

Mahfouz between Lukácsian and Brechtian Approaches to Realism

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**David F. DiMeo,**

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**Abstract:** In his article "Mahfouz between Lukácsian and Brechtian Approaches to Realism" David F. DiMeo compares the interpretations of realism by the leading Arabic author of socially committed fiction to the theories of Bertolt Brecht and György Lukács. The early works of novelist Najib Mahfouz feature a Lukácsian approach, embracing critical realism to present a totalizing view of the social system, as experienced by credible, sympathetic characters. By the 1960s, disillusioned with this method, Mahfouz turned to a more Brechtian approach, seeking to highlight social injustices by alienating the audience from identification with the characters or particular situations through ambiguous narratives and unsympathetic characters. While Mahfouz did not overtly claim allegiance to these European Marxist theorists, the similarity in his experiments with realism stems from two possible, but opposing interpretations of realism, the same interpretations which had divided Lukács and Brecht.

## David DIMEO

### Mahfouz between Lukácsian and Brechtian Approaches to Realism

The movement of socially and politically "committed" literature has presented a central paradox in all of its incarnations. A seemingly unified imperative to dedicate literary efforts to social change has belied intense debate over how literature can actually effect that change. The Arabic movement of *al-adab al-multazim* (the term derived from Taha Husayn's translation of Sartre's *la littérature engagée*) enjoyed such popularity in the mid-twentieth century that its adherents could claim it "dominated" the Arab literary world, yet experienced an intense debate over methods (Wahhabi 24). In the mid-1950s, when leading critic Anwar al-Ma'addawi — a self-professed "radical" of committed literature — asserted that the ubiquitous *al-adab al-multazim* no longer required definition (al-Ma'addawi, "Zawaya wa Laqatat" 9), his confident declaration was at least partially intended to paper over the divisions that prevented Arab writers from agreeing on such a definition.

By the time the later Nobel Laureate Najib Mahfouz began writing in 1930, European Marxist theorists had already split on the divisive question of realism in the service of committed art, a split exemplified by the famed "expressionism debates." The opposing positions in that debate — identified with Bertolt Brecht and György Lukács — provide a useful framework to view the different approaches to realism adopted by Arab writers of *al-adab al-multazim*. The divide in Arabic writing, however, was largely chronological, such that the career of Mahfouz, like that of many of his peers, had a Lukácsian as well as a Brechtian period. With the European realist novel still of a relatively fresh impact in the Arab world during the early period of *al-adab al-multazim* (from the 1930s to the early years of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser's rule in the 1950s in Egypt), *multazim* writers could share Lukács's embrace of the critical realist mode without Brecht's skepticism. In my discussion, I use the term Lukácsian not merely as a reference to Mahfouz's preference for the surface form of the nineteenth-century European realists whom Lukács so admired. Certainly, Mahfouz readily admitted patterning his early works after those writers, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy being his preferred models for the extensive social portraits they created (see Milson). Brecht himself often adopted this standard, characterizing Lukács's theories as focused primarily on form: "small clique, evidently led by Lukács and Hay, is setting up a very specific form ideal implying opposition to everything that doesn't accommodate itself to this form ideal, which is derived from the bourgeois romancers of the past century" (Brecht qtd. in Pike 295). Nonetheless, the essence of Lukács's "critical realism" lies deeper than the surface and it is at the root level where Mahfouz's early work deserves the appellation Lukácsian. In Lukács's "reflection" theory, surface perceptions provide "only the point of departure." Citing Lenin's assertion that "truth is not the initial impression," Lukács insisted that surface impressions be organized and structured according to a "hierarchy of significance" (*Writer and Critic* 25-26, 34; *Realism in Our Time* 34).

What is that reality of which literary creation must provide a faithful reflection? The negative response is required first of all: this reality does not consist simply of the immediately perceptible superfluousness of the external world, nor simply of accidental, ephemeral, contingent phenomena. While Marxist aesthetics makes realism the crux of its theory of art, it also combats vigorously any kind of naturalism and any direction which is satisfied with a photographic reproduction of the immediately perceptible superfluousness of the external world (Lukács, *Writer and Critic* 75). No one, in fact, was more obsessed with the analysis of minute detail in its particular context than Arthur Conan Doyle in his *Sherlock Holmes*, yet for Lukács, Doyle missed the truth of socialist change underneath, instead reinforcing the impression of a stable, secure order to capitalist society (*Realism in Our Time* 47). Instead, Lukács — and Mahfouz — and sought an "all-embracing totality" in the depiction of life. Beyond rejecting the obviously "fragmented" visions of a movement like surrealism, Lukács's totality requires a comprehensive, dialectic treatment of life in all its dimensions. The numerous elements that must be balanced and synthesized encompass considerations of the individual and the general; the accidental occurrence with underlying deterministic factors; detail with its context; the interaction of various levels of social and economic forces, to name a few. A proper balance of all these elements helps in developing character "types," an important concept de-

