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The Structure of Nağīb Maḥfūz's *Trilogy*

When his *Trilogy* was published in 1956–7 Nağīb Maḥfūz was proclaimed the most eminent author in the entire Arab world. He also became the most popular and the most widely read novelist in the Arabic-speaking countries. For Vol. 2 of the *Trilogy*, i.e., *Qaṣr aš-Šawq*, he was awarded the State Literary Prize in 1957. Ṭāḥā Ḥuṣayn, the prominent Egyptian scholar, greeted the appearance of the novel most enthusiastically: "This is the best Egyptian novel I have read since the Egyptians have started writing novels"¹.

The *Trilogy* carries an immense wealth of information about the everyday life of a family belonging to the petty bourgeoisie as seen against the background of the changes taking place in Egypt in the sphere of socio-political life, manners, and the *Weltanschauung*. The plot covers the period from 1917 to 1944, marked by opposition to the British occupation of the country, the strivings to modernize the traditional Egyptian society, a gradual collapse of the social norms that had been accepted for centuries, a slow emancipation of women, and the ever stronger penetration of Egypt by the Western culture, science and philosophy.

The life of the family is depicted in an integrated manner, with great carefulness for detail. We find minute description of everyday life, customs, pastimes and entertainments, dress, objects of daily use, even the songs and the singers of that time (we learn, for instance, that Sa'd Zaghāl was very fond of Umm Kulthūm, the then rising star among Arabic popular music singers).

The novel is interesting not only because of its great informative value, but also because of the way in which the fortunes of the heroes are treated, of the interesting though slow development of events, fine psychology, and excellent dialogues. One would like to read its 1200 pages at one sitting.

The *Trilogy* has been compared to European *romans-fleuves*. For instance, Louis

¹ "Kawkab aš-Šarq", 1958, No. 3, pp. 146–147.

'A w a ḍ claimed that it was a naturalistic novel like Emile Zola's saga about the Rougon-Macquarts;² Sasson S o m e k h saw in it a resemblance of *The Buddenbrooks* by Thomas M a n n³; Ghālī Š u k r ī compared it to *The Roads to Freedom* by S a r t r e, because Sartre in his trilogy also described not only a crisis of individual personality, but also that of the generation, society, and civilization⁴. In the Polish literature, it comes closest to *Nights and Days* by Maria D a b r o w s k a, especially as far as its composition is concerned: like D a b r o w s k a's novel the *Trilogy* covers the whole life of a family, everything being important there — from the tiny detail like the *minašša* with which the dandy Y ā s ī n never parts⁵ to the ideology of the Muslim Brethren.

Nağīb M a ḥ f ū z was of course familiar with European *romans-fleuves* and certainly drew much from them, but it seems that the *Trilogy* is primarily a logical consequence of his interest in the life of a traditional Egyptian family, described in his earlier novels of manners, such as *Hān al-Halīlī*, *Zuqāq al-Midaqq*, *Al-Qāhira al-Ġadīda*, and *Bidāya wa-nihāya*. They were not *romans-fleuves* but each of them presented a section or aspect of a petty bourgeois family living in the quarter around Sayyidunā al-Ḥusayn mosque. The author's fascination with the life of a traditional Cairo family had started many years before the appearance of the *Trilogy*, which crowned that interest of his.

The novel is very Egyptian in climate, has the unimitable *couleur locale*, unimitably Egyptian portraits of the heroes, and peculiarities of manners, which determine its structure to a large extent. The present brief paper is intended to pay attention to the composition of the novel and its original elements, even though, generally speaking, the *Trilogy* is a transfer into the Arab world of the European experience with 19th century realistic novel⁶.

Each of the three volumes has as its title the name of a small street in the old quarter of Cairo, in the vicinity of the Sayyidunā al-Ḥusayn mosque. There are immense differences among the three volumes when it comes to the structure of the novel: temporal composition, plot organization, type of narration, and presentation of the heroes.

Vol. 1 shows the life of traditional bourgeois family in which everything is subordinated to the will of the father and in which the mother, totally at the service of her husband and the requirements of the household, is the element of duration and stability. But it is a period in which that type of the family declines. The revolution and the socio-political and ideological changes in Egypt sow unrest and disturb the life of the family. One of its members (Fahmī), actively committed to the cause of the revolution, loses his life.

² Louis 'A w a ḍ, *Maqalāt fī ʾān-naqd wa-ʾāl-adab*, Cairo 1963, pp. 369 ff.

