

Cairo Modern



Naguib Mahfouz, 1945

Cairo Modern was the fourth novel that Naguib Mahfouz published. It was the first of his novels to have a contemporary theme.

The first three novels that Mahfouz wrote had been set in the Pharaonic past. They were not romances as such. They were however romantic in their treatment of their historical themes.

Mahfouz had apparently read Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* at school. He wanted to write a sequence of forty novels - modelled on Walter Scott's *Waverly* novels - describing the history of Egypt. Although he abandoned that particular project, he never lost interest completely in the Pharaonic past. I would guess, though I cannot be certain, that Mahfouz also never abandoned the goal of creating a complete description in fiction of Egyptian life.

Cairo Modern is the first of five novels with contemporary themes published between 1945 and 1950. They were followed between 1956 and 1957 by the *Cairo Trilogy*, as it is known in English.

The *Cairo Trilogy* is Mahfouz's acknowledged masterwork. With the *Trilogy*, Mahfouz is said to have 'established' the novel in Arabic. He continued publishing fiction until 1988. He was never to write anything again on quite the same scale as the *Trilogy*.

The five early contemporary novels are sometimes described as realistic. I do not think that is quite accurate. I would be inclined to say they are a form of 'social melodrama'. While they are undeniably competent, and their themes are interesting, they are genre novels. They sacrifice the depiction of reality to the demands of plot. As fiction, these early novels do not reach the same aesthetic level as the realistic novels Mahfouz was to write between 1961 and 1967, after the brilliantly allegorical banned novel *Children of the Alley* (which

was serialised in 1959).

I would describe *Cairo Modern* as social, like the other novels written at the same period, because of its themes. The themes that *Cairo Modern* deals with are corruption and poverty. Corruption and poverty were important social issues at the time Mahfouz wrote. Both corruption and poverty, sadly, remain important issues in Egypt today.

Egyptian poverty is above all rural. It is the *fellahin* scraping a living on the banks of the Nile. The poverty that Mahfouz describes in *Cairo Modern*, however, is urban. While Mahfouz himself grew up in a modestly prosperous petty-bourgeois environment, the family home was originally in the traditional Cairene quarter of Gamaliya. At that date, or so I understand, the streets and alleys of Old Cairo were socially very mixed. Mahfouz as a boy would have had an opportunity to observe poverty at close hand.

On joining the civil service after graduation Mahfouz worked briefly in what would now be called a micro-credit scheme. This, one imagines, would have given him the opportunity to gain a more mature understanding of poverty.

Mahfouz never lost his fascination with the area where he grew up. He returned to it repeatedly in fiction.

The corruption that Mahfouz describes in *Cairo Modern* was in the civil service. Mahfouz knew the civil service well. He was a career civil servant who never attempted to live on the income, such as it was, from writing. After graduation, Mahfouz worked for a while in the Ministry of Religious Endowments. 'Religious endowments', or *waqf*, are an important part of Muslim culture. Mahfouz later transferred to the Ministry of Culture, and was to rise to a senior position. For much of his career he had posts dealing with the film industry.

The civil service occurs frequently in Mahfouz's novels. Mahfouz describes idleness,

incompetence, bribery and the corruption surrounding entry to the civil service and promotion through the grades. Most of the time, Mahfouz got away with it. He enjoyed a relative immunity, and a degree of freedom to comment. This may have been due in part at least to the standing he gained in Egyptian cultural life, and to the national pride that international recognition of his work was to engender.

Corruption and poverty in *Cairo Modern* have a precise relationship. *Cairo Modern* is in fact among other things a *roman à thèse*. The proposition it advances is that an educated young man in extreme poverty will be forced to become corrupt in order to survive.

Cairo Modern does not belong, as far as I can tell, to a particular genre. It is however in some ways very much a genre novel. It is tightly plotted. The plot is often driven by coincidence. The action is fast-paced. It does not allow for relationships or reflection of much depth.

