

The Mirage

Naguib Mahfouz, 1948



The Mirage is one of a group of five novels that Naguib Mahfouz published between 1945 and 1950. They came after the romances of the Pharaonic past, which were published between 1939 and 1944, and before the magnificent *Cairo Trilogy* (1956-7).

These novels are often described as realistic. The others in the group - they share quite distinctive features, and it is I think reasonable to speak of them as a group - are *Cairo*

Modern (1945), *Khan al-Khalili* (1945), *Midaq Alley* (1947) and *The Beginning and the End* (1950).

I think that to call these novels realistic is in fact misleading. I would describe them rather as 'social melodrama'. They are melodramas with a rather strong social element.

I think it is the social element that has led commentators - for example, Marius Deeb and Ibrahim El-Sheikh - to assume these novels were written out of an aspiration to literature. They seem to have missed the significance of the strongly-marked traits of popular writing. [Deeb, El-Sheikh, in Le Gassick, 1991.]

In some ways *The Mirage* resembles the other four novels of this group. Like the other novels, it has significant characteristics of melodrama.

Melodrama, to me, consists of formal traits which are common across genre fiction. Melodramatic traits can also occur, as they do in these early novels of Mahfouz, in fiction which does not belong to a particular genre.

There are a number of melodramatic traits in *The Mirage*. They include a disastrous outcome, a plot which is focused throughout on the final denouement, a protagonist with a single dominant personality trait, other instances of extreme characterisation, similarly extreme events and a reliance on coincidence.

At the end of the novel the protagonist's wife, Rabab, and his mother Zaynab both die. Kamil's wife dies of a bungled abortion. Kamil's mother dies of a heart attack, following a quarrel with her son.

The fact that two of the three most significant characters in the novel die is almost enough in itself to define *The Mirage* as melodrama. The fact that the deaths occur within six short

chapters of each other is very nearly enough to settle the matter.

At first Kamil doesn't realise his mother is dead. '*...on the bed lay my mother in a deep stillness.*' He realises only when a colleague from the Ministry of War where he works shows him the obituary in the newspaper. "*Daughter of the late Colonel Abdulla Bey Hasan passes away.*" It is Kamil's practical elder brother Medhat who explains things to him. "*She wasn't asleep,*" [Medhat] *said mournfully. "It was her heart, Kamil."* [66.]

Rabab's death is in itself the essence of melodrama. Kamil does not know Rabab is pregnant. The reader has however been told. '*...the following morning, not long after [Rabab] woke up, she vomited unexpectedly....*' [58.] This is an example of Mahfouz's fondness for irony.

The abortion is performed in Rabab's family home. "*Miss Rabab will be spending the night at her mother's house, and they sent the servant to inform us of it.*" [58.] Rabab's mother and the loyal family servant are on site to grieve dramatically. "*The miserable operation! God damn the operation....*" "*You are the ones who killed her! Get out of my face!*" [60.]

The doctor is Rabab's lover, and a relative. '*...to my astonishment the person who opened the door to me was Dr Amin Rida.*' [59.] There is no description of the relationship between Rabab and Dr Rida. In a realistic novel there would be.

Amin Rida is also the doctor Kamil consulted about his impotence. This introduces a touch of paranoia. '*Before me stood the doctor I'd visited two months earlier and to whom I'd confided the secret of my misery! ...Does he remember me? I wondered.*' [46.]

Kamil knows that something is not right. '*I was faced with a crime.*' [60.] He is not sure at first what the crime is.

Dr Amin Rida believes he has killed Rabab by making a puncture during the operation. *“If the cause of death were known, the illegal operation you were performing would have come to light.”* Dr Rida therefore deliberately punctures the peritoneum in order to cover up the illegal operation he was performing and Rabab’s disgrace. *“...the patient didn’t die from the first perforation. Rather, you killed her when you made a hole in the peritoneum.”* [63.]

Dr Rida believes he has unintentionally killed his lover during an illegal abortion, a serious matter in itself. Dr Rida has in fact committed homicide.

Young wives in realistic novels may perfectly well fall in love with men other than their husbands. In a realistic novel set in the Middle East, the man a young wife falls in love with may be a relative outside what the Vatican (not set in the Middle East) used to call the prohibited degrees. Young wives may get pregnant in realistic novels. Young wives in realistic may have abortions. An accident may well happen during a medical procedure in a realistic novel. The errors made by doctors in realistic novels may well be fatal. Doctors in realistic novels may well try to cover up their mistake. All this I grant.

I grant also that all of these things may occur independently in what we are in the habit of referring to as ‘real life’. The possible occurrence of events in real life is in fact one of the criteria, though obviously not the only one, of realism in fiction.

When a young wife in a novel falls in love with a medical doctor in the same novel who happens to be a relative, and when the same doctor carries out the illegal medical procedure which kills her when she gets pregnant, we are entitled to assume that this is not in fact a realistic novel, and that we are dealing with a clear case of melodrama. We might even feel that these events were somewhat melodramatic if they co-occurred ‘in real life’.

Dr Rida’s crime is not resolved. We do not learn what happens to him. When we last see Dr Rida he is taking arrogant responsibility for his actions. *“You’re asking [Kamil Ru’ba Laz]*

something he knows nothing about. She was a wife in name only, and I'm responsible for everything from beginning to end." [63.]

