hisham and Dr. Heikal but was related to a literary trend abroad. However, foreign influence did not hinder originality as long as the local environment provided the need to adopt these trends]. Naguib Mahfouz turned his back on realistic techniques and has experimented with various technical methods since the late fifties and early sixties.

Mahfouz's understanding of the relationship between modern Arabic literature and European literary and critical trends, his awareness of developments in the field of European literature, together with his philosophic studies turned him into a pioneer who broke new grounds in Arabic literature. His employment of certain traits of the theatre of the absurd was well-adapted to his one-act plays which recreated the conditions Egypt went though in the sixties particularly after the June 1967 defeat.

His statements in these plays may be clouded with the mystification of novel techniques, some of which are drawn from other sources as widely diverse as expressionism and the morality play; however, a closer look reveals a true involvement in and frank expression of the worries of his society. Mahfouz's 'absurd' theatre reformulates absurdity and emerges as quite meaningful.

Courtesy of the author.

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NOTES

1 Naguib Mahfouz wrote eight one-act plays included side by side with his short stories in three compilations: "Yumeet wa Yuhyi" (The Resurrection), "Al-Tarika" (The Legacy), "Al-Nagaa" (The Rescue), "Mashru' Lilmunaqasha" (Project for Discussion), "Al-Muhema" (The Task) in Taht Al-Mazala (Under the Shade of the Bus Stop) (1967); "Al-Mutarada" (Harassment) in Al-Garima (The Crime) (1973); "Al-Gabal" (The Mountain) and "Al-Shaytan Ya'iz" (The Devil Preaches) in Al-Shaytan Ya'iz (1979). Only five of these plays come closer to the tradition of the absurd and are consequently discussed in this paper: "Yumeet wa Yuhyi", "Al-Tarika", "Al-Nagaa", "Al-Muhema" and "Al-Mutarada".

2 Translation of material drawn from Arabic secondary sources is mine.

3 Translation of quotations from Naguib Mahfouz's short stories and plays is mine except those from "Yumeet wa Yuhyi", "Al-Tarika", "Al-Nagaa", which are translated by Nehad Seliha. (Trans.) (1989). One Act Plays by Naguib Mahfouz. Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization.

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In the late sixties and early seventies, Naguib Mahfouz tried his hand at a number of one-act plays that were widely regarded as experiments in the tradition of the absurd. Mahfouz, who wrote his major novels in the realistic tradition, seems to have undergone a turning point in his career by the late fifties. *Awlad Haritna* (1959) was a far cry from his realistic masterpieces that had preceded it: *Bayn El Qasrain* (1956), *Qasr El Shouq* (1957), and *Al-Sukariya* (1957). This controversial novel, cast in an allegorical form, was followed by works still swerving from the technical ideals of realism

