



REVIEW ARTICLE

NAGUIB MAHFOUZ AND THE ROLE OF THE INTELLECTUAL IN THE BEGGAR  
AND ADRIFT ON THE NILE

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ABSTRACT

The essay examines Naguib Mahfouz's novel *The Beggar and Adrift on the Nile*, and it attempts to understand the author's views on the Role of the Intellectual. Written in the mid 1960s, the novels reflect on the Nasserite regime and the ontological, social, and political crises of the Egyptian intellectual during that period. The essay addresses question of responsibility in Mahfouz's works and draws from other intellectuals, particularly Ali Harb and Edward Said.

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INTRODUCTION

Naguib Mahfouz's prolific literary works show versatility in form and content. His 1960s novels are considered a definite leap from social realism which often defines his 1950s novels. In his 1960s works, Mahfouz explores themes of existentialism and the individual's ontological concerns. Nonetheless, his 60s novels are also laden with concerns about justice and social responsibility. I limit my focus to two of Mahfouz's novels, *The Beggar* (1965) and *Adrift on the Nile* (1966). Separated by a short period of time, the two novels appear to greatly resemble one another in many ways. The key question both novels pose is one of responsibility: how, why and to whom is one responsible? However, such a question, in its most simplistic form, is not created in a vacuum nor posed without complications; it is generated within a complicated social and political framework and articulated in coded ontological and philosophical language. Moreover, in both novels, responsibility is recognised by its absence. The "irresponsible" protagonists are intentionally portrayed as well-educated, clever men who deliberately perform self-destruction during the course of the novels; the self-destruction happens in a slow but steady motion, rendering every event in the novels

another step to the Absolute (*The Beggar*) or nothingness (*Adrift on the Nile*)—or perhaps the Absolute nothingness. In this essay, I will attempt to briefly analyse the manifestations of (ir) responsibility in madness and the Absolute; then, by focusing on Mahfouz's statements, I will discuss his own view of what such a responsibility ought to be.

*The Beggar and the Other*

Omar al-Hamzawi, a successful middle-aged lawyer, father and a husband, suffers from an existential crisis; as a result, he gradually abandons his responsibilities in favour of his search for the Absolute. As the events progress, Omar's mental stability is in question. After he abandons everything, family, job and friends, finally, he is taken over by visions and hallucinations. The state of madness can be read as the ultimate form of irresponsibility; only the mad are allowed to live a responsibility-free life. Moreover, in the Islamic Sharia, the Prophet Mohammed states that *three* are not to be judged: the child, until he reaches puberty; the sleeping man, until he wakes up; and the insane, until he heals ("Hadith the Pen").<sup>1</sup> The *Hadith* evidently links the absence or insufficiency of mind with irresponsibility. Furthermore, madness, the ultimate irresponsibility, equals the absence of any judgements or standards. The mad man cannot be held accountable for what he says—his words cannot be judged as true or false; thus, he

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cannot be honest, nora liar, nor a believer, nor a disbeliever. In his story 'Respected Sir', Mahfouz writes, "Madness was the only way out . . . Madness alone had a room for both belief and disbelief, glory and shame, love and deceit, truthfulness and lies"(120). The equivocalness of madness renders it impossible to penetrate and only possible to be described externally. In his short story 'Hams El-Jonoun' [Whispers of Madness], Mahfouz writes, "What is madness? It is apparently an obscure state, as are life and death; you can know a lot about it from the outside, but from the inside, it is a concealed secret" (4[translation mine]).