The novel is not about Dr Rida. It is about Kamil.

If the crime is not resolved then the abortion, in itself, is not important. The bungled abortion is a device for removing Kamil's pretty, pleasant wife from the action. Rabab needs to be removed so that - I strongly suspect - Kamil may be free.

Death, here, is a plot device. Death as a plot device, I think we can safely say, is quintessentially melodramatic.

The action of *The Mirage* moves steadily towards the deaths of the two women. The deaths are anticipated. '*...I'm a victim with two victims of his own. ...one of those victims was my own mother!*' [1.]

The deaths, in Kamil's mind, are the outcome of his anxiety and his feelings of inadequacy, which dominate the novel. Kamil believes that he is constitutionally unable to cope with life. '*Don't we prune trees, cutting off the branches that have grown crooked? Why is it, then, that we keep people who aren't fit for life?*' [1.]

Kamil believes that it is his inadequacy that led to his wife's death. '*...it was my inadequacy that cast her into the arms of temptation. ...So hadn't I been an accessory to her murder?*' [66.]

Kamil is omitting his wife's decision to have an affair, Dr Rida's willingness to perform an illegal abortion, and Rabab's family's failure to communicate with him while there was still time. It is a form of reasoning that is typical, in its elision of the chain of causation, of extreme guilt.

Kamil also believes that it is his anger with his mother that brought on the heart attack that killed her. *"I killed her, there's no doubt about it."* His practical brother, Medhat, doesn't want him to think that way. *"...Don't you dare give in to thoughts like that!"* Medhat thinks Kamil's emotionality is unmanly. *"Be rational, Kamil. We mustn't be overcome by grief like women. Wasn't she my mother too? But we're men."* [66.] Medhat however has no particularly effective counter-argument.

Kamil's mother has had a heart attack before. *'[The doctor] said she had had a heart attack....'* [57.] There have been previous hints of ill-health. *'Two days after our bizarre conversation, my mother succumbed to an ailment that left her bedridden, and I stayed by her side throughout her illness except for the times I was at work.'* [21.]

There is no clue that this illness is a heart problem, or that it is stress related. It does however follow a conversation in which Zaynab becomes distressed at the thought that Kamil might get married. *'Alas, she wasn't entirely in her right mind. "...if some day you'd like me to get out of your life, all you have to do is say the word, and you'll never see me again!"'* [21.]

Zaynab's first heart attack was brought on by family conflict. Rabab has been quarrelling with her mother. *'...it soon became apparent that Rabab and her mother were exchanging the harshest of words in a noisy shouting match.'* Zaynab is aware that something is wrong. *"Can you tell me more about what's going on between Rabab and her mother?"* [57.] The reader realises, though Kamil does not, that Rabab is having an affair and Rabab's mother is angry with her.

Rabab loses her temper with her mother-in-law. *'I found Rabab with sparks flying from her eyes as she screamed, "This sort of spying doesn't become a respectable lady!"'* [57.]

Zaynab's heart attack occurs immediately after the quarrel with Rabab. *'Then [my mother]*

placed her hand on her forehead and seemed to gradually slump over.' [57.] There is no mention of the role of stress as a precipitant of heart attacks, and no attempt to distinguish between immediate and underlying causes.

Zaynab's final, fatal heart attack also occurs after a quarrel. This time, it is a quarrel with her son. Kamil attacks his mother verbally. He accuses Zaynab of never having liked Rabab. *"I'll never forget that you hated even before you'd laid eyes on her!"* [65.]

Kamil also accuses her of being happy that Rabab has died. *"The fact is that you're beside yourself with joy!"* [65.]

Cruelly, Kamil tells Zaynab about the abortion. *"She was killed when the doctor was performing an abortion on her!"* [65.]

Zaynab chooses a prophetic form of words to express her misery. *"You're killing me without mercy."* [65.]

These are the ugly accusations that people throw at each other under the pressure of intolerable feelings. That doesn't of course make them all right.

Kamil describes himself as screaming *'like a lunatic'* and says his mother perhaps feared he had *'gone mad'*. [65.] When Kamil leaves the house the next morning his mother is already dead.

It is of course Mahfouz who has decreed that Zaynab should have her first heart attack following a quarrel with her daughter in law, and that she should have her fatal attack when her son launches an unhinged tirade. These heart attacks are not random. They are caused by the conflict over Kamil's marriage and the death of his wife.

In a more realistic novel, the heart attacks and the quarrels could both occur. In a more realistic novel, just as in what we like to call 'real life', they would not necessarily be so closely connected. It is the tight causal chain that makes *The Mirage* melodrama.

Mahfouz has made it difficult to argue that Kamil is not responsible for his mother's death. Mahfouz of course knows that Kamil's thinking is typical of guilt.

There is something quite disturbing about Kamil's conviction he is responsible for the deaths of both his mother and his wife. After the deaths Kamil breaks down. '*I know nothing about the long hours I spent in a complete coma.... "Perhaps you don't realise that you were gone for three whole days...." I was bedridden for a month.*' [67.]

As he recovers, Kamil has a lady visitor. "*A lady is her who would like to see you, and I've let her into the reception room.*" We believe, though we are not told, that the lady is Kamil's mistress, Inayat. "*You!*" [67.]

It is a hint, though no more, that Kamil has a future. It is as if he has had to kill his wife and his mother to find some kind of freedom and the possibility of fulfilment.

