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Naguib Mahfouz through Orientalist Perspectives: A Cultural Criticism Analysis of Western Interpretations

Nezar Yasin Rababah¹ , Mahmoud Ali Rababah^{2*} , Radwan Mohammad Eazolli^{3*} , Christian Wiradendi Wolor⁴ , Thamer Ibrahim Al-Masarweh⁵ , Ziyad Mahmoud Miqdadi⁶ 

¹ Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Yarmouk University, Irbid 21163, Jordan

² Department of English Language and Literature, Al-Balqa Applied University, Irbid 19117, Jordan

³ Arabic Language and Literature Department, Al-Balqa Applied University, Irbid 19117, Jordan

⁴ Department of Management, Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Jakarta 13220, Indonesia

⁵ Modern Arabic Literature and Criticism, Language Center, University of Jordan, Amman 11942, Jordan

⁶ Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Middle East University, Amman 11831, Jordan

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the views of Orientalists on Mahfouz's literature, elucidating their approach to studying a model of Arabic literature and analyzing these views through the lens of cultural criticism, particularly in relation to the concepts of the "self" and the "other". The study employed the descriptive-analytical method based on cultural criticism. The study revealed that Orientalists' opinions on Mahfouz' works were diverse, largely shaped by their preexisting ideas. They interpreted Mahfouz's works based on their social and cultural perspectives, often selecting elements that aligned with their own biases. Soviet Orientalist criticism was the closest to reflecting Egyptian reality and demonstrated a deeper understanding of and fairness toward Mahfouz. Meanwhile, European Orientalist criticism provided important insights into the influence of European philosophy and modern literature on Mahfouz's works. However, it was not entirely free from the Western superiority complex toward the East. This perspective often failed to align with Mahfouz's artistic and creative

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Mahmoud Ali Rababah, Department of English Language and Literature, Al-Balqa Applied University, Irbid 19117, Jordan; Email: mrababah@bau.edu.jo; Radwan Mohammad Eazolli, Arabic Language and Literature Department, Al-Balqa Applied University, Irbid 19117, Jordan; Email: radwan.kurdi@bau.edu.jo

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capabilities or with the Egyptian reality, instead being filtered through a cultural intermediary that imposed its ideological framework. Although Mahfouz's works served as a mirror reflecting Egyptian society in particular and the Arab world in general, presenting a truthful image to both Arab and Western audiences, Orientalist readings of his literary output varied significantly. Some offered a fair and appreciative evaluation of his artistic and literary contributions, while others used their analysis to highlight cultural biases that elevated the Western world's modernity and superiority over the East.

Keywords: Arab Literature; Egyptian Society; Naguib Mahfouz; Orientalism; Cultural Criticism

1. Introduction

Cultural criticism emerged within the framework of cultural studies, which moved away from text-centered analysis and instead examined literary texts based on the cultural systems they reveal^[1, 2]. This study does not delve into the historical development of theories of cultural criticism but focuses on cultural patterns due to their relevance in analyzing Mahfouz's literary output as a representative of Arab culture. Cultural patterns are defined as "social, religious, moral, and aesthetic constructs imposed by specific historical moments, which are implicitly accepted by both the author and their audience. Consequently, individual texts and achievements exist within a broader cultural text that enables them while simultaneously limiting their scope of inquiry. This means that no text is completely independent or singular; rather, it is interconnected with other texts and knowledge systems, which contribute to its hybrid and fragmented nature"^[3-5].

Upon reviewing Western Orientalist perspectives, we find a cultural framework that marginalizes Arab culture while placing Orientalist culture at the center. Naguib Mahfouz, in this context, represents a marginalized Arab identity that is either inevitably influenced by the dominant "other"—the culturally and civilisationally superior West—or is subject to interpretations that impose external narratives that may not align with the text itself but rather with the Orientalist's view of the Arab self. The social and political dominance of Orientalist culture has led to a narrow perception that fails to comprehend other cultures beyond their frameworks^[6-8].

The marginalization of Arab culture aligns with Al-Ghadhami's discussion on the dynamics of centrality and marginality in his book, where he highlights how Arab civilization historically marginalized groups such as Black Arabs and Bedouins^[1]. This intersects with the theories of "cultural imagination" and "cultural representation". Cultural

imagination refers to the ideological constructs that shape a specific community's worldview. Modern cultural studies have expanded this concept to go beyond individual psychological dimensions, incorporating broader cultural and social structures that influence behavior and thought. Cultural representation, on the other hand, is the process by which cultural imagination is shaped and reinforced^[9-11]. In this study, cultural representation is manifested in the Orientalist interpretation of Naguib Mahfouz's literature.

2. Methods

This research takes a critical cultural-analytical approach, which is a multidisciplinary technique that blends literary criticism tools with cultural studies concepts. Its goal is to examine discourses and depictions of power, identity, and the "other" in literature. This approach was chosen because the study is not limited to a purely literary analysis of Naguib Mahfouz's works, but rather focuses on Orientalists' representations of Mahfouz and his literature, which are shaped by ideological and cultural systems reflecting the Western view of the Arab self^[12-14].

This paradigm views Orientalist writings not as objective representations of reality, but as discourses infused with power and knowledge—discourses that generate symbolic images of the East and rebuild Mahfouz's identity in light of Western ideas of the Orient.

The critical material published by Orientalists from diverse backgrounds (Soviet, and European) was analyzed using numerous important ideas, including:

- Cultural dichotomy: self/other.
- Center and margin
- Orientalism as a system of knowledge (according to Edward Said)
- Cultural representation and Orientalist imagination
- Ideological prejudice and cultural hegemonic discourse

The descriptive-analytical method is also used in the study to classify and interpret Orientalist discourse on Mahfouz, as well as cultural discourse analysis, which helps uncover the deeper structures and ideological frameworks shaping the Orientalist perspective on contemporary Arabic literature, with Mahfouz serving as a representative case^[15, 16].