Cairo Modern is also a melodrama. It is a story of crime and illicit sex. The characters are larger than life. The main actors are villains, and the outcomes are disastrous. It meets the definition.

If there is a model for *Cairo Modern*, it is probably a loose one. Someone with knowledge of the popular Egyptian fiction of the time might be able to suggest what it was.

Cairo Modern describes a scandal in the civil service. The protagonist, towards the end of the novel at any rate, is shown to be aware of this. '*For his life story to be made public would constitute a scandal.*' [37.]

When it was published there had apparently been a recent scandal concerning the civil service. Mahfouz was interviewed by the *mufti* of the Ministry of Religious Endowments. None of the available English-language sources give any detail of what was said. There do

not, however, appear to have been consequences.

Cairo Modern opens with a description of four young men commenting on a group of women on the university grounds. *'The presence of women at the university was still a novelty....'* These young men are *'final year students who were almost twenty-four, and their faces shone with pride in their maturity and learning.'* [Chapter 1.] From this opening we learn that the novel will deal, among other things, with the changing relations between men and women in the educated classes of Egyptian society.

The young men are Ma'mun Radwan, Ali Taha, Mahgub Abd al-Da'im and Ahmad Badir. Ma'mun Radwan is handsome, like the hero of melodrama or genre fiction. He is idealised in the same way. *'...his good looks and nobility were evident. Had he wished to be a lothario like Umar ibn Abi Rabia, he could have succeeded, but he possessed unique blend of chastity, rectitude and purity.'* [3.] Unlike a hero, however, Ma'mun Radwan has very little to do with the action.

Ma'mun Radwan is not just religious but an Islamist. *"There is only one cause: the cause of Islam in general and of the Arabs in particular."* [3.] Ali Taha, by contrast, is a secularist. *'He adopted a materialist explanation of life....'* He has taken his ethics from the writings of Auguste Comte. *'He believed in human society and human science and held the conviction that the atheist - like the monotheist - has principles and ideals if he so chooses....'* [4.]

Ali Taha is also heroically good-looking. *'He was a handsome young man with green eyes and blond hair that was almost golden and that suggested a distinguished pedigree.'* He looks, in other words, like a Circassian, an ethnic group - originally of Christians from the Caucasus - that had considerable prestige under the Ottoman Empire.

Ali Taha's function in the plot is to have a romantically beautiful girlfriend who is also very poor. Ihsan Shihata *'... was a girl of eighteen and her countenance was illuminated by ivory*

skin. Her black eyes' clarity and her lashes had a special magic.' [4.] Mahgub Abd al-Da'im is intrigued as to how Ali Taha met Ihsan. *"How did you meet her? On the street?" "Of course not! From the window!"* [9.] Girls who stand at their windows are considered bold. Girls who meet boys on the street are even bolder.

Poverty, in the Cairo that Naguib Mahfouz describes, is not romantic. When his father become ill al-Da'im returns to Qanatir, where he grew up, and visits the house where he was born. *'... The look of the place suggested not merely simplicity but squalor.'* [7.]

Mahgub Abd al-Da'im is the protagonist. The premise of the story is that poverty is corrosive, and can erode all values. Mahgub Abd al-Da'im is described as amoral [31] and a nihilist [7.] His friends call him an anarchist: *"You, more than anyone, deserve the title anarchist."* [10.]

'Anarchist' is not quite correct. Mahgub Abd al-Da'im entirely lacks a class analysis. He does however share the rejection of some 'individual anarchists', as they are known, of the idea of any moral restraint or obligation. Al-Da'im is also, though Mahgub does not use the term or an equivalent, anti-social. *'His rejection of society and its values was dazzlingly complete.'* [40.]

Mahfouz returns to the anti-social personality as a subject in other novels. Said Mahran in *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961), for example, is a powerful treatment of the theme. Mahran is a criminal, a burglar who goes armed and eventually a killer. There is also a political dimension. It is a more complex novel.