Like the protagonists of Mahfouz's other social melodramas of this period, Kamil has a single dominant personality trait. This is in fact typical of melodrama and of genre fiction in general.

Mahgub Abd al-Da'im in *Cairo Modern*, for instance, is a nihilist. He is very little else. Similarly, Ahmad Akif in *Khan al-Khalili* is a failure. He fails at everything. The splendidly coarse Hamida in *Midaq Alley* is domineering. She beats her pimp and escapes, and she beats the alley. Kamil in *The Mirage*, likewise, is debilitatingly anxious.

Kamil's anxiety in *The Mirage* is a development of Ahmad's sense of failure in *Khan al-*

Khalili. Ahmad's sense of failure is factitious. It is presented as stemming from having had to give up his chance to higher education to support his younger brother. The presentation of Kamil's anxiety is more fully naturalistic. It is presented as having roots in Kamil's early childhood and his relationship with his mother.

Kamil as narrator blames his mother for his anxiety. Like other significant mothers in the works of Mahfouz, such as Amina in *The Cairo Trilogy*, Zaynab is superstitious. She believes in spirits. '*She so filled my ears with stories of goblins, ghosts, spirits, djinns, murderers, and thieves that I imagined myself living in a world filled with demons and terror....*' Kamil believes this is the aetiology of his condition. '*It was this that placed fear at the centre of my soul....*' [4.]

In the real world it cannot be true that childhood stories, however scary, are the cause of a lifelong anxiety disorder. What is true is that Kamil's condition has its origin in the way he was brought up and his relationship with his mother. Kamil's emotional dependence on his mother makes it difficult to escape the condition. '*My mother was the source of these torments. Yet, she was also my sole refuge from them....*' [4.]

Kamil's high levels of anxiety affect his concentration adversely. This is realistic. His lack of concentration harms his education. '*When the first lesson ended, I hadn't heard a word the teacher said.*' [6.] Later lack of concentration affects Kamil's ability to perform the routine clerical tasks of his low grade civil service job. '*I made careless errors time and time again....*' [18.]

As well as being anxious, Kamil is extremely shy. '*...I'm painfully shy. I love solitude and isolation, and I'm wary of strangers.*' [7.] Shyness can occur quite independently of anxiety. It can also be caused by it.

School is torture. '*School was the bane of my existence, and I genuinely and profoundly*

detested it. Kamil does not do well. *'...eventually I put the era of secondary school behind me and finished the baccalaureate when I was twenty-five years old.'* [14.]

Kamil's anxiety makes him avoidant. He has nothing to do with anyone except his immediate family, and no involvement in activities outside school and home. This becomes unbearably painful. *'Trapped in an isolation that distanced me from life's other spheres, I wondered in anguish how I would ever break free.'* [11.]

Mahfouz makes clear that this is pathological. *'I began to think seriously of committing suicide. I was seventeen years old at the time....'* Kamil lacks the resolve to see his intentions through. *'My wobbly legs carried me back to the end of the bridge, where the carriage was waiting for me, and I got back in.'* [11.]

By the time Kamil reaches university his anxiety has a powerfully negative effect on his ability to cope. It is openly disabling.

Mahfouz dramatises this in an incident in which Kamil is asked to give a speech in front of the other law students. *'Then something happened to me that may have been trivial in itself, but that changed the course of my life.... "Come up to the podium," said the professor.... "Why?" "Why? So that you can give a speech like all the others." "...I don't know how to give a speech."'* [17.]

Kamil has what appears to be a panic attack. *'The place was filled with noisy clamour and laughter. My head spun and I started having difficulty breathing.'* He gives up. *"There's no use my going on with my education."* [17.]

This leads to one of the fairly frequent accusations of effeminacy. *"Are you really a man? If you'd been born female, you would have made the best of girls."* [17.]

Kamil's anxiety makes his wedding ceremony excruciatingly painful. "*But this is a procession!*" I said heatedly. "And I can't do it! Please don't make me do it, Sir!" [39.]

This foreshadows the crippling anxiety he will suffer in his intimate relations with his wife. '*...I was consumed with despair, and that this entire scene was nothing but a farce.*' [41.] Kamil's anxiety affects every significant area of his life.

The other significant characters are also dominated by one personality trait. This is true even of some of the minor characters, like Kamil's brother Medhat.

Rabab's dominant trait is the traditional Muslim and Middle Eastern femininity that Hamida, in *Midaq Alley*, so conspicuously lacks. Kamil's father, Ru'ba Bey Laz, is in his own way more of a recluse than Kamil.

Kamil's mother Zaynab is also reclusive. Reclusiveness is not however Zaynab's dominant trait. Zaynab's dominant trait is her possessiveness towards Kamil.

Just in case we miss the point about Rabab's perfections, Mahfouz makes it explicit for us. '*... [Rabab] was the epitome of ideal womanhood.*' [38.]

The best description, in my opinion, of Rabab's attractiveness comes towards the end of the novel. Kamil is staking out the school where she works and spying on her in an attempt to find proof of infidelity. '*[Rabab] walked along in her pin-striped, lead-grey coat with her tall, svelte frame, her charming, refined gait, and her usual modesty and endearing poise.*' [51.] It is not a coincidence that Rabab's attractiveness should be most clearly emphasised when Kamil has come to suspect her of having an affair.