Justifications for Selecting the Methodology

The study uses literary analysis to explore the cultural and structural differences between Western and Arab civilizations. Orientalist discourse is linked to ideology, power, and representation, which are key components of cultural critique. Mahfouz's literary works offer valuable insights into the linkages of identity, history, and power, making them ideal for cultural criticism.

3. Theoretical Framework

Orientalism refers to the study of Eastern sciences, conditions, history, beliefs, and natural, urban, and human environments, as well as the study of Eastern languages, dialects, and the distinctive characteristics of each Eastern society. Each nation has its unique traits, and Orientalism involves the study of individuals, institutions, and intellectual and ideological movements in their various forms. Orientalism initially emerged during the period of religious reform in Europe, led by missionaries and monks, before becoming associated with colonialism^[17–19]. This study does not aim to examine deeply the issues and objectives of Orientalism due to the limited scope of research and the extensive literature that has documented this field and its circumstances. However, it is essential to highlight that this study seeks to understand the relationship between the self and the other as representatives of the marginal and central discourses in global culture, as presented by Western Orientalists.

The study belongs to cultural studies in its exploration of the concepts of self and other, focusing on the perceived absence of the Arab self in contrast to the Western other. This falls within the framework of cultural Orientalism. European Orientalism began its engagement with the Arab and Islamic world, making undeniable contributions by preserving much of the ancient Eastern heritage and introducing theories that enriched it and alerted its people to neglected aspects. However, Orientalism often adopted a superior

perspective, largely disregarding Eastern contexts and their social and historical conditions. Following Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, a deconstructive movement emerged within what is known as post-colonialism, with one faction focusing on recognizing the East as an independent entity with its own identity. Another faction shifted towards viewing the self through the lens of the other, rather than studying Paris itself, they examined Egypt through the mirror of Europe^[20, 21].

This is precisely what Edward Said articulated in his book *Orientalism*, where he argued that it is impossible to understand ideas, cultures, and history, or to study the forces that drive them and the structures of power within them, without acknowledging the role of power dynamics. It is misleading to believe that imagination alone created the image of the East as shaped by Orientalists or to assume that such a portrayal could have emerged in isolation. The relationship between East and West involves power, control, and varying degrees of complex hegemony^[22–24].

This study aims to explore Orientalist perspectives on Naguib Mahfouz's literature, especially considering that Western civilization has reached the height of its power and influence over the world, particularly in Eastern countries. Arabs have a long history of interaction with the West, yet the body of studies on Arab literature remains relatively small. Mahfouz, however, attracted Orientalist interest due to his literary prominence, prolific output, and recognition, including his Nobel Prize win.

Previous Studies

Bakker's study attempts to provide a panoramic reading of the reception of Naguib Mahfouz in Western literary journals and magazines^[25]. Bakker demonstrates how Western critics interpreted Mahfouz's works through the lens of Western modernity, often disregarding the religious and cultural context of the texts. He shows that this mode of reading was frequently driven more by a desire to uncover the "mysterious East" than to understand Mahfouz's artistic self. The study highlights how translation has at times distorted Mahfouz's image due to linguistic and cultural gaps. However, a major limitation of the study is its lack of engagement with Orientalism as a discourse of power; instead, it offers linguistic and contextual observations, making it rich in literary insight but weak in its cultural-critical dimension.

Meyer presents an extensive analysis of Arabic narrative modernity, positioning Naguib Mahfouz as a central figure in the evolution of the Arabic novel, particularly in relation to “experimental modernity”^[26]. He argues that Mahfouz blended Western narrative techniques, such as stream of consciousness and symbolic structure—with the shifting realities of the Arab world. However, the analysis is conducted from a postcolonial perspective shaped by an East/West binary, wherein Mahfouz’s “modernity” is continually measured by its proximity to Western modernism. A notable critique of the study is its implicit reproduction of Western-centric discourse, as it compares the development of the Arabic novel to the European novel as the ultimate standard. Furthermore, the author’s emphasis on artistic form sometimes comes at the expense of analyzing the Arab cultural and religious context, making Mahfouz appear to be merely reproducing Western modernism in Arabic, rather than reimagining it from an indigenous standpoint. Nevertheless, the study remains a valuable resource for highlighting the modernist techniques in Mahfouz’s later works and for challenging the stereotype that views Arabic literature as merely a realistic reflection of its environment rather than a complex artistic creation.

Siddiqi’s study adopts a more ideological and critical approach, focusing on the representation of Mahfouz as a national writer within a postcolonial framework^[27]. Siddiqi argues that Mahfouz is often read in Western reception as a “spokesperson of the nation” or as a representative of collective Arab consciousness. This framing strips his work of its individual and artistic character, reappropriating it within a political/cultural narrative that serves Western understandings of modern Arab struggles. The study centers on novels such as *Children of the Alley*, showing how some Western critics have interpreted them as symbols of the East’s confrontation with authority, or as evidence of delayed modernity in the Arab world. Siddiqi reveals how such readings embody a form of veiled Orientalism, where Arab literature is viewed through a desire to comprehend the “non-Western other” rather than as an autonomous artistic expression. She skillfully deconstructs Western discursive representations of Mahfouz and exposes the contradictions between aesthetic admiration and political appropriation. However, the study is occasionally criticized for lacking direct textual analysis and for relying heavily on theoretical discourse without suf-

ficiently engaging with the narrative structures of Mahfouz’s novels.

Jaddan approaches the subject of Orientalism using a critical-analytical method that balances rigorous critique with intellectual inquiry, moving beyond rigid positions that either glorify or condemn Orientalists^[28]. He introduces the concept of “reverse Orientalism,” referring to how some Arab intellectuals began reproducing stereotypical images of the West as a reaction to what traditional Orientalism had done to the East. He examines Orientalist theory as developed in the West, particularly in classical studies of Islam, Arabic language, and Eastern history, and analyzes the underlying motivations, arguing that these studies combined epistemological pursuits with service to imperialist projects, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries. He affirms that Orientalism made undeniable intellectual contributions but also generated discourse saturated with prejudice, religious and cultural bias, and contributed to reinforcing Western centrality while marginalizing the East.

