Western-Made Source of Naguib Mahfouz’s Pharaonic Novels

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Abstract

This paper argues that the efforts and discoveries in Egyptology made by European archaeologists and historians are the main references that helped the modern Egyptian people and writers learn about the history of ancient Egypt. Naguib Mahfouz’s three novels about ancient Egypt – written in the late 1930s when Egypt was under the British occupation and the Turkish rule – unconsciously conveyed postcolonial ideas to the colonized people, i.e, surrender to Fate (the colonizer’s and dictator’s reality) (Khufu’s Wisdom), irrelevance of democratic rule, lack of centralized regime leads to conflict between two domineering authorities – religious and military (Rhadopis of Nubia), and political relief from contemporary oppression springing from nostalgic pride for forcing the invaders out (Thebes at War). The three novels foster enlightenment principles of Egyptian patriotism (rather than Middle-Ages Arab) nationalism, and this helped implement the European colonizer’s strategy: ‘diairei kaì basíleue’.

Key words

ancient Egypt, enlightenment, dictator rule, colonialism, patriotism, individualism, Middle-Ages Arab nationalism.

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M.K. Abdel-Daem is currently a lecturer in English literature, language, linguistics and literary criticism. He has published several critical works on many genres, featuring poetry, drama, novel, translation, literary criticism, linguistics, comparative literature, and postcolonial studies

References

Primary Sources

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Naguib Mahfouz lived for almost a century, and he wrote for most of that time: short stories, plays, scripts for Egypt’s booming movie industry, and novels that, serialized in Egypt’s leading magazines and newspaper, became classics. In 1988, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature; today, he remains the only Arab author to have received that honor. In a sense, many of Mahfouz’s novels were a continuation of his childhood hobby of
"writing" by copying. Know that the best of people—along with the rest—are made up of fierce impulses and that they contain a dreadful measure of selfishness, vanity, and greed.” Naguib Mahfouz. Egyptian novelist and first Arab Nobel laureate who sprang to world attention with his depictions of life in Cairo’s old city. Denys Johnson-Davies. His first attempts were three novels with Pharaonic backgrounds, the first being The Curse of Ra (1939). Next came a period of social realism as seen in novels like Midaq Alley (1947), an entertainingly vivid depiction of the alleyways of his youth and the extraordinary characters that inhabit them: the hashish-smoking cafe-owner Kirsha, and Zaita, the "fashioner of deformities", who performs maiming operations on those wishing to take up a life of begging. Mahfouz was widely read in western fiction and particularly admired Flaubert, Stendhal, and Proust, and Melville’s Moby Dick. See also “Naguib Mahfouz and Pharaonic Fiction,” our interview with Raymond Stock. Stock deserves real praise for translating these stories and bringing them to a wide audience. His concise introduction and glossary are helpful, and, if anything, could have been expanded. Published in Arabic between 1939 and 1944, Mahfouz’s three earlier pharaonic novels--Khufu’s Wisdom (The Mockery of the Fates), Rhadopis, and Thebes at War--are now being translated and will be brought out by AUC Press this fall. Illustrations from W. M. Flinders Petrie’s Egyptian Tales (1895) show Sinuhe fleeing on hearing of the pharaoh’s death, meeting the herding people with whom he would live, and finally being welcomed back in Egypt.