What makes Rabab even more attractive than her dignity is that her features are not African. In Egypt being fair-complexioned is associated with higher social status: '*...those*

large green eyes, that straight, delicate nose and that long, fair-skinned, well-proportioned face.' [16.]

Green eyes were said to be typical of Circassian beauties. Circassians were sought after in the harems of the sultans. [Wikipedia.]

By contrast Inayat, Kamil's mistress, is not modest. '*...there was a boldness in her gaze that caused me to look away bashfully.*' [51.]

Inayat is not attractive. '*...She looked to be over forty, and ... she was uglier than she was pretty.*' [51.]

Inayat is not a Circassian. She has quite distinctly African features: '*...a short, flat nose, full lips, rounded puffy cheeks, and kinky hair.*' [51.]

Having an affair is not of course particularly modest. The affair however is not described and we do not see Rabab behaving in ways which conflict with Kamil's ideal.

In addition to the affair, there are two displays of temper. One happens just after the death of Kamil's grandfather plunges Kamil and his grandfather into poverty. It is not possible for Kamil to ask for her hand. '*...no sooner had she seen me than she turned away from me in a kind of fury. Then she got up and left the balcony.*' [28.] The other is when Rabab quarrels with her mother about her affair with Dr Rida. [57.]

In Kamil's mind all these incidents - the affair, the display of temper, and the quarrel - are the result of his own inadequacy. They do not detract from Rabab's idealised femininity.

Ru'ba Bey Laz, Kamil's father, is even more of a recluse than his son. His best friend is his gatekeeper, 'Uncle Adam.' '*Uncle Adam is father's long-time confidant and hears everything*

that's on his mind....' [13.] There is no real explanation of Ru'ba Bey Laz's reclusiveness. That is just the way he is.

Drink is part of Ru'ba Bey Laz's reclusiveness. We are told that Ru'ba Bey Laz was always dissipated. *'[My grandfather] ...was told frankly that he was a young man with untameable passions and that he was a riotous drunkard.'* [3.] Kamil, of course, also takes to drink. *"I want liquor...." Released at last from indecision, I ordered beer.'* [22.]

Kamil has very little contact with his father. Until his sister runs away from their father's house to get married, he has very little contact with his siblings either. *"...we found [Radiya] living with a kind, respectable family. We met her husband, a young man by the name of Sabir Amin who works at the Ministry of Justice."* [8.]

We are told that Kamil and his mother hear gossip. *'...we heard it said that the man virtually imprisoned himself at home, fleeing from the world and those in it by keeping himself in a state of perpetual inebriation.'* [3.]

When his father dies, Kamil produces a very bleak formulation. *'...my father ...had lived most of his life as though he were dead, cut off from people and the world.... He seemed to have left the world without anyone who would grieve his loss, and this, to me, was a tragedy more terrible than that of death itself.'* [32.] It is the kind of life that might have been in store for Kamil without his mother, his wife and finally his mistress.

Kamil's mother is also reclusive. As a divorced woman she has returned to her grandfather's house. She keeps to herself. *'I found it strange that my mother herself didn't mix with people very much....'* [5.]

Zaynab's reclusiveness is associated, quite realistically, with what looks like a form of depression. *'...the minute she found herself alone she'd be engulfed by a cloud of*

melancholy.' [5.]

With both of his parents being reclusive, it is perhaps unsurprising that Kamil should be reclusive as well. The point is not made explicitly. Perhaps it does not need to be.

We are not given any detail of Zaynab's early life. There is no more explanation of her reclusiveness than there is in her husband's case. It is however an established part of her character as an adult. '*[My mother] was thin, reclusive, full of fears and worries, and almost abnormally attentive and affectionate.*' [5.]

It is the excessive affection - the possessiveness - that is more damaging than Kamil's mother's reclusiveness. '*I didn't realise until it was too late ...it was an unwholesome affection which had exceeded its proper limits, and that there's a kind of affection that destroys.*' [5.]

Kamil and his mother spend all their time together. '*We rarely left the house.... We would even take baths together.... The one place we visited regularly was the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab.*' [4.]

This excessive closeness inhibits normal development. '*Was I going to stay in her lap forever as though I were part of her body? I was all of four years old, and the time had come for me to want to play and have friends.*' Kamil's mother protests against his desire for independence. '*If you really love me, don't leave me.*' [5.]

Apart from a difficulty in making friends, Kamil's dependence affects his education. '*This state of affairs between my mother and me led to a delay in my school enrolment. I got to be nearly seven years old without having received the least bit of education*' [6.]

The dependence persists well into adulthood. '*One day, though, my grandfather said to me*

derisively, "Have some shame, man, and buy yourself your own bed! Do you plan to go on sleeping in your mother's arms forever?" ...I did buy myself a bed.... I set it up in the same room... which went on accommodating the two of us together.' [18.]

Kamil's most significant attempt to gain independence is marrying Rabab. His mother does not welcome this. *'...what I sensed was that my mother hated the thought of my marrying at all....'* [20.]

Zaynab loses her role in life. *'... [my mother] seemed like someone who feels helpless and who's been relegated against her will to life's periphery.'* [38.]

Zaynab becomes even more reclusive. *'...my mother had only visited my fiancée's house once since our engagement, and then only under duress.'* [39.]