In the second part, Jaddan discusses the phenomenon of “reverse Orientalism”, a trend emerging among some Arab thinkers who in turn crafted stereotypical views of the West—as materialistic, arrogant, value-hostile, and intellectually colonizing. He sees this as an emotional, unscientific reaction, arguing that it is not appropriate to counter Orientalist arrogance with a defensive and reductive discourse. Jaddan calls for the development of a rational, critical discourse on Orientalism that avoids falling into closed dichotomies (West/East, Us/Them). He advocates what he calls “pragmatic critique”, which means reading Orientalism within its historical, political, and intellectual contexts—benefiting from its scientific achievements while rejecting its ideological biases.

Al-Jabiri’s study addresses Orientalism from the perspective of its relation to the Arab Renaissance project, focusing on its role in shaping Arab self-awareness regarding their history and heritage during the 19th century^[11]. He argues that Orientalism was not merely an intellectual current for studying the East, but part of the European colonial system that aimed to understand Eastern societies in order to dominate them intellectually, culturally, and politically.

Al-Jabiri believes that many modern Arab intellectuals relied on Orientalist theses in their readings of Arab-Islamic heritage, whether in methods of textual editing or historical

analysis of intellectual eras. He views this as an epistemological problem, because Orientalist discourse, though appearing scientific, carries a structural bias rooted in a civilizational superiority complex that places the West as the standard and diminishes everything else. He examines the role of Orientalists in cementing the notion of “decline” in Arab thought, presenting Arab-Islamic civilization as having flourished briefly before entering a long era of decay—worthy only of historical study, not active engagement. Al-Jabiri considers this perception to be based purely on Western standards that disregard the particularities of the Islamic civilizational experience. However, Al-Jabiri does not adopt a wholly antagonistic stance toward Orientalism. He distinguishes between objective academic Orientalism and ideological colonial Orientalism. He insists that Arabs cannot cut ties with Orientalism but should engage with it through civilizational awareness and scientific critique—benefiting from its scholarly contributions and rejecting its biases and ideological content.

Al-Twajiri’s study focuses on the image of Islam as reflected in Western Orientalist studies, concentrating on the intellectual and ideological dimensions that guide these works and deconstructing the religious, political, and cultural backgrounds shaping Islam’s image in the Western mind^[29]. Al-Twajiri asserts that the portrayal of Islam in most Orientalist studies is distorted, and characterized by selectivity, generalization, and reductionism. Islam is often presented as a religion of violence, backwardness, and oppression, rather than as a religion of civilization, justice, and reason.

He analyzes several Orientalist models that have addressed Islam in its doctrinal, legal, and historical dimensions, noting that many Orientalists offered incorrect interpretations of the Qur’an, Sunnah, and Islamic history due to their lack of linguistic and contextual understanding—or because of their prior assumptions. He also critiques the Western interpretation of prophethood, which often reduces Prophet Muhammad’s experience to political or psychological motives.

Al-Twajiri emphasizes that contemporary Orientalism, despite its methodological development, still often operates under the influence of historical conceptions—even if these are now framed in modern terms such as “cultural analysis” or “comparative studies”. He concludes by stressing the need to develop a scientific Islamic discourse that addresses these

challenges and corrects misrepresentations—not merely by reacting, but by producing original knowledge that expresses Islam through a methodological vision attuned to modernity without compromising its essence^[29].

Said’s *Orientalism* is considered one of the most influential works in modern thought. In it, he reveals the epistemological and ideological structure that shaped the image of the “East” in Western eyes. Said argues that Orientalism is not merely an academic field concerned with the study of the East but a system of knowledge embedded within colonial power structures^[15]. According to Said, Orientalism is a form of knowledge production that serves political agendas by constructing the East as weak, static, emotional, and sensual, in contrast to the rational, advanced, and moral West.

By analyzing literary and political texts by European Orientalists such as Renan, Voltaire, and Montgomery Watt, Said shows how stereotypical images of the “Oriental” were entrenched in the European imagination. These representations functioned as tools of dominance, making the East legible, governable, and ultimately subject to control. Said insists that Orientalist knowledge is not innocent but is deeply implicated in power discourse and was instrumental in justifying colonialism. He extends his critique to Western academic institutions that continue to reproduce this knowledge under what he terms “epistemic imperialism”^[30].

He exposes the contradiction in Orientalism’s claim to objectivity while enacting authority through discourse, framing it as a political institution rather than a scientific enterprise. He calls for dismantling this discourse and for the formation of a critical Arab knowledge system capable of analyzing both the West and the self without reproducing inverse Orientalism. The book sparked a wave of scholarly responses and helped establish the field of postcolonial studies, fundamentally altering how Arabs approach Orientalist literature—no longer as neutral references but as politically charged texts.

Huwaydi’s book is a prominent work on modern Orientalism, focusing on how Islam is portrayed in Western cultural and media discourse—particularly post-Iranian Revolution and post-9/11^[31]. He argues that Islam is perceived in the West not just as a religion but as a civilizational challenge with cultural, political, and security dimensions. The image of Muslims is often distorted, not due to ignorance,

but as part of a deliberate discourse that serves foreign policy and perpetuates cultural dominance.

Huwaydi analyzes media stereotypes: The Muslim as a terrorist, backward, anti-woman, and anti-democracy, showing how these images are selectively generalized while ignoring internal diversity and historical contributions of Muslim societies. He also identifies a “new Orientalism” where not only traditional scholars but policy experts and think tanks recycle old Orientalist assumptions under modern academic or political language. The book differs from Said’s *Orientalism* by focusing on mass media and public perception rather than purely academic discourse. It is aimed at a general audience but retains critical analytical depth^[32].