As a result, the obscurity of the experience of madness could be conflated with that of the Absolute, as both experiences show the same mental ambiguity. Therefore, it is impossible to determine whether Omar's trance in the desert is a Sufi experience and thus a form of unity with the Other, as Ziad Elmarsafy suggests (28–29), or merely a path to madness by which Mahfouz expresses his rejection of transcendental escapism as Rasheed El-Enany does (110). Describing madness, hence, is hardly different from describing the Absolute. Moreover, the two experiences can be seen sometimes as one; it might be worth invoking Fyodor Dostoevsky's case, for instance, where his epilepsy and God are essentially the same thing.<sup>2</sup>

Another common feature between madness and the Absolute is arguably the necessary absence of the other for such an experience to be achieved. Although Elmarsafy proposes that Omar's existential quest is essentially his search for the Other to whom he speaks and by whom he is inspired (28), I contend that neither madness nor the metaphysical experience (including Sufism) accept the presence of the Other. On the contrary, I would venture to argue that the metaphysical experiences operate essentially on the *exclusion* of the Other—provided that the voice of God/Truth cannot be addressed as the Other, for it is the *only* being that does not accept or reflect any voice but its own. This grants God/Absolute/Truth its most important property: its *oneness*. The chapter 'Al Ekhlas' [Fidelity] in the Quran, states, "Say: He is Allah, the One! (1) Allah, the eternally Besought of all! (2) He begetteth not nor was begotten. (3) And there is none comparable unto Him. (4)" ("Quran Explorer" 112:1–4). The qualities of God manifestly stress upon the exclusion of any Other, and consequently cannot be one. Also, to be the Other of the Self necessarily entails that the two entities bare essential sameness upon which their difference can be recognised, which is not the case of man/God. The Quranic verse states, 'Naught is as His likeness' (42:11). If any, this relationship could arguably be viewed as Self/Self, which fairly invokes Nietzsche's attempt to create the transitional *Übermensch*, or superman (41), to bridge the gap between man and God, or rather to render them one.

Moreover, both experiences, madness and the metaphysical, do not bare the concept of *sharability*, to use Ellaine Scarry's term (4), owing to their linguistic inexpressibility—granted that what language accepts can be shared and vice versa. Being involved in either madness or the metaphysical experience remains among the most private, unshared experiences, which, therefore, render these states as enigmatic. Furthermore, their incomprehensibility is essentially a result of the absence of the

Other—the witness outside the experience. Omar's trance in the desert, for instance, exemplifies the absence of the Other and consequently the resistance to sharability, which makes it as ambivalent as it is. This analytical comparison between madness and the Absolute reveals Mahfouz's motives behind establishing such a relationship. Mahfouz arguably illustrates that any experience that depends upon the exclusion of the Other (and the responsibilities that inevitably accompany his or her presence) is not worth perusing, which renders the search for the Absolute no different than the state of complete madness. It also demonstrates that it is the responsibility towards the Other that gives meaning and value to the Self's existence, and abandoning such a responsibility equals abandoning one's sanity.

In short, despite the novel's equivocalness between madness and the Absolute, Mahfouz's central point is the importance of the responsibility towards the Other to enrich the individual's ontological experience—by which I do not mean the *transcendental Other*, which does not fit the criteria of the Other as I have proposed, but the social Other, the Other that shares the human experience of living and suffering. The real Other in *The Beggar* is not God, truth, or poetry—it is the wife, the daughter, the dancer and the friend who have been left behind. Moreover, although the line of poetry that echoes in Omar's head at the end of the novel, "If you really wanted me why did you desert me?" (140), could be read as the voice of poetry rebuking Omar for abandoning it, what is *actually* abandoned during the novel is the social Other without whom the Self becomes misplaced.

### The Intellectual's Responsibility

Written shortly after in 1966, *Adrift on the Nile* appears to pick up from where *The Beggar* ends. It poses specifically the question of the responsibility of the intellectual. The novel is often read with regard to the political and social frustration of the intellectuals in 1960s Egypt due to the suppression of the Nasserite regime. In his dialogues with Al Ghitani, Mahfouz states "We were granted a breathing space in 1952, but things soon relapsed, and so it went. In any case, I confess to you that I fell into the absurd for a few minutes after the June 1967 defeat. It's true that resistance had begun, but the reality seemed absurd, terrible" (*The Mahfouz Dialogue* 92); interestingly enough, many critics suggest that the novel anticipated the military defeat in 1967 (Mahfouz, *In the Presence* 274). However, not only does the novel discuss this political-intellectual tension, it also exemplifies it. As a left-wing Wafdist intellectual, Mahfouz was miraculously saved from imprisonment for writing this novel. Mahfouz recounts that some security measures had been planned against him after writing *Adrift on the Nile*; he would not have been saved if not for the protection of Abdul Nasser himself (130–133). Anis Zaki and his friends, who represent the cultural elite, gather in a houseboat floating in the Nile to smoke kif and indulge in sensual pleasures. Inside the houseboat, they seem completely isolated from the rest of the world. Ali, a group member, states, after an unfortunate death incident which happened across the street, "Luckily we're far from the street—we can't hear anything" (64). The arrival of Samara Bahjat, seemingly the "responsible" voice in the novel, invokes pleasant