After the wedding, Zaynab's reclusiveness becomes extreme. *'[My mother] had become withdrawn, making her bedroom into a prison she barely left, and she seemed to have devoted herself entirely to prayer and worship.'* [45.]

Zaynab blames Rabab. *"Your wife doesn't like me, and that's all there is to it."* [45.]

Zaynab's marriage broke down very early. This is a result of ill-treatment by her husband, Ru'ba Bey Laz. *'...barely two weeks after their wedding night, my mother returned to my grandfather's house, tearful and broken-hearted.'* Zaynab is pregnant with her eldest child, a daughter. [3.]

Zaynab is persuaded to return. *'...my mother and her baby girl returned to the Laz mansion once again. Her stay there lasted for two months....'* On this occasion she is pregnant with Kamil's elder brother, Medhat. *'...my grandfather took a hard stance with him and insisted that he divorce her. Some months passed and my mother gave birth to my elder brother.'*

[3.]

As a result of a chance encounter, Ru'ba Bey Laz has an opportunity to ask Colonel Abdulla Bey Hasan, Kamil's grandfather, to send his wife and children back to him. *"Lord, I'm fed up with this world. It's nothing but fever, delirium and madness without end. ...Send me my wife and my children and let my family be with me. Please!" ...However, this new life only lasted for two weeks.'* [3.]

Ru'ba Bey Laz's cruelty towards his wife is shown by his denying her contact with her children. [3.] Zaynab is isolated by her divorce. She is further isolated, not just because Ru'ba Bey Laz takes her children - which he is perfectly entitled to do under Islamic law when they reach the age of nine - but because he stops her seeing them. As an officer's daughter, with no formal education that we are aware of, Zaynab would not of course consider working outside the home. This does not even need to be said.

We are not told that Zaynab's social isolation is the cause of her psychological reclusiveness. That however is what we are allowed to think.

Zaynab has only Kamil. She is very worried that Ru'ba Bey Laz will take him as well. *'In just a few months I would be nine years old, and once reached that age, my father would have the right to reclaim me.'* [7.]

The rationalisation for Laz's not reclaiming his son is his meanness. *"If I'm asked for a single penny in the coming days, I'll take him away from you, and you won't lay eyes on him as long as I live."* [7.]

Kamil's mother becomes dependent on her son. It is a dependence that lasts the whole of her life.

The seclusion of women in well-to-do, socially conservative households was still common in Egypt at that date. Mahfouz places such a household at the centre of *The Cairo Trilogy*. In *The Cairo Trilogy* Amina, the secluded wife, invests too much emotionally in her youngest and favourite son, Kamal. Amina however has social contact with female relatives and neighbours. It is the lack, to any very great extent, of this kind of permissible contact that makes Zaynab's reclusiveness extreme.

These - Kamil, his mother Zaynab, his father Ru'ba Bey, his wife Rabab - are the main examples of extreme characterisation. We also have extreme events and behaviour.

The clearest examples of extreme events are Rabab's death from the abortion and Zaynab's heart attack. Kamil's surveillance of his wife is surely also fairly extreme.

The most obviously extreme behaviour Ru'ba Bey Laz's attempt to poison his father. It is not dramatised for us - the novel is about Kamil, not Ru'ba Bey - and we are not given very much in the way of detail. '*...the reckless young man had tried to poison his father.... ...the father had discovered the crime through the cook and banished his son from the mansion. ...Ru'ba Laz woke up to find himself in relative poverty.*' [3.] We are not told of legal consequences. If there had been any, there would not have been much of a novel.

The novel relies heavily on coincidence. There is even an explicit discussion of the subject of coincidence. '*Then something happened to me that seemed trivial, but that nearly turned my life upside down. Strangely, it came to light as a result of a coincidence, and it seems only right for me to wonder: Would my life have taken a difference direction if it hadn't been for that coincidence? Then again, what is a coincidence? Doesn't life seem at times to be an endless chain of coincidences?*' [49.]

Life does indeed sometimes seem to be 'an endless chain of coincidences'. It usually seems like that particularly when the life in question is being described in a genre novel. The

perception of 'an endless chain of coincidences' is also characteristic of paranoia. In paranoia which everything is meaningful and everything relates to the observer.

The discussion of coincidence in this way in a novel which is to a large extent driven by coincidence is somewhat unusual. It seems to me that a writer of melodrama - as Mahfouz then was - who feels the need to discuss coincidence in this way may be on the point of giving it up, and moving on to something more sophisticated.

There is a whole string of coincidences in *The Mirage*. Many of the most important plot developments depend wholly on coincidence.

Rabab's family moves into a flat overlooking the tram stop just when Kamil starts going to university. *'I stood on the sidewalk waiting for the tram... I wasn't without a feeling of pride.... As I stood there waiting, I heard the clattering of a window shutter as it opened forcefully and struck the outside wall.... My glance fell on a girl who stood on the balcony drinking tea.... The sight of her had a joyous effect on me.'* [16.]

Girls on balconies and girls at windows are a very important part of Mahfouz's novels. It would seem these incidents were also an important part of flirting and courting in a socially conservative society.

Ali Taha in *Cairo Modern* sees Ihsan from the window. *"How did you meet her? On the street?" "Of course not! From the window!"* [*Cairo Modern*, 9.]