Mustafa’s study offers a historical-analytical perspective on the evolution of Orientalism and its key figures and schools^[33]. He emphasizes the cultural and political motivations behind the rise of Orientalist thought and attempts to provide an objective historiography that avoids emotional bias. He argues that Orientalist studies were often aligned with colonial goals, although some contributions were academically valuable. He points out that German Orientalism was linguistically deep, French Orientalism closely aligned with political power, and British Orientalism more pragmatic. Mustafa criticizes the Arab response to Orientalism, noting that Arab scholars have either idolized or harshly condemned Orientalists without nuance. He calls for a more critical and informed Arab engagement with Orientalism, highlighting the need for an independent, confident Arab intellectual tradition capable of dialogue and critique. The work serves as an important reference for researchers in Orientalism and Islamic studies, as it avoids simplistic condemnation and strives for deeper understanding and analysis.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Naguib Mahfouz in Spanish Orientalism

Modern Spanish Orientalism is divided into three main schools. The first group, which has significant influence, focuses on Al-Andalus in terms of history, literature, and civilization, with little engagement with modern Arabic literature. The leading theorist of this school is Don Emilio García Gómez and his students^[19, 20]. The second group also focuses on Al-Andalus, but primarily on the history of sciences in the region, with prominent figures such as Juan

Vernet and Julio Samso. The third school breaks away from this narrow framework and views contemporary Arabic literature as an extension and modernization of both Andalusian and Eastern Arabic literature. This school has shown considerable interest in modern literary trends, including the more radical ones, and has made significant efforts to translate much of modern Arabic literature through structured plans. The leading figure of this school is Don Pedro Martínez Montávez, a well-known name among Arab intellectuals^[20].

The first introduction of Naguib Mahfouz’s work into Spanish is attributed to Martínez during his tenure as director of the Spanish Cultural Center in Cairo in the early 1960s. His deep interest in Arabic literature led to him being awarded the Sheikh Zayed Book Award for Cultural Personality of the Year^[21]. He translated *Whisper of Madness* and later included Mahfouz’s short story *The Impossible Love* in a collection of stories translated and presented by Marcelino Villegas in 1968^[21].

Later, the Spanish Institute of Culture undertook a significant effort by commissioning two researchers, Marcelino Villegas and María Jesús Viguera, from the Department of Arabic Language at the Faculty of Arts, Central University of Madrid, to introduce Naguib Mahfouz in a fitting manner. In 1974, they selected, translated, and presented a collection of Mahfouz’s works as part of the *Contemporary Arab Writers* series, publishing dozens of short stories. However, they did not provide a strong justification for choosing short stories, despite Mahfouz being more renowned for his novels. They argued that these stories were written at different stages of the author’s life and might be more accessible to Spanish readers before delving into his longer works. Perhaps the reason lies in the fact that Mahfouz’s longer novels require more patience and dedication, as they are not merely for entertainment or passing the time^[22].

After the Swedish Academy awarded Naguib Mahfouz the Nobel Prize, a Spanish newspaper described him as the great successor of contemporary Arabic literature. Several Spanish writers, mostly journalists, participated in the award-related events, admitting their prior ignorance of such a figure. Francisco Duplas remarked that Arabic novels do exist, noting that certain publishing houses planned to release the following works starting from November 1988: *Miramar*, *Midaq Alley*, and *Adrift on the Nile*. He concluded with the phrase: “Something is better than nothing”^[21]. It becomes

clear that Spanish interest in modern Arabic literature is minimal, especially compared to the study of classical Arabic literature. One scholar specializing in Spanish Orientalism pointed out that the aforementioned journalist-translator rendered *Midaq Alley* as *El callejón de los milagros*, which was likely borrowed from the French translation. This version, translating to “The Alley of Miracles,” was originally done by Antoine Cohen in 1970. One of the most intriguing Spanish perspectives on Arab-Spanish relations compared them to a divorced couple who have gone their separate ways, yet both remain haunted by past memories^[24].

4.2. Naguib Mahfouz in French Orientalism

The first French scholar to study Mahfouz’s literature was the orientalist Jacques Jomier, who analyzed *The Cairo Trilogy* and its characters. He praised Mahfouz’s realistic approach, and perhaps due to the revolutionary spirit of these novels—addressing Egypt’s crucial issues, revolutions, and political turmoil—he described Mahfouz as having a leftist inclination and a political orientation in his writing. Jomier’s study served as an introduction for European readers to Mahfouz’s literature^[30] (pp. 123–124). His classification of Mahfouz as a leftist may not be entirely inaccurate, as Mahfouz’s nationalism dominated all his other orientations. His patriotic sentiments distanced him from direct political engagement and its complexities, particularly in *The Cairo Trilogy*, where he focused on Egypt’s marginalized popular classes.

Among the most prominent French orientalists who studied Mahfouz was André Miquel, a student of the distinguished French orientalist Régis Blachère, who specialized in Arabic and Islamic studies. Blachère authored several important works, most notably his 1950 translation of the Quran. André Miquel stated:

“Most modern Arabic novels draw their themes from Surrealism or contemporary French literature. I selected fifty-five texts that indicate what is termed contemporary classicism, which can roughly be defined as social realism”^[24]

He further commented:

“The status of figures such as Taha Hussein and the state awards given to someone like

Naguib Mahfouz clearly show the types of literary production in which the nation recognizes itself.” He then posed the question: *“Does this mean that all foreign influences are excluded from modern Arabic fiction?”* To which he answered: *“Certainly not... The novelistic style has absorbed and continues to absorb models from abroad. We have seen the influence of French realism, as well as the impact of Sartre, Camus, and Russian novelists in shaping new patterns of Arabic narrative expression”*^[25].

