

representation of this group and their opinions about the problem in the book. Nevertheless, I recommend this book to anyone interested in South Africa, ethnic identities, environmental issues or human rights issues.

Pavel Miškařík

BEŠKOVÁ, Katarína. *Mahfouzian Nights: Fate, Desire and Politics in Layālī alf layla*. Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 2021. 96 p. ISBN 978-80-8265-000-9.
<https://doi.org/10.31577/aassav.2024.33.1.07>. CC-BY

The literary oeuvre of Najīb Maḥfūz has received considerable scholarly attention, which, since 1988, when the writer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, has only grown in depth and volume. Some of the most valuable studies on Maḥfūz's work, however, were published even prior to his rise to such international acclaim, for instance Sasson Somekh's *The Changing Rhythm: A Study of Najīb Maḥfūz's Novels*¹ (1973) being a case in point. After a certain lull in Mahfouzian studies around the turn of the millennium, recent years have seen a renewed scholarly interest in the works of the foremost Egyptian novelist, with the publication of the two monographs by Muḥammad Shu'ayr, *Awlād ḥāratinā: Sīrat ar-riwāya al-muḥrama* [Children of Our Alley: The Story of the Forbidden Novel, 2018]² and *A 'wām Najīb Maḥfūz: al-Bidāyāt wa an-nihāyāt* [The Years of Najīb Maḥfūz: the Beginnings and the Endings, 2021] respectively. However, literary criticism on the lesser-known works by the world-renowned Egyptian novelist that could also be available in English for both reference and teaching, is still relatively sparse. This lack makes Bešková's monograph a vital contribution to the field.

The book is divided into six chapters, the first two introducing the life and work of the Nobel laureate and situating his work *Layālī alf layla* within a broader framework of literary re-imaginings and rewritings derived from – as well as inspired by – one of the most influential repositories of Arab storytelling; that of the famed collection of the *Thousand and One Nights*. While the first chapter, as its title³ suggests, situates Maḥfūz's genius in his most natural habitat, the Cairene *ḥāra*, the second looks to position his work

¹ SOMEKH, S. *The Changing Rhythm: A Study of Najīb Maḥfūz's Novels*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973. Given its date of publication, this study, however, concerns itself with the first forty years or so of Maḥfūz's literary career and discusses the works published prior to 1967.

² Shu'ayr's book is now also available in English translation. See SHOAIR, M. *The Story of the Banned Book: Naguib Mahfouz's Children of the Alley*. Translated by: HUMPHREY, T. D. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2022.

³ *The Genius of the Cairene Hāra*, pp. 11–23.

Layālī alf layla within the legacy of the tales recounted by Shahrazād in the *Thousand and One Nights*. In doing so, Bešková also highlights the points of departure from the aforementioned collection in Maḥfūz's rendering of the tales; firstly, she notes it can be conceived of as "a kind of a sequel" to its popular counterpart, as its plot picks up where the *Thousand and One Nights* left off, with Shahriyār granting Shahrazād his royal pardon. Secondly, in comparing the rich tapestry of Maḥfūz's tales with the original collection, Bešková notices that the degree of interconnectedness in Maḥfūz's rendering of the selection of the stories is far greater than in the *Nights*, where the same tales were operating independently of one another. Likewise, the protagonists, whose "personal actions, decisions, victories and failures" (p. 34) are interdependent on one another's as the threads of their fates across individual episodes interweave, serve to solidify the overall cohesion of Maḥfūz's novel, whereas in the original collection their fates would not converge or be joined up in this manner.

Drawing upon Hanafy's observations⁴, Bešková concurs that the novel's "plot cannot be assigned to any specific place or time; [...] it is set in semi-mythical surroundings resembling a Mahfouzian *ḥāra*." (p. 34) However, she expands her treatment of *ḥāra* by focusing on its typical features such as *maḡhā* (the coffeehouse) or *zāwīya* (the lodging of a local Sufi shaykh), since these locations are loaded with social meanings and functions, besides their serving as unifying chronotopes throughout the entire novel. They are the places where characters from various backgrounds and social classes come into contact with one another, the latter being a place where humans at different stations (*maqāmāt*) of their journey towards spiritual enlightenment meet and interact.

In the second chapter, Bešková also discusses the degree and type of intertextuality, maintaining that the source text is "part of the identity" of Maḥfūz's novel. While hers is not the first study of the novel in question (a very thorough analysis of the novel can be found in Enany's monograph entitled *The Pursuit of Meaning*)⁵, hers is certainly the first one that looks closely at the source text of the popular collection and provides in-depth information as to which particular stories served as a basis for Maḥfūz's creation, and sheds light on the way in which the specific tales were incorporated and/or manipulated to serve the novelist's vision and goals.

Chapters three to six are organized thematically, each of them exploring the ideas central to the novel and to the writer's interest. Chapter Three, entitled *Man's Spiritual Journey*, discusses the interrelatedness of an individual's search for the truth (as a unique expression of one's spiritual growth) and the simultaneous quest for social justice (a question very close to Maḥfūz's heart and the chief motivator of his literary ambitions and undertakings). Here, Bešková chooses the topos of the journey, both a spatial and

⁴ HANAFY, I. Magic Realism in Jorge Luis Borges's Fictions and Naguib Mahfouz's Arabian Nights and Days. In *Benha University Website*, p. 7, [online] [cit. 1 March 2015]. Available from <http://bu.edu.eg/portal/uploads/Arts/English%20Language%20and%20Literature/2008/publications/Iman%20Adawy%20Ahmed%20Hanafy_MAGIC_RealismFinal.pdf>

⁵ EL-ENANY, Rasheed. *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning*. London; New York: Routledge, 1993.

spiritual one, in order to explore the Mahfouzian theme of the gradual nature of social and political reform, which is always predicated on the characters' personal development and spiritual growth. The chapter explores the journeys undertaken (or undergone) by three of the novel's protagonists, namely Shahriyār, Sindibād and Jamaṣa al-Bulṭī, whose social and intellectual backgrounds, as well as points of departure and arrival, vary considerably. However, they all share one and the same journey, which Bešková describes as "a quest for the truth" (p. 36). What all these characters have in common is the realization that the vanity and shortsightedness of seeking only one's own benefits, impede and delay the greater good that would benefit the whole society; therefore, the collective rebirth of humankind and the reclaiming of our shared humanity lies in the moral transformation and spiritual growth of an individual.