Mahgub Abd al-Da'im is not heroically handsome. He is also poor. *'Mahgub Abd al-Da'im ... did not change his clothes, because unlike his two friends he did not own a special outfit for Thursday night.'* He is aware of Ali Taha's fiancée. *'He saw Ihsan Shihata ... as breast, butt and legs.'* Unlike Ali Taha and Ma'mun Radwan he is neither a secularist nor an Islamist.

'His philosophy called for liberation from everything: from values, ideals, belief systems and principles, from social culture as a whole.... His objective in life was pleasure and power.... without any regard for morality, religion, or virtue.' [5.]

Mahfouz has created a religious young man and an ethical materialist as foils for the amoral Abd al-Da'im. The didactic intention is clear.

The fourth of the group is Ahmad Badir, who is a journalist as well as a student. When he graduates he becomes a full-time journalist. His function in the plot is to supply Abd al-Da'im occasionally with information that Abd al-Da'im could not otherwise plausibly obtain.

When Abd al-Da'im goes to a charity event in search of a patron, Ahmad Badir is there. Ahmad Badir explains who is who. *"Aziz Darim... was forced to resign on a morals charge.... His business is his elegant apartment, which contains a gaming table and superbly endowed young women."* Abd al-Da'im appreciates his help. *'... it was vexing to plunge into a new world without a guide.'* [21.]

Cairo Modern is rather precisely dated. There are references to the 1923 Egyptian constitution [3] and to *'... pamphlets opposing the new constitution....'* [6.] The 'new constitution' must be the constitution of 1930-35.

Towards the end of the novel there is a remark about *'The Nazi Party's successful rise to power....'* [41.] This would be a reference to Hitler becoming Chancellor in 1933. The context makes clear this is a recent event. The action of the novel, spread over a few months, therefore takes place in 1932 and 1933.

There were at that date many issues in Egyptian politics. The over-riding issue was of course independence from the British. The British were in effect - though not in international law - the colonial power. Mahfouz reminds the reader that once independence

was achieved the fault line in Egyptian politics would become the division between the secularist and Islamist groups represented by the two young friends. *“Do you suppose we’ll become sworn enemies in the future?”* [46.] It remains a fundamental division in Egypt today.

A few months before he graduates, Al-Daim is plunged into extreme poverty. This is precipitated by his father’s illness. Al-Da’im’s father has a stroke. *‘He suddenly fell down and lost the ability to speak.’* [7.] The prognosis is clear. Abd al-Da’im’s father *“... won’t be able to return to work.”* [8.]

Mahfouz describes Al-Daim’s new depths of poverty in some detail. Al-Daim now has to manage on one Egyptian pound a month, rather than three.

He finds a rooftop room. He pays forty piasters rent. That leaves him two piasters a day for food, kerosene and laundry. He eats stewed beans in pita-bread from a stall patronised by labourers. [11.]

He is desperate. *‘If only he knew how to pick pockets.’* [14.]

Like many Egyptians in similar circumstances, Al-Daim applies to a relative. In Al-Daim’s case it is Hamdis Bey, a relative of his mother’s who has done well. This is unsuccessful.

Al-Daim then applies to Salim al-Ikhshidi, someone he knows from Qanatir who is already established in the civil service. By one of the coincidences that drive the plot of *Cairo Modern*, Al-Daim bumped into Al-Ikhshidi at the station on his way to visit his sick father. *‘...he found himself face-to-face with a young man... who was casting a completely self-confident, vain and supercilious look at everyone around him.’* [6.] Al-Ikhshidi, even more than Al-Daim, is a caricature.

Al-Ikhshidi introduces Al-Daim to a newspaper editor. *'Mahgub... met the editor of The Star and was commissioned to translate some pieces at the rate of fifty piasters a month.'* [18.] This is at least honest. Mahgub is using the English and French he has learned during the course of his studies.