This perspective aligns with that of Valeria Kirpichenko, who also sees Sartre’s influence on Mahfouz and other Egyptian writers. The clearest evidence is *The Search*, a novel that closely resembles Sartre’s *The Stranger*, whose protagonist, Meursault, embodied the existential struggles of young people in that era, symbolizing a generation’s attempt to reevaluate their worldview in the 1950s^[31]. This interpretation holds merit, as the protagonist of *The Search* attempts to find new meaning in life and assert his existence, but society resists him until he commits a crime and is sentenced to death. His acceptance of his fate and disregard for worldly consequences mirror the existential crisis experienced by the protagonist in *The Stranger*.

Similarly, *The Beggar* follows another existential journey, where its protagonist, a former lawyer, abandons his profession to live as a beggar, seeking a new understanding of life and searching for answers to its meaning. He symbolizes, through this sense of loss and the journey in search of truth, a dilemma that afflicted Egyptian youth after their faith in the Egyptian revolution and its failure to fulfill their aspirations and needs. For this reason, he concluded his novels with tragic endings, as reality failed to provide an answer to his existential questions. The spirit of absurdity is evident in *Adrift on the Nile*, as we have previously mentioned, where a group of intellectuals, despite their education and intelligence, remain confused. Mahfouz even references *The Stranger* in the intellectuals’ dialogues:

“Every living being is serious and conducts life on the basis of seriousness, while absurdity is usually confined to the mind. We may find a murderer without motive in a novel like The Stranger, but not in real life”^[26].

The characters in *Adrift on the Nile* do not stray far from the existentialist path of *The Stranger*'s protagonist. They hold significant societal roles—one is a writer and a supporter of the French “art for art’s sake” school, another is a journalist, and yet another is a filmmaker. However, despite their positions, they resign themselves to gathering daily on a boat to smoke hashish rather than striving to achieve their dreams, as reality does not support them.

It is important to note that an Orientalist perspective was strongly present in André Miquel’s commentary. While Mahfouz appears to have been influenced by French libertarian ideas, André Miquel expected him to fully absorb and adopt these values in his writings. Although he did not explicitly state this, a similar sentiment emerges in his reflections on artistic and literary conditions in Egypt and the Arab world:

“The West possesses material power and technology; which Arabs must acquire. However, at the same time, there are materialistic principles that should be rejected in favor of the eternal teachings of the Arab-Islamic spirit. The long-standing relationship between the two warring cousins—Arabs and Europe—filled with both fascination and fear of the Other, has led to a fundamental issue for Arabs: from now on and for a long time, the priority is not to adapt themselves to the West, but rather to determine what the West must do to position itself in relation to them” [24].

He suggests that the Islamic world is dominated by spiritual and metaphysical forces, which is natural given the prevalence of Islam and the inability of writers and artists to detach from this crucial element of Arab identity. This perspective did not sit well with the French orientalist, which is unsurprising when considering the cultural framework that shaped France in the past century—a tendency toward materialism and a detachment from spirituality and the abstract.

One indication that this perspective was prevalent in Miquel’s approach is his admiration for his colleague Charles Pellat’s views on Mahfouz’s literature. Pellat praised *Midaq Alley*, stating:

“My colleague and friend Charles Pellat, who closely follows Arabic literature, considers this

novel the best work Mahfouz wrote during this period. Even if not for its pure literary qualities, at least for the boldness of its themes and the depth of its psychological analysis” [25].

He was likely referring to the religious and sexual themes within the novel.

This perspective was evident in the portrayal of the female protagonist, who suffered from both material and physical exploitation by men. These themes appeal to French readers, reflecting an attempt to interpret Mahfouz’s work through a French liberal lens.

4.3. Naguib Mahfouz in English Orientalism

Mahfouz’s novels resonated widely among English-speaking critics across various nationalities, including British, American, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand scholars—essentially among readers of literature in English.

The British orientalist Hilary Kilpatrick wrote about the 1950s in Mahfouz’s literature and beyond, focusing on realism first and later on post-realist experimentation. She identified Mahfouz’s *Children of the Alley* (1959) as marking the beginning of this phase in his writing and personal journey [27].

Kilpatrick was particularly interested in the psychological dimensions of *Mirage*, analyzing it in her book *The Modern Egyptian Novel*, where she compared it to Mahfouz’s other works and referenced Egyptian critics such as Izz al-Din Ismail [28].

Denys Johnson-Davies was among the first to translate Mahfouz’s works, including in his book *Modern Arabic Short Stories*, published by Oxford University Press. He described Mahfouz as the most prominent representative of modern Arabic literature at the time. Johnson-Davies also highlighted the difficulties he faced in publishing the book:

“It was 1967, and it was not the right time to introduce a book about Arabic short stories. Many publishers refused to even review the manuscript, and the situation was further worsened by the fact that none of the Arab governments or institutions purchased even a single copy of the book.”

In his memoirs, published by the American University in Cairo Press, he dedicated two chapters to Mahfouz. Addi-

tionally, he produced an exquisite translation of *Echoes of an Autobiography*, which was prefaced by the South African writer Nadine Gordimer. Gordimer, who won the Nobel Prize three years after Mahfouz, was the first African writer to receive the award after him^[29].

Among these studies is an article by the American scholar Trevor Lee Jasek, which focused on the social dimension in Mahfouz's literature, specifically *The Cairo Trilogy*. In another article, the critic examined the political dimension of *Love in the Rain*, describing Mahfouz as the ever-present voice of Egypt's conscience. Meanwhile, Philip Stewart emphasized the philosophical and religious aspects in the introduction to his translation of *Children of the Alley*, a novel that, as previously discussed, carries profound religious and philosophical dimensions. It explores human relationships, the history of thought, and the way people perceive the world.

Stewart's analysis of this novel introduced an important perspective by comparing it to *Back to Methuselah* by Bernard Shaw, *Christ Recrucified* by Nikos Kazantzakis, and *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. These novels address philosophical and social themes concerning the influence of ideas on people, control over societies, and the portrayal of religious figures—a theme previously noted in Mahfouz's work. Additionally, the novel's plot hints at Nietzsche's concept of the "death of God", which was one of the aspects that appealed to the Swedish Academy and contributed to Mahfouz winning the Nobel Prize^[28].