³ Sasson S o m e k h, *The Changing Rhythm*, Leiden (Brill) 1973.

⁴ Ghālī Š u k r ī, *Al-Muntamī*, Cairo 1969, p. 19.

⁵ *Minašša* — an object for warding the flies off.

⁶ A detailed analysis of the composition of the *Trilogy* can be found in the present writer's unpublished doctoral dissertation in Polish, deposited at the Warsaw University Institute of Oriental Studies.

The plot in Vol. 1 develops slowly, the events form a chronological sequence. The exposition, which occupies nearly one-fourth of the whole volume, is a description of one typical day of 24 hours shown in great detail, hour after hour. All the events, determined by the structure of the 24-hour period, which is due to customs and tradition, take place in the various, strictly defined, parts of that period. That 24-hour period is the basic unit of the temporal structure of the novel. The life of the family, based on that 24-hour cycle, constant and changeless, shown in Vol. 1 completely and in great detail, and recurrently also in Vol. 2, makes the impression of continuity of events and duration. This temporal structure of the novel follows from the idea of the narrator, intended to evoke in the reader the feeling of that continuity and duration.

The narrator relates the events objectively; he knows everything about his heroes and makes his omniscience felt from time to time. His narrative follows at a slow pace, very often changes into description, and conversely, the plot is rather static, which corresponds very well with the presentation of a monotonous life, strictly regulated and poor in events.

The heroes are presented by the author many-sidedly and in great detail; this applies to both their external appearance and their inner life. There is no doubt who is the principal hero. The father, the master and the ruler of that small world, is the most representative person, treated by the author very carefully. The mother is the second hero. 'Ā'īša, Hadīğa and Kamāl form the background, they are characters which enable the author to show the normal functioning of a family with several children, the parents' concern about getting the daughters married, the girls' dreams about their fiancés, the pranks and jokes of Kamāl who, being the youngest, is the family favourite. Yāsīn and Fahmī are individualities. Yāsīn is marked by his sexual temperament and dissoluteness which make him provoke family scandals. Fahmī is an exceptional personage, the only one in the novel who develops. External factors, events in the family, combined with his mental predispositions, shape his character and influence his decisions. We witness how Fahmī matures to engage in the revolution. As opposed to all others, he is the only dynamic character in the novel. The father is the same throughout the whole story, he does not change his principles whatever his experiences and the events around him are (he may only abandon his pleasures for some time). He is changed only by the lapse of time, the coming old age, which mellows his character and changes his manners, but that is quite independent of him. The mother is always the same, gentle, good, naïve, and Fahmī's death affects her only in so much that to the end of her life she preserves her rankling hatred of Maryam, whom Fahmī loved and who disgraced herself.

When it comes to Vol. 2 nothing has apparently changed in the house in Bayn al-Qaṣrayni Lane which is emphasized by the author who commences that part of the novel by describing Aḥmad 'Abd al-Ğawwād's return from a night revel (as in Vol. 1), followed by a reference to the sound of "beating" the dough of which crude cakes are to be baked (in Vol. 1 that sound was mentioned many times, which made the reader feel that the next "day as usual" was to begin). But the structure of the novel

changes. The hero now is Kamāl, a young intellectual who lives under new socio-political conditions. Egypt has entered the period of regaining independence and of modernization, when the family tradition begins to be felt as something anachronic. Kamāl found himself at the crossroads between the East and the West. He is fascinated with the Western philosophy and culture, but contact with them brings him sufferings. He must break with all that which he had assimilated in his home and first of all with his faith. Making Kamāl, a young man in the process of internal transformation, who is mentally torn apart by contradictions and lives in constant distress, the hero of that part of the novel must have predetermined its structure. There is no longer such strict chronology and such a detailed description of the life of the family as we saw in Vol. 1, even though the plot is still mostly set in the house in Bayna 'l-Qaṣrayni Lane. Concentration on Kamāl's experiences and actions accounts for the fact that some events take place simultaneously — Kamāl often visits the Šaddāds — and the plot is set as it were on two planes. There are fewer relations and descriptions, and more interior monologues and dialogues. A large part of the novel takes place "within" the hero, in his mind. There are fewer comments from the author, the narrator leaves the hero to himself, to his own reflections and inner discussions. Kamāl is now a dynamic hero, even though he is unlike Fahmī. The times are different, and the mental differences between the two are great. Nothing can prod Kamāl to action. He develops intellectually, but remains a passive and uncommitted man. The truth about the world and about his father, which he discovers, make him live in a state of permanent distress.