rived from Engels's advice that "each is simultaneously a type and a particular individual" (*Realism in Our Time* 45; *Writer and Critic* 43, 76-77). As an artist, rather than theorist, Mahfouz put it simpler: praising "the all-encompassing outlook in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," noting "the novel offers a very realistic story but contains at the same time a broad universal view. This is what I have been trying to do in my latest novels" (Mahfouz qtd. in El-Enany 17). Thus, although Mahfouz has been lauded as the Dickens, Balzac, and Galsworthy of Arabic literature for a surface resemblance to the works of those authors, from a Lukácsian view, he deserves those titles for offering "totalizing" views of the social structure (see also Al-leithy).

Between 1945 and 1957, Mahfouz published a series of realist novels set in the crowded old quarters of Cairo that featured families or neighborhoods as microcosms of Egyptian society. In one of many testimonies to Mahfouz's fidelity of detail, author and critic Jamal al-Ghitani, who grew up in the same areas of Cairo depicted in Mahfouz's 1940s novels, visited the locations described and found them to be accurate to the level of interiors and exteriors of specific buildings (see El-Enany). Mahfouz began with *Khan al-Khalili*, a novel tracing the tribulations of a lower middle class family headed by a low-ranking government clerk during the economic and political unrest of British occupation. The following year saw *al-Qahira al-Jadida* (New Cairo) portray another lower middle class family, stricken by the retirement of the father for ill-health. To survive, the protagonist Mahjub submits to a degrading arrangement in a corrupt economic system — serving as a sham husband for a rich man's mistress. While these distinct individuals wrestle with general social and economic constraints, the novel also offers running commentary in the form of discussions between three ideologues with different paradigms for analyzing what transpires — Ma'mun the Islamist, 'Ali the atheist and Ahmad, a member of the nationalist *Wafd* party. Although these characters and scenarios are quite credible, Mahfouz's subsequent novels would avoid such clear artifice as ideological spokesmen and offer holistic, systemic social analysis with far greater subtlety. In his 1947 *Zuqaq al-Midaqq* (Midaq Alley), Mahfouz presented his most fully integrated picture of a geographic microcommunity entrenched in a larger, rigid social and economic system. Beyond the physical accuracy noted by critics like al-Ghitani, Mahfouz captured the alley as a closed world for its inhabitants, a world supporting a strict social hierarchy based on drugs, prostitution, professional matchmaking and legitimate retail trade. In this very Lukácsian feature of Mahfouz's realist works, criminal and licit enterprises function according to similar rules and structures, with neither appearing more benevolent. Even the beggars of Midaq Alley are organized into a tight racket, run by the novel's most colorful character, Zaita the cripple maker, whose title describes the service he provides to aspiring beggars for a fee. In Mahfouz's totalizing picture, Midaq Alley itself occupies a specific position in the larger Cairo social system, a position most clearly seen when someone attempts to break out of the alley (see Al-leithy). Like Mahjub of the previous novel, *Zuqaq al-Midaqq*'s Hamida, the promising young beauty of the neighborhood, sells her virtue in an attempt to escape her trapped position in the socio-economic structure of the alley. As a prostitute on the outside, however, she quickly learns she is but an expendable commodity. While the characters in these novels have distinct personalities, their fates are ultimately decided by a controlling social reality. For while Hamida is led to her moral demise through personal greed and ambition, rather than survival, she is ruined by the same social laws that bring down Mahjub.