conversations about meaning and nothingness. The group finally faces their first collective responsibility after they take a journey by car, during which they run over a man. They exchange blame, but, at the end, the yall fail to take responsibility for the accident, including Samara.

The houseboat functions in the novel as the space outside responsibility (virtually as madness in *The Beggar*). As a consequence, concepts, which become devoid of responsibility, appear to acquire different meanings inside the houseboat. Anis reflects, "Love is an old and worn-out game, but it is sport on the houseboat. Fornication is held as a vice by councils and institutions, but it is freedom on our houseboat. Women are all conventions and marriage deeds in the home, but they are nubile and alluring on the houseboat" (107). By manipulating the social connotations of the signifier, Mahfouz shows how words themselves are neither virtuous nor vile; it is the presence or the lack of responsibility that determines their final meaning. By extension, and as an author, Mahfouz naturally considers *writing* to be one of the most important acts of responsibility; to write, Mahfouz shows, is to have a responsibility towards what is written and to whom it is written. It is no wonder, hence, that when Anis writes a document for his boss during the novel, his words are never written, and the pages remain blank because the pen with which he has written is empty (4); the incapability of writing is but a manifestation of Anis's incapability of practicing responsibility.

The second act of writing during the novel is Samara's play, in which she attempts to show the struggle between the Serious and the Absurd, featuring the group of the houseboat as the play's main characters. She decides that meaning should eventually win (94). Nonetheless, the spatial presence of Samara's notebook inside the houseboat is quite allegorical: it depicts the attempt to create meaning/order—and consequently responsibility—inside a chaotic space where responsibility is non-existent. With this highly bleak image, Mahfouz arguably suggests that all of the attempts by Egyptian intellectuals and authors to write in hope for change end in vain as long as they exist within a suppressive environment—in this case the Nasserite period. To enhance the intensity of the image, Anis finds and reads the notebook and confiscates it—possibly alluding to the political censorship from which literary texts suffer. On another occasion, Ali states, "That's why the third act is usually the weakest in the play; it is usually written for the censors" (118). With such a statement, the reader could imagine the tension between the difficulty and responsibility of writing during that period, which Mahfouz both criticises and suffers from simultaneously.

However, Mahfouz's central concern is the depiction of the frustration of the intellectuals who had high hopes for the 1952 revolution but were eventually repressed under the same values they had once believed in. Mahfouz discusses this issue more plainly in the case of Othman Khalil in *The Beggar* and Sa'id Mahran in *The Thief and the Dogs*. Mahfouz naturally blames the state for the marginalisation of the intellectual, and he portrays such a gloomy image of the intellectuals who find themselves stripped away from their responsibility as *representatives* of the revolution. Ragab states, "The authorities

have enough to do already without bothering with the likes of us" (*Adrift* 29). In a similar manner, Ali states, "we can see the ship of the state sails on without need of our opinion or support; and that any further thinking on our part is worth nothing" (48). This strong sense of existential fatalism which runs throughout the novel is likely a result of the political climate during Abdul Nasser rule. In his dialogues with Al Ghitani, Mahfouz addresses that period, "Individual rule ends up acting like fate and destiny, and how you do depends on luck" (*Naguib Mahfouz Dialogues* 115). Moreover, and with respect to my earlier discussion of the Absolute in *The Beggar*, Mahfouz further proposes that fate and destiny also indicate absence of the Other—embodied in the absence of the left-wing intellectual from the political scene in Egypt, rendering the political action "destined" for the rest of the Egyptian nation.