Vol. 3 differs completely from the first two, and especially from Vol. 1. The events (Vol. 3 covers the period of eight years) follow by jumps, and the continuity of events is preserved by "rapports": the heroes tell one another what has happened. Only the exposition comes directly from the author; the readers must know what the family looks like eight years later. The author is no longer concerned with evoking the sense of continuity. Hence the type of the narration is changed. It seems reasonable to conclude that Vol. 3 was intended by the author to present the ideology of the times and the possible ideological attitudes. There are no such heroes as the father and Kamāl were. The father is very old, his health is very poor, and he almost never leaves his home. Kamāl is a fully shaped man and he does not develop any longer. He stays where we had left him at the end of Vol. 2. He has not married, and is still full of distress and doubts. The younger generation — Raḍwān, 'Abd al-Mun'im, and Aḥmad — enters the stage. But they are no full-blooded persons, rather models of attitudes. The author has completely changed the idea of his novel in Vol. 3. Vol. 1 was much more "person-oriented", Vols. 2 and 3, and especially Vol. 3 merely convey ideas. The new heroes in Vol. 3 are merely outlined and schematic. Their discussions reveal their views, their actions, their attitudes toward life. What is now important in the novel is ideological controversies and description of the various moral and socio-political attitudes, and not pen-portraits of the heroes.

The *Trilogy* is thus not homogeneous in its structure: in each volume we see a different technique of describing events and a different technique of presenting the

heroes. While Vol. 1 comes closest to the realistic 19th century novel (the type of narration and presentation of the heroes). Vols. 2 and 3 more resemble modern prose. The author abandoned the complicated plot we see in Vol. 1 in favour of the inner life of the heroes. In Vol. 3 even Amīna, the mother, after death of her husband engages in a long and painful interior monologue. Discussions over the *Weltanschauung*, which fill the whole Vol. 3, also bring the novel closer to present-day prose.

The composition of the *Trilogy* is largely conditioned by the socio-political relations, tradition, and customs in the Egypt of its times. It seems that this greatly accounts for the originality of the novel. Vol. 1, which describes a traditional patriarchal family, whose life determined by traditions, moves on slowly and monotonously, everything being subordinated to the father, has a definite temporal structure and a definite type of narration. The events are arranged chronologically, and they take place, first in accordance with "the time of the milieu"⁷, and second, on the basis of the 24-hour cycle. Some events can take place only in certain parts of the day, it being implied by the author that this is so every day. For instance, the day begins with the "beating" of the dough; every afternoon the family gathers to drink coffee; the father always returns home about midnight. Amīna always stays at home, which is therefore the centre of the novel. From the point of view of the composition of the novel Amīna, by being so completely static, is the most important person in the *Trilogy*. The rigorous traditional rules do not allow her to leave the house. The girls Ā'īša and Hadīğa also are always in the same place. This conditions the narration, because, in addition to the ample comments that come directly from the author, there is much telling Amīna about what is going on in the world, the informants being her sons or her husband.

The gradual breakdown of the family traditions affects the structure of the novel. In Vol. 2 we only twice watch Aḥmad 'Abd al-Ğawwād return home from his mistress, we only once hear the "beating" of the dough, and only once assist at the afternoon coffee party. The chronology of events is disturbed. There is a separate motif of Kamāl's experiences; he spends much of his time out of home (on the contrary, Fahmī always used to return home immediately after his lectures, he only climbed the roof of the house with Kamāl). The events often take place simultaneously, as we can judge from the indications of time. In the narrative, dialogues and interior monologues are more frequent than descriptions and relations.

In Vol. 3, in which the author is concerned with showing ideological attitudes, there is no reference at all to a typical day in the life of the family. We look through Kamāl's eyes at what is going on in the houses in Bayna 'l-Qaṣrayni Lane and as-Sukkariyya Lane. The author's own narrative is almost completely replaced by dialogues and interior monologues. While an objective in which the author revealed his omniscience was dominant in Vol. 1, that omniscience of his being only seemingly

⁷ The term introduced by K. Wyka in his *O potrzebie historii literatury* (The Need of History of Literature), Warszawa 1969, pp. 99-100.

restricted from time to time, in the other two volumes the narrator acts as an observer, mainly from a single person's point of view⁸.