Mahfouz's next novel, the 1949 *Bidaya wa Nihaya* (A Beginning and an End), the most Lukácsian of his works, offers a totalizing view of Cairo society at a particular moment. Critic al-Ma'addawi, the "radical" of committed literature, felt that the novel reached new heights of realism in its depictions of Cairo life (al-Ma'addawi, "Bidaya" 757-59), while the founding critic of the "purposeful literature" (*al-adab al-hadif*) school of committed writing, Mahmud Amin al-'Alim, praised this "most mature" of Mahfouz's novels for its achievements in synchronizing the particular with the general, and the individual with the social dimensions — the very kind of totalization which Lukács demanded from realist writing (46-48, 50-52, 56). The "beginning" announced in the story's title comes in the unexpected death of a low-ranking government clerk, forcing his family to prepare for economic survival on their own (19). The three brothers and one sister of the Kamil 'Ali family enter economic fields as diverse as prostitution, the drug trade, military service, the government bureaucracy, and the marriage market. Mahfouz describes the rigid social laws that

govern each particular field, contrasting their superficial differences with their underlying similarities. In each case, the Kamil 'Ali children are newcomers to social systems in which they have no allies or connections. They start at the bottom, and only the middle son Husayn, who recognizes the folly of daring to move higher, will survive to the novel's declared "end." Indeed, despite the many differences in their personalities, submission to established social law seems to be the only quality that ultimately differentiates their fates. Youngest son Hasanayn, the proud idealist who emerges from the military academy enamored with his white uniform and determined to save the family, will ultimately throw himself off the same bridge as his disgraced sister Nafisa (368, 373), who turned to cheap prostitution because she was too ugly to marry out of their old neighborhood (164). The moral opposite of the dreamer Hasanayn, his older brother Hassan, is lured into the drug and pimping trades by the promise of quick money, and there, for a brief time, skill and determination seem to pay off for him. Yet the same greed that drives Hassan to climb the criminal ladder also pushes the rivals that ultimately undo him, a fate dictated by the laws of the underworld long before Hassan's naïve entry in to the business (345-46).

The novel not only paints each social microcosm with fidelity, it highlights the interaction of these distinct blocks in a structured social system. Truly, Hasanayn's career as a military officer, on which the family has gambled its future, is ruined because of the career choices of his prostitute sister and drug dealer brother (355-57). At one point, the desperate family even seeks help from a rich acquaintance, only to discover that their deceased father was but "one of the third rank of friends" to the official, not close enough on the social order to be granted favors (28-29). Unlike the siblings who have gone off to seek fortunes licit or otherwise, middle brother Husayn understands the constraints on his choices and submits to the path marked out for him from birth. He will take the same kind of dead-end government clerk job that left his father penniless, live in the same old tenement and marry the girl upstairs that he has known since childhood (185, 324-25). Husayn has been raised on a diet of reality, devoid of the illusions fed to his pampered older and younger brothers. With the urging of his mother and brother, Husayn sacrifices his dreams of higher education in order to get a job to fund the spoiled Hasanayn's entry into the military academy (177-180). Hasanayn even explains the rules that force this decision to his brother with Lukácsian realism: "I'm merely stating a general principle that applies to you today and to me tomorrow" (178). Indeed, in this insistence, Hasanayn overtly acknowledges what he and his kin have been doing throughout the novel — applying well understood general rules to their specific circumstances, the essential function, indeed, of characters in a classic realist story. Yet those same general rules, which humble Husayn understands too well, dictate that mother Samira's encouragement of Hasanayn's ambitions as a military officer, like her hope that Nafisa can find a good husband, constitute attempts to break out of a designated position in the social system, and will only lead to disaster.

After his realist years, Mahfouz entered a seven year "period of silence," occasioned by his disillusion with the transformation of the socialist revolution of 'Abd al-Nasser into an all too familiar pattern of repression. When he began writing again in 1959, he left behind the classic realist style that marked his earlier works. Indeed, his later surrealist or allegorical novels, with their unreliable, conflicting narration, embraced ambiguity as eagerly as his earlier works sought certainty. Gone also was the earlier pretense of totalization. Neither Mahfouz's characters nor readers could apprehend more than a jarring collision with the rigid social system, much less a comprehensive picture of it. Those brief jolts, however, offer clear glimpses of the punishment meted out to those who leave their assigned places. In this latter period, Mahfouz's works show a distinctly Brechtian, rather than Lukácsian approach to focusing attention on social injustice. Brecht separated from Lukács by rejecting the goal of totalization, instead disrupting everyday patterns and alienating specific social phenomena for analysis, taking his cue from Hegel that the familiar aspects of life must become unfamiliar in order to awaken consciousness (see Grimm 42). Brecht warned that a literary work crafted in accordance with expected conventions—be they the conventions of nineteenth century French realism or otherwise — posed the great danger of inducing "identification" with characters, situations or actions, causing an emotional catharsis rather than rooting "acceptance or rejection" of the characters' "actions and utterances" on the "conscious plane" (*Brecht on Theatre* 87, 91). Brecht's best known artistic innovation, the *Verfremdungseffekt*, then, most