Interest in Mahfouz continued through academic studies and lectures. One such lecture was presented at Harvard University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies as part of its scholarly activities. Titled "*Zaabalawi: The Hidden Dimension in Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo Trilogy*," it was delivered by Nadine Gordimer in 1994^[20].

Gordimer believed that Mahfouz's works deeply engaged with themes of morality, justice, time, religion, memory, sensuality, beauty, ambition, death, and freedom. She argued that his novels not only provided great enjoyment and a sense of gratitude but also offered profound insights into human nature, allowing readers to acquire wisdom from Mahfouz himself and his literary contributions^[28].

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* recorded several international press excerpts following Mahfouz's Nobel Prize win, reflecting diverse reactions and implications. These comments included:

"For the first time, an Arab wins the Nobel Prize," "Naguib Mahfouz's Nobel Prize is a prize for the Arab nation," and "The first Arab writer to receive global recognition... The Nobel Prize goes to Naguib Mahfouz from Egypt."

While these statements expressed admiration, they also carried undertones of surprise and astonishment that an Arab writer had managed to break through the barriers of the Nobel Prize, which had long remained out of reach. This recognition also symbolized, for the first time, an acknowledgment of contemporary Arabic literature through the figure of Naguib Mahfouz (p. 8)^[30]. However, there was an evident racial bias in this discourse, as the tone of admiration was overshadowed by a condescending perspective toward Arabs.

Maher Shafiq Farid and Farid summarized the views of English Orientalists on Mahfouz's literature, stating that their analyses added little to what an Arab researcher would already know, as they often merely summarized the plots of his novels. Furthermore, their writings frequently contained explicit racial biases, as seen in the works of figures such as Enrett and Haim Rodin. These critiques were primarily aimed at readers unfamiliar with Mahfouz and often focused on traditional literary techniques, such as structure, plot, characters, and language, rather than deeper thematic and cultural aspects^[28].

4.4. Naguib Mahfouz in Soviet Orientalism

Russian Orientalism is one of the most significant academic traditions that have studied and analyzed Arab culture. Russian scholarship has generally been more impartial and less biased than European studies, which often framed Arabs through negative stereotypes and propagated these portrayals within academic circles as established truths. One of the key reasons for the more balanced Russian perspective on Arabs is the direct historical interaction between the two civilizations, whether through war or coexistence. Many Muslim populations lived under Russian rule during the Tsarist era, continued to do so under the Soviet Union and remain under the governance of the Russian Federation today.

Interest in Arabic and Islamic studies in Russia dates back to the Tsarist period when a committee of Orientalists

and specialists in Arab affairs was established. This committee included Jewish members whose primary objective was to prepare the groundwork for settling in Jerusalem and establishing homes for Jewish immigrants. This mission was later expanded in 1864 to include building shelters, sanatoriums, and hospitals for the care of Orthodox Christian and Jewish residents^[31].

Russian Orientalism, in its historical and social dimensions, is divided into two phases. The first phase took place in the early 19th century during the Tsarist era and had two directions: the first was associated with missionary delegations to Palestine, while the second involved diplomatic missions to major Levantine cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Beirut. These missions focused on documenting social and political events in the Levant. The second phase corresponds to modern Russian Orientalism, which itself is divided into two periods: one during the Soviet Union and the other after its dissolution^[32].

Soviet Orientalism was distinguished by its alignment with the slogan of the Russian socialist revolution, which advocated supporting newly decolonized nations. As a result, the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with these countries. Soviet Orientalists supported Arab causes, defended them, and sought to expose imperialist and Zionist schemes in the Arab region. Journalist Yevgeny Primakov focused on political aspects, serving as the head of the Institute of Oriental Studies and authoring numerous books on Arab affairs. Meanwhile, in his book *Arab Social Thought*, Levon studied the formation and evolution of major Arab intellectual trends, as well as the struggle between tradition and modernity across various domains of Arab social consciousness. Additionally, the critic Ignaty Krachkovsky was the first scholar to conduct a rigorous academic study of Arabic literature, offering a precise understanding of the evolution of Arab social awareness^[32].

Naguib Mahfouz garnered significant attention from Russian Orientalists, and writer and critic Al-Khamisim^[30]—who has resided in Moscow for nearly three decades—contributed to this field with his book *Naguib Mahfouz in the Mirrors of Soviet Orientalism*. This study serves two main purposes: first, to understand the standing of Arabic literature and novels in the eyes of foreign scholars, and second, to gain a clear perspective on the depth of knowledge Soviet Orientalists possessed. Al-Khamisi observed that So-

viet Arabism established unique traditions that set it apart from other forms of Orientalism. The book also explores Mahfouz's position as the most prominent Arab novelist in Soviet Orientalism and, more broadly, the status of Arabic literature in Soviet academia (p. 112)^[30].

This book examines what was written about Naguib Mahfouz in the Soviet Union both before and after he won the Nobel Prize, covering studies by Soviet Orientalists, reactions in the press, references to Mahfouz in major encyclopedias, introductions to translated editions of his novels, and doctoral dissertations on his works.

The book features a curated selection of articles written by Soviet Orientalists about Mahfouz's works, which were originally scattered across various sources. Additionally, it highlights numerous books that analyze different aspects of modern Arabic literature, all of which, to varying degrees, discuss Mahfouz's writings and their intellectual and literary impact.