Ahmad Akif, the protagonist of *Khan al-Khalili*, has an encounter with Nawal in the corridor. The significant moment, however, is when from the window of his room, quite by accident, he sees her on the balcony. *'He left the window, went over to the other one that looked out on the old part of Khan al-Khalili, opened it, and leaned on the sill.... A young girl was sitting [on his neighbour's balcony] embroidering a shawl.'* [*Khan al-Khalili*, 10.]

Hamida in *Midaq Alley* watches her pimp from the window as he watches her. *'She hesitated and then, turning the catch, she opened up the window a bit, carefully standing behind it as though watching the celebration in progress.'* [*Midaq Alley*, 19.]

There are obstacles to Kamil's suit, as there should be in any tale of true romance. The death of Kamil's grandfather plunges the family into poverty. *"May God grant you length of days. Your grandfather has died, son."* [24.]

The family have relied on Colonel Hasan's officer's pension. *"All we have is God,"* [my mother] *said to me sorrowfully.* [25.] With only Kamil's meagre salary, they are plunged into relative poverty. *"Maybe we can find a small flat in the neighbourhood for just a hundred fifty piasters.... We'd have to let the servants go."* [25.]

Kamil cannot ask for the hand of his bride. *'...I was languishing under the burden of poverty and despair. Consequently, my beloved was a lost cause.'* [26.]

Equally coincidentally, the death of Kamil's father rescues him. *"Our father has died. Come to Hilmiya."* [32.] Kamil's situation is transformed by his inheritance from his father. *'I was no longer the indigent, destitute person I had been....'* [33.]

Kamil happens to see Dr Rida's sign when he is thinking of consulting a doctor about his impotence. *'...one day as I was on my way to the ministry, my eye fell upon a large sign fixed to a balcony on Qasr al-Aini Street. The words "Dr Amin Rida, Specialist in Reproductive Disorders, University of Dublin," were written on it in large script.'* [44.] Kamil has no idea that Dr Rida is a relative of Rabab. He learns this only through another coincidence. Both Kamil and Rida attend: *'...a lunch banquet for family members and relatives....'* [46.]

One of the most striking examples of the use of coincidence in the novel comes in the chapter which opens with the discussion of coincidence quoted above. This is hardly likely

to be coincidence either.

'As I left our room, I encountered my mother in the living room and discovered she wasn't feeling well. Consequently, I went with her to her room and we sat there talking for quite a long time. ...As I was on my way out, I happened to glance in the direction of our bedroom. The door was open as it had been before, and I saw Rabab sitting on the edge of the bed and reading a letter.'

Kamil asks Rabab about the letter. *"It isn't a letter. It's just some comments I wrote down relating to my work at school."*

Then suddenly I saw her tear it up, walk over to the window and throw it out.

"If it was a letter, who sent it?" "I don't know."

This in itself is a chain of coincidences. Zaynab is not well. Rabab has not noticed that Kamil has not left the apartment. The postman brings a letter. Rabab has left the door open. It is as good as a play.

Kamil becomes paranoid. *'A fear came over me that numbed my joints. ...as though some unnamed, ominous presence was gathering on my already cloudy horizon.'* [49.]

After many agonies Kamil decides to spy on Rabab. *'The right thing to do, I decided, was to ask for a vacation from the ministry, then devote myself entirely to surveillance from a vantage point no one else would know about.'* [50.]

The decision to spy on Rabab is one Kamil does not come to without revisiting the world of superstition in which his mother brought him up. He visits the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab: *'...I happened to see a geomancer. "...You think and worry a lot," he said. "...And you have a*

cunning enemy.... He's planning a cunning deceit, but God will bring his artful plot down on his head. ...And you'll receive a piece of paper that will bring you everlasting satisfaction." [50.] From this point the progress towards the denouement is rather rapid.

The post Kamil chooses in the Nubian café for his surveillance just happens to be opposite Inayat's house.

'I turned, instinctively, to look across the street, and what should I find but a woman looking out a window on the second floor of a large building. ...she examined me with such consummate daring that I could feel my face flush with embarrassment.' Inayat is exactly the kind of woman for whom Kamil feels a fatal attraction. *'...I'd always responded erotically to the ugliest, filthiest of women.'* [52.]

The coincidence, here, is not just Kamil's chance encounter with Inayat. It is that he finds a lover while he is spying on his wife. *'I'd gone trailing after my wife, suspecting she's been unfaithful to me, and I ended up being unfaithful myself....'* [56.] It is difficult to avoid the impression that Mahfouz enjoys his coincidences.

In a number of respects *The Mirage* is different from Mahfouz's other novels of the period. *The Mirage* is a psychological novel, and has a first person narrator: the protagonist, Kamil Ru'ba Laz.

The Mirage is also socially different. *Cairo Modern*, *Khan al-Khalili* and *Midaq Alley* focus on the poor and the petty bourgeoisie. Kamil and his mother are reduced to the level of the petty bourgeoisie when his grandfather dies and they lose his pension. The novel nevertheless focuses on a higher social class.

The Laz family are marginal aristocracy. Colonel Hasan has nothing except his army pension. He nevertheless keeps a carriage till he loses too much at the tables. Ru'ba Bey

Laz, though a reprobate, is the son of a notable: that is to say, a landowner.

Rabab's family are upper-middle class. Her father is an irrigation inspector for the Ministry of Labour. The upper-middle class relies on education rather than land-owning for their prestige.