Al-Ikhshidi is not honest. Before he graduated he had been distributing *'... pamphlets opposing the new constitution....'* on campus. He then met the minister, dropped his protests and was appointed to the civil service. [6.] It is clearly implied that the civil service job is a *quid quo pro* for the cessation of political activity. That is Al-Ikhshidi's form of corruption.

After graduation Al-Daim's situation is if anything worse than before. His father *'...was expecting his son's support from that time forward.'* Al-Da'im *'...was panic-stricken.... His sole concern was fending off death by starvation and that meant finding a job that paid a living wage.'* [18.]

A friendly librarian then explains to Al-Da'im facts about degrees and employment that most of Mahfouz's readers would probably already know. *"Listen, son. Forget your qualifications. Don't waste money on applying for a job. The question boils down to one thing: Do you have someone who will intercede for you?"* [18.]

Presumably someone in Al-Da'im's position would have known this before embarking on a prolonged course of education. To reveal this information now, however, has a more dramatic impact.

There now follows quite an odd episode. It violates the rule of genre that all incidents should advance the plot. Al-Da'im applies again to Al-Ikhshidi. *'Al-Ikhshidi... despised the young man and scorned his poverty and need.'* Al-Ikhshidi explains to Al-Da'im the costs of finding someone to intercede. *'[Abd al-Aziz Bey Radwan's] cut from his nominees is a guarantee of*

half of the salary for a period of two years.' [19.]

There is also Mrs Ikram Nayrus, a philanthropist with a charity. She '*... doesn't ask for money but is fond of fame and praise.*' Al-Ikhshidi suggests Al-Da'im should write something in the newspaper. "*Attend the [benefit next Sunday] and I'll introduce you to her.... You'll have to purchase a ticket for fifty piasters....*" [19.]

The benefit is a picture of aristocratic decadence and un-Islamic practices. There is social dancing. There is '*...a troupe of upper-class maidens in ravishing pharaonic costumes*'. Mahfouz does not need to explain to his readers that 'pharaonic costumes' violate Islamic canons of modesty.

The guests speak French - '*... those fallen Muslims!*' Mrs Ikram Nayrus cannot even speak Arabic properly. '*She delivered her speech in Arabic, but there was scarcely a sentence that lacked a grammatical error, or an ill-chosen word.*' [21.]

Ahmad Badir is able to identify a number of the guests for Al-Da'im. They exemplify different forms of corruption. We never meet them again. They have no function in the plot.

To help him with his article Abd al-Da'im makes a list of points in two columns, headed '*The Truth*' and '*What I Should Write*'. Only one point is the same on both lists: '*Her guests are just like her.*' He is then summoned by Al-Ikhshidi, who has a new proposal for him. "*Drop that article and forget about Ikram Nayruz.*" [22.]

An entire chapter has been given over to the description of a charity event which as it turns out does not advance the plot in the slightest. It does however support the *roman à thèse*. That is its function. It portrays a blatant, pervasive corruption in the Egyptian elite.

It is with Al-Ikhshidi's new proposal that the novel descends into sheer melodrama. Al-

Ikhshidi's superior, Qasim Bey Fahmi, is besotted with Ihsan Shihata, Ali Taha's former girlfriend. '*Qasim Bey Fahmi... pursued her affections without regard to rank, family or children.*' [36.]

The Bey is married. The proposal is that Mahgub Abd al-Da'im will marry Ihsan. Qasim Bey Fahmi will pay the rent and expenses of a flat. [29.] Abd al-Da'im and Ihsan will live together. The bey will visit Ihsan when he pleases. In exchange Abd al-Da'im will get something he wants desperately: a job in the civil service.

There is nothing unusual about rich, powerful men keeping pretty young mistresses. Cases could probably be found of complaisant young husbands being rewarded in their careers. What is implausible is the rich, powerful man looking for a husband for his pretty young mistress in order to install her in a discreet love-nest.