often associated with his distinctly jarring stage techniques, must be seen as but a single application of his imperative to raise incidents "above the level of the everyday, the obvious, the expected" (*Brecht on Theatre* 101). Any particular technique, even Brecht's own innovations, could become familiar and conventional — the evolution of "Mack the Knife" to a pop standard would validate that fear. By the 1930s in Europe, the realist style of Balzac or Flaubert had certainly lapsed into the conventionalism Brecht decried, yet for Mahfouz and his Arab contemporaries, that style remained until the 1950s an innovative form that had not yet begged experimentation in the mentally jarring, Brechtian approach.

By the 1960s, however, Mahfouz replaced sympathetic characters like the Kamil 'Ali family with those whose very existence first shocked the reader, then invited a rational analysis of the systemic injustices that produced them. In 1961, *al-Liss wa-l-Kilaab* (*The Thief and the Dogs*) offered the stream-of-consciousness narrative of a killer released from prison, determined to take revenge on those he believed betrayed him. Sa'id Mahran's understanding of reality in the novel does not agree with that of the society around him, and the narrative does not attempt to establish either view as the truth. Sa'id views himself as a modern-day Robin Hood, beloved by the public, celebrating as he shoots two of his corrupt betrayers (60-61, 111-12). Only passing glimpses at newspapers later in the story inform us that Sa'id has mistakenly killed two strangers instead, establishing himself as little more than a public menace (69-70, 118-20). Sa'id's flashbacks establish scenes of social injustice — his mother denied the lifesaving medical care she cannot afford, then this idealistic, but now bitter, young man lured into crime against the rich as a means of social justice by the charismatic revolutionary professor who will later betray him (89-91) — but like all his impressions, they are unreliable, residing somewhere between bitter fantasy and truth. While it defies an analytical, Lukácsian reading, the confused struggle of this alienated figure nonetheless resonates with a revolution gone wrong.

In 1964, Mahfouz offered a more personal vision of a former committed writer forsaking his craft in *al-Shahhadh* (*The Beggar*). 'Umar Hamzawi, a dedicated socialist poet in the pre-revolutionary days, who eventually realized that "no one listened" to his poems, thus becomes rich as a full participant in the corruption of the 'Abd al-Nasser regime, abandoning art because he "sought power, the evil we once hoped to vanquish" (48-49, 52). Like Sa'id Mahran, 'Umar retreats from society and degenerates into a state of delirium. His mental state is hardly helped by the sudden arrival of his old revolutionary comrade, 'Uthman, from a long prison stay. 'Uthman is also delusional, having been sealed away long before the 'Abd al-Nasser revolution and now viewing the new society as an alien. 'Umar watches through a fog of intermittent consciousness as the firebrand recruits 'Umar's beloved daughter to his one-man revolution, impregnating her in the process. Instead of igniting a popular uprising, both rebels are hunted down by the police and apparently killed, although 'Umar is not quite sure what has happened (209-16). How much of this is reality and how much 'Umar's tortured nightmare, the reader will never know. Unlike the novels of the 1940s, *al-Shahhadh* cannot offer a basis for detailed analysis of the causes and process of the tragedy, but rather provides a glimpse at the terrible emotions of a derailed revolution devouring its young. Two years later, *Tharthara fawq al-Nil* (*Gossip on the Nile*) featured a group of former intellectuals, artists and activists who had retreated to drug-induced stupor on a houseboat in order to shut out the noise of Cairo. Having severed all ties with family and society outside, they offer only fleeting glances at the injustices and disappointments that crushed their earlier zeal. A contemporary journalist, Samara Bahjat, full of idealism and energy, tries, yet completely fails to understand them. The clearest vision, in fact, of what has gone wrong with Egypt since the revolution comes from the disjointed hallucinations of Anis Zaki, who apparently once led demonstrations, battled with police, studied medicine to help the poor, but eventually abandoned the medical studies he could not afford, took a dead end job in Egypt's monolithic bureaucracy, and lost his family. Now a drug addict who converses with the image of Cleopatra, he is written off by the arrogant reporter as being as useful as "a vacant seat" with "no positive role" (114).