Mahfouz wittingly employs such metaphysical ideas to undertake the political crisis—for the two dimensions, religion and politics, constitute the primary concerns of the ordinary individual living in the Arab World, where the anxieties of each dimension feeds the other. Moreover, in his book *Al Arab Thahira Sawtiyah [Arabs Are a Vocal Phenomenon]*, Abdullah al-Qassimi comments that it is the political defeats that strengthen and reinforce the Arab's religious and metaphysical beliefs, and only through his sorrows does the Arab begin to search for God (8). Moreover, Mahfouz locks the intellectual elite inside the houseboat floating on the Nile to create a powerful political-metaphysical image: the suppression of the voice of the political Other renders the voice of the state *one*. Thus, the state becomes the voice of God—that which bears *no Other*. Mahfouz—and rightfully so—employs the metaphysical search as a result of the dissatisfaction with one's political space, for the political despotic structure can easily resemble that of the metaphysical. Al-Qassimi, for instance, notes that the Arab God highly resembles the Arab Sultan (9), which further indicates a long common history between politics and religion.

It becomes evident by now that Mahfouz believes in creating the political space of the intellectual to practice his responsibility towards the Other, and—in Mahfouz's view—appreciate the value of Self existence. On the contrary, madness, the Absolute, destiny and fate appear to be responsible for the absence of responsibility towards the Other in the two novels. The responsibility of the intellectual remains, nonetheless, rather *vague*; no clear indication of the nature of such a responsibility is given in the novels.

### Mahfouz (and) the Intellectual

For Mahfouz, the word *intellectual* has a general meaning which includes people such as doctors, lecturers and engineers (*In the Presence* 160); Edward Said agrees with such a view—in principle—depending on Antonio Gramsci's analysis of the intellectual "as a person who fulfils a particular set of functions in the society" (8). In this sense, Omar al-Hamzawi and Anis Zaki and his group are meant to be representations of the Egyptian intellectuals in the post-1952 revolution. One of the key documents to help understand Mahfouz's idea of the kind of responsibility intellectuals ought to take upon themselves is

his Nobel speech in 1988 (which Mohammed Salmawi delivered on his behalf). In his speech, Mahfouz speaks directly of himself as an intellectual addressing his peers. Mahfouz states, “[I]ntellectuals ought to exert themselves to cleanse humanity of moral pollution” (‘Nobel’). In this line, Mahfouz unambiguously states the role of the intellectual as he sees it; he believes that intellectuals ought to carry the traditional role of moral preaching. This role is instantly problematic for it lacks the ground upon which intellectuals are given the moral authoritative role—which highly resembles the role of the prophets. Moreover, the prophets’ assumed privilege of moral superiority theoretically justifies their representation of and preaching to their nations. Thus, Mahfouz’s statement inevitably (and perhaps unintentionally) grants the intellectuals some kind of moral superiority. By extension, I conclude that Mahfouz views intellectuals as the *new prophets* of the modern age. Consequently, the suffering of the intellectuals in the hands of political suppressors, and their deep alienation in society in his novels, can be read as the suffering of the prophets in the hands of their kings and their alienation in their own nations.

This reading allows for the deciphering of two key moments in *The Beggar and Adrift on the Nile*, which seemingly have similar correspondents in the Islamic stories of prophets. Omar’s trance in the desert is closely similar to Prophet Mohammed’s in *GharHira*, in Mecca where he had his first *Wahi* [revelation]. It is also worth mentioning that both Omar and the prophet Mohammed had their revelations in their forties, both were charged of insanity, and while the prophet was accused of writing poetry (the Quran),<sup>3</sup> Omar is criticised for abandoning it. On the other hand, Anis’s visions of the whale, which claims to be the whale that swallowed Jonah (*Adrift* 21) and threatens to swallow the entire houseboat is self-evident. Moreover, the Islamic version of the story of Jonah is set on a ship in the middle of the sea, which the setting of *Adrift on the Nile* highly resembles. It appears that Omar and Anis are Mahfouz’s lost, frustrated prophets who, when failed (or not enabled) to deliver their moral responsibility—as Mahfouz sees it—end up in states of insanity and absurdity, respectively.