Among the articles included is a study by researcher Valeria Kirpichenko, titled *The Search for the Path: A Study of Naguib Mahfouz's Novels*, which analyzes *The Thief and the Dogs*, *Autumn Quail*, *The Search*, *The Beggar*, *Adrift on the Nile*, and *Miramar*. This study was drawn from her book *Egyptian Literature in the 1960s and 1970s*, published in Moscow in 1987 by Dar Al-Ilm. The book also includes selected translations from five doctoral dissertations:

- *The Trilogy: A Creation of Critical Realism* by Yuri Roschin (1967).
- *Naguib Mahfouz's Early Social Novels* by Kash Mohammed Wafa (1970).
- *The Question of the Hero in Naguib Mahfouz's Novels* by A. J. Nad (1971).
- *Historical Novels in Naguib Mahfouz's Literature* by Lotus Boragiva (1986).
- *The Growth of Anti-Bourgeois Tendencies in Naguib Mahfouz's Literature* by Ali Zada Zardosht (1986).

The book concludes with a study by researcher Valentina Chernovskaya titled *The Egyptian Intelligentsia in Mirrors*, taken from her book *The Formation and Development of the Egyptian Intelligentsia*, published in Moscow in 1979 (p. 112)^[30]. The term "intelligentsia" refers to the educated class within society.

Given the extensive and detailed studies produced

by Soviet Orientalists—unmatched by scholars from other traditions—it becomes necessary to reflect on these researchers' choices and the reasons behind their selection of specific works. Through their analyses, we can discern their cultural and critical perspectives on Naguib Mahfouz.

Valeria Kirpichenko, for instance, selected six novels—*The Thief and the Dogs* (1961), *Autumn Quail* (1962), *The Search* (1964), *The Beggar* (1965), *Adrift on the Nile* (1966), and *Miramar* (1967)—because they represent a distinct phase of Mahfouz's creative output. This period is marked by his deep contemplation of social justice, the means of achieving it, the legitimacy of violence in the struggle for a just cause, the role of labor in human life, and the interplay between science and religion (p. 136)^[30].

If we examine the novels selected by the researcher, we find that they were not chosen arbitrarily, as they share common characteristics that align with certain aspects of Russian society and the Bolshevik Revolution. These can be summarized as follows:

The first point of convergence between the Russian and Egyptian perspectives is that these novels belong to Naguib Mahfouz's realist literature, which emerged after the 1952 Revolution and the significant changes in Egyptian society. They depict characters from various social classes and their struggles to adapt to these changes, with most of them failing to do so. This led Valeria to draw a parallel between Mahfouz and Dostoevsky, particularly in *The Thief and the Dogs* and *Autumn Quail*. She observed themes of belief and disbelief, the utopian dream of a socialist revolution and its realization, violent conflicts resulting from ideological struggles, intellectual motives for murder, and the symbolic nature of certain characters (p. 141)^[30].

This conclusion is justified, as both novels depict protagonists who are disillusioned by the new reality: Said, who embarks on a vengeful quest after being released from prison, targeting his wife, daughter, and friend, only to fail and die in the end; and Issa Al-Dabbagh in *Autumn Quail*, who directly represents the political and social changes following the Free Officers' Revolution. The novel highlights the contrast between two generations, each with new conceptions of life and society, concluding with the protagonist's lonely demise, unable to adapt.

Another aspect of this realism is the social class transformation in *Autumn Quail*, where Issa, once a well-off min-

ister during the monarchy, is removed from office after the 1952 Revolution as a remnant of the old regime. Refusing to flatter the new rulers to maintain his position, he faces a life of hardship. The researcher saw a strong resemblance between his character and Prince Myshkin from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (p. 153)^[30]. The similarity lies in their contradictions: The Russian prince is indecisive, and weak-willed, but kind-hearted, whereas the Egyptian minister belongs to the aristocracy that once oppressed the people but remains an honorable nationalist.

In addition to Mahfouz's realism, the researcher focused on *Adrift on the Nile* and *Miramar*, emphasizing social class issues and the presence of multiple social voices within a single novel, unlike the singular perspective in the other selected works. After the 1952 Revolution, the middle class expanded and participated more actively in public life, having previously been crushed by feudalism and capitalism under the monarchy.

Adrift on the Nile portrays a group of intellectuals who have lost their sense of purpose, gathering nightly on a boat to discuss various topics—politics, art, love, and existence. Their conversations reveal their spiritual emptiness, eventually escalating into personal conflicts. The novel reflects the contradictions within Egyptian society and the disappointment with the revolution, illustrating the struggle between traditionalists and reformists. Mahfouz masterfully “depicts the mental state and mood that overtook a significant segment of Egyptian intellectuals and condemns this phenomenon” (p. 100)^[30].

Social classes are also central in *Miramar*, named after the hotel where the novel's characters reside, each representing a different class or ideological current in post-revolution Egyptian society. The researcher noted the novel's relative boldness in addressing the revolution's challenges and social values, particularly when Nasser persecuted communists and the Muslim Brotherhood, imprisoning them (p. 109)^[30]. This is a clear reference to the dictatorship that followed Lenin's rule when Stalin seized power and purged his communist opponents. Valeria's critical approach attempts to trace the intersections between Mahfouz's literature and Soviet society, emphasizing that national values take precedence over all other ethical considerations (p. 101)^[30].

Yuri Roschin^[33] studied Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* for his doctoral dissertation. The trilogy—*Palace Walk*, *Palace*

of *Desire*, and *Sugar Street*—published between 1956 and 1957, is regarded as Mahfouz's greatest literary achievement. It provides a historical and social portrayal of Egypt during the monarchy: the first volume (1956) covers the events of the 1919 Revolution and the Egyptian struggle against British colonialism; the second (1957) highlights the state of Egyptian society after the revolution's failure; and the third (1957) examines the social transformations that followed, including generational shifts and differing worldviews.

Yuri considered the trilogy a monumental work not only in Egyptian literature but in modern Arabic literature as a whole. He regarded it as a milestone in the evolution and maturity of Arabic literature, even comparing it to *War and Peace* by Tolstoy and *The Life of Klim Samgin* by Maxim Gorky in terms of length and multi-volume structure (p. 119)^[30].