Zaynab is contemptuous. "*Girls who come from nice families don't work as teachers.*" [34.] There is a world of prejudice in that simple remark. There is a socially conservative disdain for women who work outside the home, and a snobbishness about the need for employment.

The social element in *The Mirage* reflects the growth of the modern state in Egypt. The notables, whose power is based on the ownership of land, are losing status. The professional bourgeoisie, whose status is based on Western education and whose power comes from direct involvement with the state, are on the up. The two groups have reached a point where their status is roughly equivalent. Their children marry each other.

Cairo Modern, *Khan al-Khalili* and *Midaq Alley* are all precisely dated. They are dated by rather precise references to current affairs, involving the Western powers. This suggests the impact on Egypt of the world beyond its frontiers.

Cairo Modern is dated by reference to the constitution of 1930-35. [*Cairo Modern*, 6.] It is also dated by reference to 'The Nazi Party's successful rise to power...' in 1933. [*Cairo Modern*, 41.] The action of *Cairo Modern* is spread over a few months. It takes place in 1932 and 1933.

Khan al-Khalili is set eight or nine years later. It begins in September 1941, during the Second World War. It ends in 1942, just as the Axis forces under Rommel have reached the westernmost point of their advance into Egypt: '*...when the invasion reached as far as al-Alamein, general panic reached its height.*' [*Khan al-Khalili*, 50.]

Midaq Alley is also dated with reference to the war. Hussain Kirsha gets a job with the British at Tel el-Kebir. Improvident and feckless, he is not prepared for being let go when the fighting in North Africa winds down. “*How can the war end so quickly?*” [30.] This would make it 1943, when the last remnants of the Axis forces were pushed into Tunisia.

The Mirage is not so precisely dated at all. Of the five novels from this period, it is the only one which is psychological rather than social. Psychological novels, perhaps, are more universal.

There are trams. Trams were installed in Cairo at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. [Wikipedia.] The tram stop where Kamil sees Rabab every day has huge importance in the novel. ‘*As I stood waiting for the tram alone for the first time in my life, I had a sense of independence that I’d never had before.*’ [14.]

There are also horse-drawn carriages. Kamil’s grandfather keeps a Victoria. The Shaddad family in *Palace of Desire*, set in the 1930s and published in 1957, keep a car. The Shaddads are of course much wealthier than Colonel Hasan.

Rabab working as a teacher might seem indisputably modern. Women’s education became an issue for feminists in the 1920s, which helps a little. It is however Dr Rida, the Western-educated professional, who provides a link to the modern world.

Dr Rida is political. “*Aren’t you still a radical Wafdist? You were thrown into prison once for the sake of the Wafd party!*” [46.] Dr Rida could have been imprisoned any time after 1919.

Dr Rida is also an admirer of Umm Kalthoum. “*Don’t you see anything in Egypt that deserves your admiration?*” “*Umm Kalthoum.*” [46.] Umm Kalthoum became famous in the 1930s. That is about as precise as it gets.

I mentioned that *The Mirage* is a psychological novel. The psychological element embraces Kamil's anxiety condition, which affects everything that he does. It also includes sexual splitting.

Sexual splitting, in essence, is the simultaneous idealisation and devaluation of the other: in Kamil's case, women. Sexual splitting is one of Mahfouz's great themes. Mahfouz sees sexual splitting as the fate of a man brought up in a culture in which women are secluded.

Their mothers invest too much emotion in them. The men idealise their mothers and their sisters. They are unable to have sexual relations with the women they are expected to marry, women of the same social class. They can only have sex with women, often prostitutes, for whom they have no respect.

I have argued elsewhere (*Two Brothers* <http://ravensdaleandco.org/two-brothers>) that sexual splitting is dramatised in *Khan al-Khalili* through the feelings and behaviour of the two brothers towards the same woman. The inhibited brother Ahmad fails in love. The irresponsible Rushdi falls in love. Since however splitting cannot result in a successful relationship Rushdi has to be disposed of. He dies of tuberculosis.

In *Cairo Trilogy* it does not even occur to the teenage Kamal al-Jawad that his love for his schoolmate's sister Aïda could be requited. Kamal carries a torch for her for the whole of his adult life. He never marries, and has recourse to prostitutes. This is portrayed against a background of the very different sexual relations of Kamal's father and brothers.

There are some signs of Kamil's later sexual development in his early life. Kamil's first sexual explorations occur not with a girl of his own class but with a servant whom his mother has hired as a companion for him. '*Some time after this my mother brought us a young servant girl whom she allowed to play with me under her supervision*'. [5.] What happens next is not unusual in a period when the middle classes can still afford to keep

domestic servants. *'The servant girl volunteered to reveal that which had so perplexed me and fired my imagination.... It wasn't long before my mother caught us in the act.'* Kamil's mother's response is exactly calculated to instil anxiety and guilt. *'...she spoke to me about the punishment such things call for in this world and the torments they merit in the next.* [9.]

The next step in Kamil's sexual development, in his teens, is completely normal. Only the language, perhaps, belongs to a particular time. *'I discovered on my own... that fiendish boyish pastime.'* Kamil's splitting, even in his masturbation fantasies, is already set. *'The strange thing is that in its ardour, my imagination never went beyond the realm of the servant women in Manyal.... If I saw a bright, lovely face that emanated light and beauty, I would be filled with admiration, but my animal instincts would grow cold.'* This is reflected in his feelings. *'...I felt increasingly timid, estranged, and fearful, especially towards women.'* [11.]