Yet, for all the essential differences in the structure of the three volumes, the *Trilogy* forms a unity, which is due to several factors:

I. Some principal characters exist in the novel from the first page to the last. They include Amīna and Kamāl. Especially Amīna is that person who keeps the story together by opening and closing it while being spatially exactly in the same place, the house in Bayna 'l-Qaṣrayni Lane.

II. Some characters reappear from time to time throughout the novel, as, for instance, ṣayḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣamad al-Mitwallī, who symbolizes the passing of time. We see him for the last time at the funeral of Aḥmad 'Abd al-Ġawwād; he is over one hundred years old and does not remember anything, but he is still fit physically.

III. Some personages (the officer from al-Ġamāliyya, Maryam, Zubayda) disappear for a long time to return for a moment in Vol. 3 to remind the heroes how much time has elapsed.

IV. The parallelism of the heroes and situations⁹ also is the factor which contributes to the unity of the novel. There are many parallel situations: Kamāl's love for 'Ā'ida, a young lady of an aristocratic family, in Vol. 2 has its analogue in Aḥmad's love for 'Alawiyya Ṣabīrī, also of noble origin, in Vol. 3. Both men fail in their endeavours, though each of them reacts quite differently. Fahmī's flirtation with Maryam on the roof of the house in Vol. 1 has its analogue in Yāsīn's flirtation with Maryam on the same roof in Vol. 2, both events taking place in the presence of Kamāl.

V. The roof and the *maṣrabiyya* of the house in Bayna 'l-Qaṣrayni are two places which play an important role in the composition of the novel in Vol. 1 and in Vol. 3¹⁰. They are the windows to the world for the women, who are locked in the house like in a prison. It is through *maṣrabiyya* that the women look at the men who go to their work and at Kamāl surrounded by British soldiers; and it is also through *maṣrabiyya* that 'Ā'īša looks furtively at the police officer. On the roof of the house young people make declarations of love, and Amīna grows flowers and keeps hens. In Vol. 3 the old invalid father, who is already unable to leave the house, sits on the *maṣrabiyya*, and that is his only pastime next to listening to the radio and reading newspapers.

The *Trilogy* is a heterogeneous work, with a changing rhythm of the plot, but, all its three volumes are linked together inseparably and form a single whole from the artistic point of view.

In one of his interviews Naḡīb M a ḥ f ū z has said that "It is time which is the

⁸ Cf. H. Markiewicz, *Główne problemy wiedzy o literaturze* (The Main Issues in the Knowledge of Literature), Kraków 1970, p. 177.

⁹ See also S. S o m e k h, op. cit., p. 131.

¹⁰ The roof, the *maṣrabiyya*, and the window are symbols of the prison which the home was for women. They also play an important role in Naḡīb M a ḥ f ū z's other novels: in *Zuqāq al-Midaqq* Ḥamīda dreams about the world at large when she looks through the window and sees the by-street; in *Hān al-Halīlī* the lovers communicate through the window and the *maṣrabiyya*.

true hero of the *Trilogy*"¹¹. He chose for his novel a period of upheavals in the history of Egypt, upheavals which completely changed the life of the country. During the twenty-seven years covered by the novel Egypt was slowly transforming from a backward colonial country into a fairly modern one; the Egyptian people were developing national consciousness and also the consciousness of the inevitability of the changes which the Naser revolution brought only eight years after the date when the novel ends.

Changes in the family that follow changes in society at large are one of the principal issues in the *Trilogy*. The new generation and the new families do not resemble the old traditional ones in any way. None of Aḥmad 'Abd al-Ġawwād's sons inherits his shop and his merchant profession. His sons and his grandsons belong to another class, they are educated and belong to the intelligentsia.

Raġā' an - N a q q ā š, the well known Egyptian literary critic, defined the importance of Naġīb M a ḥ f ū z' s work in Arab literature very pertinently by saying that "There is no doubt that one cannot understand modern Egypt correctly without having read Naġīb M a ḥ f ū z'"¹². One may also add that his importance consists in the fact that with his works Arab literature joined the main trend of world literature, and that his novels bridge the gap between Arab countries and Europe in that field.

¹¹ "Āhir Sā'a" of October 9, 1957, p. 27 (quoted after J. J o m i e r, "MIDEO", No. 4, p. 84).

¹² Raġā' a n - N a q q ā š, *Al-Udabā' al-mu'āṣirūna*, (Kitāb al-Hilāl), February 1971, p. 154.