Ali Harb realises the pitfalls of this role—namely the prophetic role of the intellectual. He contends that the intellectual can no more play such a role through which he practices his guardianship over collective values such as freedom and justice (14). To Harb, the preaching role no longer works, and, to prove that, he sums it all in one question, which I believe applies exceptionally well to the Egyptian situation since the 1919 revolution: “Why do we always witness the collapse of the ideological plans and totalitarian theories of those with revolutionary agendas?” (18 [all translation mine]). Evidently, the answer to this question in Harb’s view is the problems of the Arab intellectual. Harb claims that this role has come to its end, and he predicts what he terms *Nihayyat Al Muthakkaf* [the end of the intellectual] (14); needless to say that Harb murders the intellectual, the idol, the prophetic, the elitist and the preacher—not the human. Opposed to Mahfouz and Said’s definition, Harb interestingly defines the intellectual as a being who lives amidst crisis and revives on problems and violations of human rights (39). He further proposes that instead of

addressing crisis, “the intellectual himself has become the crisis” (39). For Harb, the problem of the intellectual begins with the connotations of the word; it creates a division between the intellectual and the rest—audience (50). As a consequence, the rest of the binaries follow: enlightened/unenlightened, extraordinary/ordinary, leader/followers and elite/mass. Even if the intellectual’s concerns are his nations and their rights, Harb continues, it does not change the fact that it is his decision that counts as to how and when these representations should be (51). Going back to his Nobel speech, Mahfouz states, “I would not be exceeding the limits of my duty if I told thom [*sic*] [human beings] in the name of the Third World: Be not spectators of our miseries” (‘Nobel’). Mahfouz is well aware of the representative role which he plays merely by being the only Arab recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature (1988); however, instead of evading it, Mahfouz stresses his right to the representativeness of the “Third World” countries. On another occasion, Mahfouz confesses to Raja’ El-Naggash that the only type of authority he seeks is that of literature, or *Sultat al-Adab*, and not of any other (*In the Presence* 127).

Harb calls this type the symbolic authority or the authority of speech; although different than the political and economic authorities, it nonetheless reveals a similar structure (57); and while the intellectual appears to fight power, he is in fact competing over authority (58). It is worth noting that *although* Harb firmly rejects any form of claim of representation of mind and truth and considers such roles to be harmful to humanity, he, nonetheless does not discuss the notion of the prophet, although such a concept is based upon the ultimate form of representativeness: there is *one* human being who represents the voice of God/Truth. Moreover, I propose that this type of what I would call *transcendental representativeness* has far more consequences for, and prominent effects on, humanity than the one Harb is warning against. I would further venture to suggest that it is from the prophet’s that the intellectual’s representativeness is inspired—as I have shown earlier in the cases of Mahfouz’s prophet-like protagonists Omar and Anis. Turning back to Mahfouz, the worst fate he expects can await the intellectual is alienation and marginalisation in and from his society—in other words, to be deprived from representativeness. Mahfouz explains that his two novels illustrate the dangerous consequences of the alienation and marginalisation of the intellectuals (*In the Presence* 248–249). Likewise, Mahfouz stresses the importance of belonging—belonging is fundamental to representativeness. Another bad fate that awaits the intellectual, in Mahfouz’s point of view, is to maintain a disturbed relationship with the state, a theme he says he addressed in *Adrift on the Nile* (144). Mahfouz understands this because in several occasions his relationship with authority would have been at stake had it not been for the intervention of his friends, as his dialogues with El-Naggash show.

However, in his lecture, ‘Representations of the Intellectual’, Said’s view appears to negate Mahfouz’s; he considers that disturbed relationship as being essential to the intellectual’s independence as it enables the intellectual to “speak the truth to power” and practice the role of an outsider (xvi); the intellectual’s spirit ought to be, as he puts it, “a spirit in opposition, rather than in accommodation” (xvii); therefore, the

condition of the intellectual is unavoidably lonely (xviii). Consequently, Mahfouz' protagonists, in Said's view, are in the ideal state in which intellectuals ought to be.