When Kamil sees Rabab he deliberately avoids using her as the object of masturbation fantasies. *'I banished her from the realm of my vile habit.'* [16.] When they marry, Kamil is incapable of having sexual intercourse with her. For sexual feeling, he substitutes an inappropriate spirituality. *'I was filled with a dazzling, spirited intoxication that was joyous and sublime.'* 40

Kamil becomes capable of having intercourse with Rabab under the influence of drink. *'I took the tram to Ataba, and from there I made my way to Alfi Bey Street.'* Alfi Bey Street is the location of the pub Kamil resorts to. *'What was happening between us was like a dream so blissful, so incredible, that even slumber yields only grudgingly. ...I was certain that my worries were over forever.'* [47.]

Rabab however is already having an affair. The reader knows this. Kamil does not. Mahfouz is very fond of irony. *'It seemed to me that Rabab wasn't as happy with my recovery as I*

was.... She seemed to be afraid for the night to come....' [48.]

It is hard on the heels of this rejection that Kamil encounters Inayat. Inayat is Rabab's opposite, just as Rushdi in *Khan al-Khalili* is Ahmad's opposite. She is coarse where Rabab is refined, forward where Rabab is modest, plain where Rabab is pretty. These qualities have a direct sexual effect on Kamil. '*...I was fully aware of the sexual tension that was being aroused by the woman's uncomely face and chubby legs.*' [51.]

Inayat gives Kamil a rendezvous. "*Wait for me at seven sharp this evening at the bridge at the end of the tram line.*" [54.] She seduces him in her car. '*I didn't know where the confidence came from, but this woman was fully in charge of the situation, and in her I found the guide that I'd lacked all my life.*' [55.]

Kamil produces a poetic formula for his dilemma. '*One of them was my spirit, and the other was my body, and my torment was that of someone who isn't able to reconcile his body with his spirit.*' [56.]

The protagonist of *The Mirage*, Kamil Ru'ba Laz, is the narrator. The 'point of view', as the creative writing teachers call it, is consistently that of Kamil. No other characters are important.

Something similar is true of *Cairo Modern*. In that novel the point of view only moves to Ma'mun Radwan's friends at the end, when Ma'mun has been disgraced.

The effect is similar. Ma'mun Radwan is a nihilist. He is completely obsessed with his own interests. Kamil is obsessed with his own thoughts and feelings. Both men, in different ways, are narcissistic.

The narcissism also serves to heighten the melodrama. It does so by creating opportunities

for irony. Mahfouz often lets the reader know of impending doom before his protagonists are aware of it.

Mahfouz is somewhat coy about his first person narration. *'I'm amazed at the fact I feel able to take up the pen. Writing is an art I have no experience with, either as a hobby or a profession.'* Yet Mahfouz's narrator is not quite as naive as that. A few lines later he comes up with a rather sophisticated, if romantic, formulation: *'Life has been lost, and the pen is the refuge of the lost.'* The narrator also acknowledges, in a way a *naïf* might not, the significance of the act of writing: *'Perhaps my beginning write is a sign that I've given up the notion of suicide once and for all.'* [1.]

The narrator - I am somewhat cautious about assuming that the narrator is in fact Kamil, though this is what the reader is encouraged to assume - also attempts to justify the remarkable degree of candour that his account exhibits: *'...I'm writing to myself, and myself alone.'* [1.]

Kamil's education is a disaster, and as far as we know he never reads a book. Yet his voice is often sophisticated. *'...I realised she was my delight and joy, that she was my spirit and my life, and that the world without the sight of her face wasn't worth a pile of ashes.'* [16.] Neither Ma'mun Radwan in *Cairo Modern* nor Ahmad Akif in *Khan al-Khalili* would ever use a phrase like 'the world ... wasn't worth a pile of ashes.'

The language of the narrative is more literary than Kamil, realistically, could ever manage. There is also a remarkable degree of self-awareness. *'...herein lies the secret of this regrettable malady of mine.'* [4.]

The first-person narrative is a device. Mahfouz exploits it to the full. The world of the novel is filtered through the consciousness of the narrator. In *Cairo Modern* and *Khan al-Khalili*, through the use of free indirect speech, we get a very full account of the protagonist's

subjectivity.

Mahfouz uses first-person narrative in other novels. In *Karnak Café* (1974) and *Heart of the Night* (1975) the narrator is an interlocutor. In *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* (1983) the narrator is very much the protagonist.

Mahfouz is perfectly capable of giving an account of subjectivity without using a first person narrative at all. He does so with the character of Kamal in *the Cairo Trilogy*.

The primacy of subjective experience is one of Mahfouz's great themes. To that extent Mahfouz, the arch-realist of the novel in Arabic, was also a romantic.

The Mirage is technically highly competent. Mahfouz is completely in control of the requirements of melodrama, and the tone of the novel is completely consistent. Mahfouz touches on a theme which will become important later, the relations between the declining aristocracy and the rising bourgeoisie. Mahfouz also further explores his great theme of sexual splitting, perhaps his most important contribution to the understanding of a culture in which women are segregated.

The limitation of the melodrama is quite simply that it is a melodrama. Finally we don't believe in the people. And we don't really care.

Bibliographical note

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