The ceremony of signing the marriage contract, the Islamic marriage, is an embarrassment. Ihsan is described, in what appears to be the standard formula, as '*...an adult virgin of sound mind...*' Sound in mind she would seem to be. She is not however a virgin. It is quite clear that Qasim Bey Fahmi has already had his way with her. '*This constituted fraud in an official document. His marriage was a fraud. His life was a fraud.*' That is objective. '*The whole world was a fraud.*' That is a rationalisation. [26.]

Egypt at that date was socially very conservative. A woman in an irregular sexual relationship was likely to be called a prostitute, even if she was not in fact a sex industry worker. Since Ihsan became the bey's mistress for financial reasons, many readers would see her in this way. She is, in the eyes of conventional people, a whore.

Abd al-Da'im gains a beautiful wife, whom he would never attract under normal circumstances. When we meet Al-Da'im his 'girlfriend' makes a living from collecting cigarette butts and reselling the tobacco. She charges three piasters for sex. She smells.

They have sex behind a tree. [5.] Now that Abd al-Da'im has married Ihsan, he has something to lose.

Abd al-Da'im benefits from his wife's unchaste behaviour. That makes him a pimp.

Despite the irregular nature of the relationship, Abd al-Da'im seeks sexual satisfaction. *'Could a pimp and a whore find happiness together?'* This is not love. *'All he wanted was... a lust that mirrored his own.'* [29.] To achieve this he uses alcohol. *'Only a little [booze] sufficed for both of them.'* [31.] Al-Da'im has corrupted Ihsan. *'... she felt the emptiness and ennui of a young woman whose heart has been deprived of love.'* [36.]

This is perhaps a somewhat sentimental version of womanhood. The point, I think, is that in a socially conservative period Mahfouz does not unequivocally condemn a young woman whose conduct violates the restrictive social norms. It is a hint of the compassion he will often show for women in his novels later.

Al-Da'im intends to support his parents. *'He fully intended to send his parents two pounds every month, in fact to increase that to three if he could.'* [27.] He doesn't do it.

The plot moves on very rapidly. There is a political crisis. Quite oddly, it is announced before it happens. Ahmad Badir, the journalist, tells Al-Da'im about it. *"The prime minister has lost the palace's confidence...."* *"How about the English?"* [37.] Ahmad Badir has however anticipated events. *'... this information was premature, for there was no echo if it in the newspapers.'* [38.]

The anticipation gives Al-Da'im an opportunity to reflect on the extreme precariousness of his situation, without however the development of the plot being affected in any way. *"If the bey is pensioned off, I'll definitely be transferred to some obscure position - unless I'm banished to the most rural district... if I'm not fired outright."* [38.]

Al-Da'im's sense of insecurity also prompts him to decide he cannot help his parents. '*...his parents... were the first victims of the political crisis.*' [37.] This is a decision that contributes significantly to the eventual denouement.

Qasim Bey Fahmi turns the crisis to his advantage. '[Al-Da'im's] *telephone rang, and it was his wife, Ihsan. "Do you know who the new minister is? ... Qasim Bey Fahmi."*'

Al-Da'im exhibits his characteristic audacity and greed. "*I must join his office staff.*" Ihsan, like a loyal wife, supports him. "*I don't think he would refuse me my request.*" [38.]

Al-Daim excites the jealousy of Al-Ikhshidi, to whom he owes his position in the first place. Al-Ikhshidi makes Al-Da'im an offer. "*If you take my position and let me have your new job, that will realise all our hopes.*" Al-Da'im, not without some trepidation, refuses. '*This was a man - just like him - who had no morals and no principles and who knew everything.... This time he was assailed by fear.*' [39.]

The young people go on a boat-trip down the Nile to Qanatir to celebrate. Al-Da'im is nervous. '*Wasn't it possible that his desire for vengeance would be so great that he would spill the secret in some manner to his parents?*' [40.] On the trip there are a couple of odd incidents.