Said's view of the intellectual appears, nonetheless, to advocate the same role of the intellectual as Mahfouz's—namely the representativeness of values, messages, or a philosophy (Said 29). Such a *universal* representativeness has to be problematised because, and as Harb puts it, the intellectual's role, as a result, becomes “*guarding ideas*, as if they were a hypostasis to be sanctified or an idol to be worshiped, as is often the case with intellectuals and their slogans” (11). Nevertheless, Harb agrees with Said by stressing the importance of the alienation of the intellectual. For Harb, only by being alienated can the intellectual cease to play the role of representing moral values, and become a writer of his own thoughts and experiences (46). It is as if the representative role of the intellectual is accentuated depending on the degree to which he feels he belongs to those whom he represents. The concern here is that this representativeness is highly reductive, and, for the Arab intellectual, and after years of playing that role, it has proven to have done more harm than good. This is the paradox as Harb puts it: “the more the intellectual is accommodated by the society, the less effective he becomes” (46).

However, Said and Harb reach a dead end; whereas Said seems quite preoccupied with the intellectual/authority binary, Harb, in contrast, stresses the intellectual himself as a problem; for him, it is *not enough* for the intellectual (as Said advertises) to be independent and loyal to his cause to benefit his society (47–48). Harb's claims do appear to be more realistic than Said's because he bases his argument on a very convincing—yet simple—fact: intellectuals are not heaven-sent; they are people of authority and interests (59), and, thus, they can never be representatives but for themselves.

With respect to Said's and Harb's analysis of the intellectual, I propose that Mahfouz's intellectual (or rather prophet-like) protagonists, which suffer from a *sudden* alienation in their lives for *unknown reasons*, are the result of Mahfouz's feelings of alienation at that time. Mahfouz does not employ this alienation in the positive sense that Said and Harb do; on the contrary, this alienation is responsible for the most pessimistic situations the protagonists find themselves in. The key fact is that the two novels were written after the 1952 revolution, when Abdul Nasser's regime has systematically marginalised the Wafd Party (the most popular party before the revolution) to which Mahfouz belonged. After the revolution Mahfouz ceased to write for five years because, and according to him, there was nothing more to say, for it seemed that the revolution achieved a lot of what he had wished for in his novels (*In the Presence* 333–334). Written in 1965 and 1966, the two novels, nonetheless, revealed Mahfouz's hidden frustration: as one of the most important authors in Egypt, he felt he deserved a more representative role in the revolution—without which, he ceased writing. Mahfouz's frustration stems from his desire to *belong* to the new promising Egypt; such a desire haunts every intellectual, that is, to *represent* the new face of change. The policy of the Nasserite regime contributed further to Mahfouz's disappointment, and, as a result, Mahfouz “felt as alienated as

ever” (*The Beggar* 105)—a feeling that Mahfouz does not seem to find very virtuous as Said and Harb do. One could clearly see Mahfouz's non-adversarial, accommodative nature outside literature in his relationship with the Egyptian presidents Abdul Nasser, Anwar El Sadat and Hosni Mubarak; despite the very different regimes and periods those three presidents represent, Mahfouz always maintained (despite a couple of incidents), one might say, a good and stable relationship with authority. Questions about the role of the intellectual, although of continuing importance, seem to always simultaneously erupt with political revolution; it is the only chance of the public to question all forms of authority—including the intellectuals. Questions about the role of the Arab intellectual now in the Arab Spring are more critical than they have ever been. This could not be truer than for the situation of Egyptian Revolution of 2011. For instance, in his interview with Suhair Helmi, the notable Egyptian intellectual Murad Wahbah states that the 25 January Revolution does not follow the norms or conventions of how a revolution should be. He explains that because of the absence of thinkers and philosophers, the revolution is more likely to destroy than build. According to Wahbah, the revolution needs revolutionary intellectuals like Naguib Mahfouz (Helmi). Many other intellectuals like Wahbah *still* believe that the success of the revolution depends upon their enlightened wisdom, without which the nation will lose its path to freedom, just as the rooster thinks that the sun will not rise if he does not crow.

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