Chapter Four, entitled *Slaves of Desire*, also draws on the universal themes introduced in the previous chapter, by exploring the shadow aspects of human nature that must be overcome in order for the spiritual and moral rebirth of society to occur. The particular focus here is on *desire*, or rather, on the manifold kinds of desires that motivate the characters's choices and drive their actions. Here, Bešková distinguishes the (lower) "desires" from (higher) "longings". The longings, associated with spiritual or intellectual goals are contrasted with desires stemming from one's baser self. As the chapter's opening lines suggest, Bešková's interest in this chapter lies in the psychological and moral depravities and impairments that occur once a desire is "unchecked, repressed, misplaced or gone awry" (p. 55). In Maḥfūz's novels, she observes, the protagonists may be (mis)guided by more than just one particular desire. However, "it seems that losing control of any of them can set one on the slippery slope of succumbing to other desires as well" (p. 55), which she illustrates through a number of characters populating Maḥfūz's novel, whether they were taken over from the original tales, or are of Maḥfūz's own invention (such as Fāḍil Ṣan'ān). Of particular interest in this chapter is Bešková's detailed analysis of individual elements, themes, motifs and characters of the *Nights* that inspired Maḥfūz's tales; in examining the possible sources (sometimes limited to mere fragments of the original tale), she explores Maḥfūz's reversals of some touchstone ideas present in the tales which they were built upon, and contrasts the variations as well as occasional asymmetrical structuration of parts of the two texts.

The following chapter, *The Play of Fate*, delves deeper into Maḥfūz's philosophical preoccupation with matters of fate. Even though Maḥfūz cherishes the concept of free will and human volition, and advocates responsibility and accountability for one's own actions, he also seems to believe in – or at least he leaves his texts open to – the mysterious workings of space and time entanglements that are beyond human control and that often influence the outcome despite one's will to steer the wheel of destiny in a more appropriate, or more desirable, direction. The role of fate in the novel is mostly assigned to the jinns, whose designs often run contrary to those of Maḥfūz's characters'. Bešková identifies four jinns in the novel, both the good and malevolent ones, and, treating those as (possible) embodiments of fate, she discusses the role of unknown, inexplicable forces in shaping characters' destinies. Even though she arrives at the conclusion that "the choices we make are still our own and the responsibility for one's actions always lies with the individual", she also acknowledges Maḥfūz's ambivalence "in [his] rendering of fate in his works" (p. 78). In her discussion of fate in this chapter, Bešková also includes one

of the lesser known works by the author, a one-act play *ash-Shayṭān ya 'iz* (The Devil Preaches), which was also based on one of the tales included in the *Thousand and One Nights* called The City of Brass (*Madīnat an-nuḥās*). Her exploration of fate, or, rather time-fate (*dahr*) rounds off the theme of the chapter and provides deeper insight into Maḥfūz's views surrounding one's duty towards oneself and, by extension, to the society, in the event of one's encounter with forces that constitute what humans interpret as fate.

The last chapter of the monograph, entitled *From Personal Redemption to Social Responsibility: Socio-Political Aspects and Sufism*, traces the development of Maḥfūz's worldview with regard to the moral and spiritual evolution of a person, which in turn elevates the society and cures it of its ills and moral degradation. It discusses the author's unique blend of what he referred to as "socialist Sufism" (*as-sūfiyya al-ishtirākīyya*), and reveals Maḥfūz's restraint towards the "obliteration of self"⁶ that Sufism alone would entail, as he believed that if individuals remain dedicated only to themselves, without a connection to the real world and its concerns, they cannot contribute to society and thus are of no significance to its rebirth.

Bešková's monograph is an exceptionally engaging (and engaged) work, whose subject-matter illuminates many of the "perennial" themes and questions that Maḥfūz had searched for an answer to throughout his life and literary career, throughout his own "thousand nights". In his *Layālī alf layla* these themes are presented with philosophical as well as aesthetic maturity (one may even say mastery) and Bešková's insightful and well-grounded analysis lets his vision unfold almost by itself, as if guiding the reader and providing them with tools, but at the same time, allowing Maḥfūz's genius and his dedication to humanity to shine through. Unearthing the motifs, characters and tales of the *Thousand and One Nights* that served as the basis for the novel's episodes and plots provides a valuable layer to her reading of the work and helps facilitate a deeper appreciation for Maḥfūz's masterful transmutation of the source material into a pinnacle of art that is all his own.

Danuša Čížmíková

⁶ MAḤFŪZ, Najīb. *Layālī Alf layla* [Nights of the Thousand Nights]. Al-Qāhira: Dār ash-shurūq, 2009. At-tab'a at-tālīta, p. 218. Johnson-Davies's translation, p. 165. Cf. MAHFOUZ, N. *Arabian Nights and Days*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1996. Quoted in: BEŠKOVÁ, p. 75.