Yuri focuses on Naguib Mahfouz's realism and draws attention to those who preceded him in writing epic novels, which were common in Europe but only reached the Arab world with Mahfouz. This is because the *Cairo Trilogy* narrates numerous events over a long period, from 1917 to 1944, including major historical events. The historical portrayal expands through three generations of the family of Mr. Ahmed Abd al-Jawad, who experienced the events of the 1919 Revolution, the national struggle against the king and the British, and World War II. The focus is on the lower class and the national struggle leaders, along with simple, poor people, while taking into account the social, intellectual, economic, and political developments in Egypt. The trilogy presents these changes with representatives of these transformations (p. 128)^[30].

We conclude with Valentina Chernovskaya's study in her book *The Egyptian Intelligentsia in the Mirrors Novel*, where *The Mirrors* is considered highly important in Mahfouz's literary work. Published in 1972, it sharply critiques the state of Egyptian society after its stabilization, which saw corruption spread. This situation is presented from the perspective of several characters, allowing Mahfouz to portray multiple events that can be seen as reflections or mirrors of Egyptian social reality. The novel features various backgrounds of characters, including artists, politicians, intellectuals, and ordinary people. It breaks away from the traditional narrative structure and relies on the convergence of characters in some stories, critiquing political conflicts

and the spread of corruption in state institutions.

Valentina's study focuses on the position of intellectuals in the Republic of Egypt and their situation post-revolution. Since it was difficult to depict their status in Egyptian society solely through literature, as writers tend to address the intellectual as an individual, she chose *The Mirrors* because it presented what she was looking for. She considered it "a unique document because it provides material that resembles a portrait of a group of intellectuals... and serves as a literary record that chronicles the changes in the intellectual class over half a century (1920–1970), which gives the novel great importance" (p. 189)^[30].

Valentina shows a clear interest in presenting the problem of bureaucracy in Egypt before and after the revolution, and the suffering of intellectuals in dealing with it. In a society that respects culture and science and ensures citizens' needs, the state should provide intellectuals with a space to practice their profession and contribute to the country's development or offer them facilities to improve their standard of living and job opportunities. Instead, young Egyptians struggle to secure a decent social position in the workplace. "In this bureaucratic system, promotion becomes the primary value in the lives of educated individuals. The reader notices that employees in Mahfouz's novels aspire and think only of promotion. Service in the government provides a sense of pride and belonging to this large hierarchy, despite the meager salary" (pp. 193–194)^[30].

This is similar to the Soviet Union, where corruption and bribery spread. The researcher also notes Mahfouz's criticism of the West through the character of Abdel-Rahman Shaban, who was influenced by European values. He returned with a theory full of disdain and resentment toward his people, glorifying the West and its ethics while harshly criticizing Arab values and history. Mahfouz gives him a strange death, as he dies among his French and English friends in a club after revolutionaries attack them on January 26, 1952 (p. 195)^[30].

It is clear that Soviet Orientalism directed its efforts primarily at critiquing Mahfouz's thought and its social manifestations in line with the Marxist-Leninist application of literature and art. However, it did not ignore literary technique, craft, and structure. The discussion on these literary techniques relies on what has been written by Arab critics, who are excused for this approach, as the orientalist focus

naturally centers on ideas rather than language.

The titles of the works about Mahfouz clearly reflect the tendency to study his novels primarily. One final observation is that there is no comprehensive book on Mahfouz's literary and novelistic journey, as Al-Khamisi states^[30].

On the other hand, what distinguishes Russian Orientalism is its reference to the opinions of Arab critics. Valeria Kirpichenko relied on the views of Mahmoud Amin El-Alim, Nabil Ragab, Louis Awad (pp. 38, 39)^[30], and Abdel Mohsen Taha (p. 157)^[30]. Similarly, Yuri Roschin, as stated in the introduction of his dissertation, relied on the opinions of both Russian and Arab critics, as well as Mahfouz's writings about his literature and life, including personal letters exchanged between them^[30] (pp. 120–121). Finally, we conclude that Al-Khamisi's book *Naguib Mahfouz in the Mirror of Soviet Orientalism* is a highly significant expression of the role Soviet Orientalism played in enhancing cultural dialogue with authenticity, respecting the Arab world as a living document of Arab creativity in the eyes of others.

5. Conclusion

It is clear that Mahfouz's literature found its place both in the East and the West. He managed to enter the circles of scholars and critics worldwide and earned praise for his performance in his works, despite his immersion in Egyptian identity. This is a credit to the writer and enhances his literary global stature, reflecting positively on his position in Arabic literature. The diversity in the treatment of Mahfouz's literature varies greatly; while Soviet studies provide a vast amount of explanations and interpretations, we find a notable lack of such in Western studies. Mahfouz was a mirror that not only reflected Egyptian society in all its diversity and differences, but also reflected the vision of Orientalists toward Arab civilization, their preconceptions about Arabs, and their views of them. The Soviet perspective was positive; it did not impose its views on the Arabs nor treat them with inferiority or racism. Instead, it respected Arab culture and held its representative in high esteem. The connection between the Russian society and Mahfouz was mainly due to the shift to socialism adopted by Nasser, in addition to the Egyptian-Soviet rapprochement in the last century.

French and British Orientalism reflected the racial perspective inherent in the West toward the Arabs, showing little

interest in Arab peoples and denying that one of them could deserve a Nobel Prize. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Naguib Mahfouz was influenced by their writings and ideas, as we have explained. This neither diminishes Mahfouz's value nor does it elevate the status of those who disdain him from the West.

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Conceptualization, N.Y.R. and M.A.R.; methodology, N.Y.R.; software, R.M.E.; C.W.W, and T.I.A.-M.; validation, N.Y.R, formal analysis, N.Y.R; investigation, R.M.E; resources, T.I.A.-M.; data curation, Z.M.M; writing—original draft preparation, N.Y.R; writing—review and editing, M.A.R; C.W.W, and T.I.A.-M.; visualization, C.W.W; supervision, M.A.R; project administration, M.A.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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