Anis and Samara offer something of a Lukácsian-Brechtian dialogue in miniature — she known for her journalistic writing in accordance with the strict rules of *al-adab al-hadif* (84) — the "purposeful" literature advocated by Mahmud Amin al-'Alim, above — he immersed in his own surrealistic world. In one of his few moments of lucidity, Anis does attempt to curb Samara's naïve ambi-

tions: "you imagine that you are able to comprehend in a few days what I have been unable to understand after many years" (129), he cautions, to little effect. The proud journalist seeks no clarification of his warning "your ideas are empty, trust me" (129). With her faith in systematic, analytical reporting, the disjointed emotional outbursts of a wreck like Zaki deserve no further exploration. Indeed, the residents of this houseboat are as offensive to a socially concerned reader as they are to Samara Bahjat. Their dismissive laughter at the suicide of a woman in Cairo prompts the journalist to ask whether they care at all about what goes on in the world, only to be told "sometimes it gives us something to laugh at" (59). The image of former social crusaders laughing helplessly at the tragedy around them focuses on the spirit of failure and pessimism pervading society rather than the structural contradictions that cause the defeat of this generation, as was found in Lukácsian totalization of Mahfouz's earlier novels. In the end, however, when the killing of an innocent man affords the group its one call to genuine social responsibility, idealistic Samara Bahjat willingly joins in the cover-up, accepting her lover's advice that "we're a living in the real world, not a play" (158-63). As the object of her contempt, the broken Anis Zaki, declares his intention to report the matter to the police, Samara seals the coffin on her idealism, noting, "I will be useful for nothing after this" (180). Certainly, the pathetic Anis, loaded with contradictions, defies coherent analysis; even he doesn't seem to understand what he has become and what remains of his former self. Nonetheless, in this very non-Lukácsian novel, he comes off better than the committed writer with her confidence in systematic reporting

Mahfouz's later novels attacked the very assumptions of the Lukácsian model, in effect denying the ability of any one observer to make an accurate analysis of another's social situation. *Miramar*, in 1967, marked one of Mahfouz's rare forays outside Cairo to depict the rootless people who share an Alexandria apartment, through a quartet of narratives offering conflicting accounts of the same period of time. Each narrator—beginning with the noted journalist 'Amr Wajdi — attempts, yet fails, to characterize the other residents based on their actions and the often fabricated life stories they offer. Young Sirhan, for example, who appears in the other narratives as aloof, but perhaps not such a bad fellow, turns out in fact to have been a criminal. Lest any doubt about the impossibility of an accurate understanding of events persist, Mahfouz caps each of the narratives with accounts of Sirhan's violent death: first, the journalist 'Amr reports the unexplained tragedy; then, in the third narrative, a jealous Mansur confesses to the reader that he murdered Sirhan; while the last narrative overturns this confession — at least for the reader who has access to all four narratives — with Sirhan's own account of his suicide. Gone is the certainty that could trace the suicide of the promising Hasanayn Kamil 'Ali to a specific set of social laws; now, even a distinction between murder and suicide is impossible. What remains, instead, is a tangled web of stories that can only point to social dislocation and alienation, the very antithesis of the unity that the 'Abd al-Nasser revolution promised.

Over a decade later, the quartet format again served well in *Afrah al-Qubba* (Wedding Song), a far more direct assault on the pretenses of the committed writing in which Mahfouz himself once excelled. Four conflicting narratives show how an idealistic young playwright's attempt at social commentary merely serves to entrench the very injustices about which he writes. *Afrah al-Qubba* crosses Brecht's fourth wall, putting the reader in the place of the author and audience, ultimately showing that the project of committed writing has been derailed. Rather than revealing even a word of the actual play around which the novel centers, the novel focuses on the contradictory interpretations of three audience members, none of whom agree with the final narrator, playwright 'Abbas Yunis. Fittingly, 'Abbas's narrative, revealing his rather ironic intent to write a play exposing the corruption of the very theater troupe producing the play, deserves last place as merely an addendum to the interpretations that conflicting viewers have already construed to serve their own interests. With his idealistic writing project already shattered before he gets to tell his story, 'Abbas's unvarnished naiveté unknowingly plays as self-mocking. Indeed, the new playwright believes his work has exposed the injustices of the exploitive theater manager and lead actor, oblivious to the fact that both have come away feeling vindicated and empowered by the play.

'Abbas's own declarations surpass even the pretensions of Samara Bahjat: "For me, art is not merely art, but rather a substitute for the kind of work an impotent idealist like me dreams of ac-

complishing. What have I done to oppose the evil surrounding me? What work do I have, if I am impotent on the only battlefield I have been granted, and that is the stage?" (163). Like a true committed writer, he envisions tangible results springing from his literary work, apparently unconcerned about the missing steps in between: "I am addicted to a dream, the way my father is addicted to opium — my dream of changing everything and recreating it. I would demolish the old houses and put tall buildings in their place. I would enlighten the police, raise up the level of behavior of students and teachers, produce food out of thin air, and eradicate drugs and alcohol" (136). Theater manager Sirhan understands better what 'Abbas's idealism is worth: "There is no one more cruel than the idealists. They are responsible for worldwide slaughter!" (7-8) "Don't talk to me about life ... don't philosophize. I hear that every night on the stage until I can't stand it" (18). Nonetheless, Sirhan eagerly produces 'Abbas's work, noting "It's an exciting play that promises to succeed and that's the limit of my concerns" (9). On this point, he turns out to be quite correct.

Like Hitchcock's *MacGuffin*, the play is both all-important and meaningless in itself. In a Lukácsian novel, 'Abbas's treatment of his subject would be paramount. Has he accurately depicted the social forces at work? Has he systematically tied together the interacting elements of society? Do his specific examples illustrate the correct general principles? On these bases, the failure of his play could be addressed. Even a brief stage excerpt could demonstrate whether 'Abbas's play is an effective piece of committed literature. Yet Mahfouz denies that glimpse, instead forcing the reader's attention from the stage to the audience, taking us into the thoughts of the spectators. While Lukács was somewhat ambivalent on the interior monologue technique—he claimed to oppose not the technique itself, but the fractured pictures that impressionist writers like Joyce created with it (*Realism in Our Time* 38-39, 17-18) — Mahfouz's earlier works avoided the technique as religiously as his later works embraced it. In *Afrāh al-Qubba*, the impossible interior views of four different characters serve not to expose a flaw in the social system, a use of which Lukács would approve, but rather to offer conflicting visions which together can only affirm the lack of social cohesion and understanding. As a final irony, Mahfouz includes only one piece of 'Abbas's writing in the novel — a suicide note, that in fact, turns out to be a lie. That controlling capitalists like Sirhan can manipulate the idealism of dreamers like 'Abbas to their own profit is clear; how they do that is no longer the focus of Mahfouz's writing project.

The constant uniting Mahfouz's works of the 1940s and 1960s is the same joining Lukács and Brecht — the imperative to alert public consciousness to unjust socio-economic forces. Although his characters have lost their faith in social justice, Mahfouz continued to write for it well into his 90s. Yet in the early period of his work, Mahfouz took a Lukácsian step back from the immediacy of everyday life to paint a wider picture of the social system. The 1940s novels offer few scenes of the emotional excesses of immediate experience, instead focusing on the larger social structure that produced those experiences. In fact, the calculating way in which the Kamil 'Ali family of *Bidaya wa Nihaya* turns from the emotional tragedy of the loss of the father to a reasoned analysis of their economic situation, or in which mother Samira dictates the economic sacrifices Husayn must make to fund his ambitious brother's career plans would seem too dispassionate by 1960s standards. The reader's sense of outrage or compassion in the 1940s derived instead from the sheer inescapability of the social laws that seal the characters' fate.

In the Mahfouz's 1960s works, that step backward is gone, the narrative perspective now pressed so firmly into the sting of social injustice that the peripheral framework is indistinguishable. We are not to empathize with Sa'id Mahran or 'Umar Hamzawi — they are unbalanced, unreliable characters who seem to cause suffering and harm and do no good. Yet they embody feelings that are palpable to the audience. It is Sa'id Mahran's rage, disillusion and frustration that draws our attention, emotions that must be separated from his otherwise noxious character. Mahfouz does not allow us to judge the validity of the social alienation and resignation of the houseboat dwellers of *Tharthara fawq al-Nil*; rather, isolates those feelings for our consumption. The sympathetic figures they may have once been can only be imagined.

For European and Arab committed writers, realism was never a matter of literary style, as Brecht would assert "Realism is not a question of form. One cannot take the form from one realist ... and call it the realistic form. We ought to guard against formalism in criticism. It is a matter of



realism" (Brecht qtd. in Pike 297). Similarly, the most profound change in Mahfouz's approach during the 1960s was not the stylistic change from a nineteenth-century European realist model to surrealist and impressionist writing, but rather the fundamental assumptions that undergirded such a change. The alternative to this experimentation and debate, of course, would be resignation to literature's limited ability to influence such change, regardless of the approach toward realism. Unlike the characters he often depicted, Mahfouz was never willing to make such a surrender.

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