In one of these, a louche young man in the party attempts to seduce Ihsan. '*She realised her had tricked her into his own cabin.*' Ihsan refuses him. She '*...shoved him away violently, and shouted at him in an angry voice, "Please leave me alone. Leave me!"*' [43.]

The point here is I think that while Ihsan is the mistress of a rich, powerful man and her marriage is arranged in the worst possible sense, she is behaving as Egyptian society would expect a wife to behave in the circumstances. Mahfouz is not making a wholly conventional judgement.

Mahfouz has emphasised of course that it is her parents who are responsible for her downfall. '*... her parents had no moral scruples....[they]... were Satan's wily allies plotting her downfall.*' [4.] The reference to 'Satan' is, I think, a concession to religious views.

The young people, before the young man attempts to seduce Ihsan, have of course been engaging in social dancing and drinking alcohol. The prejudices of more religious readers are catered for by this Westernised dissipation. An attempt at seduction, if not worse, is just the outcome they would expect.

The other odd incident is that when the party go on shore Al-Da'im sees an old man who reminds him of his father. '*His father, if he were able to leave his bed, would look just like this man, leaning on a stick at every step.*' [42.] This has the emotional impact on Al-Daim that meeting his father might have done. The plot, however, is allowed to unroll as intended. It works in the same way as the anticipation of the political crisis. It is a strategy that compensates for the over-rapid development of the melodramatic plot.

The next morning Al-Daim has a hangover. He is in a morbid mood. '*He could find only one answer: suicide. That was how a devoted egoist would terminate his life.*' [43.]

The action of the denouement unrolls with a clockwork precision which is so melodramatic that it borders on farce. It is in fact quite visual. One wonders if it has a model in the popular cinema, or even the stage. In quick succession, Al-Da'im's father, Qasim Bey Fahmi and the Bey's wife all turn up.

Al-Da'im is not prepared to see his father. '*He saw his father... standing at the threshold leaning on a stick, casting a fixed, sullen look at him.*' [44.] He is even less prepared for the Bey's wife. "*Come on, show me the room where my husband is secluded with your chaste wife.*" [45.]

We assume that Al-Ikhshidi has betrayed Al-Daim. We are not told how he contrived to have everybody arrive at just the right time.

This is the end. *"It's all over. No more job. No more salary. Let's go beg together!"* Ihsan, perhaps curiously in the circumstances, but consistently with the way Mahfouz has been portraying her, reacts like a real wife. *"What will become of us?"* [45.]

There are a few loose ends to be tied up in a final chapter. The Bey resigns. His wife divorces him, but does not go to the newspapers.

Mahgub is posted to Aswan. This is a joke. The Aswan governorate is so remote that its southern border is on the Sudanese frontier. Al-Da'im's prediction that he will be *'...banished to the most rural district....'* has come true. [38.]

We do not learn what happens to Ihsan. Mahfouz has portrayed her with some indulgence. He is nevertheless writing in a society where women, and outcomes for women, are less important.

I have mentioned that I think that *Cairo Modern* is in form a genre novel, even if it is not possible to identify a particular genre. I have said that I think it is melodramatic. I have suggested that the portrayal of the four young men is didactic. Consistently with this, I think, *Cairo Modern* is moralistic.

Mahgub Abd al-Da'im violates all the social norms. He tastes success. He is punished. The cup is dashed from his lips. The besotted Bey falls from grace as well. This is pretty much what conventional readers would expect. Mahfouz is not aiming for an alternative, bohemian audience.

Meanwhile, Mahgub Abd al-Da'im's friends pursue their chosen careers. They are rewarded.

The final indulgence for Ihsan, perhaps, is that she is allowed to slip out of the end of the novel without being mentioned at all.

Cairo Modern is a limited novel. It has strengths. As a genre novel, it works well. The plotting is tight. The characterisation is no deeper than it needs be. The motivations, though sometimes crude, are adequate. Nothing is irrelevant.

Its subject matter, the poverty of the Egyptian people, the corruption of Egyptian public life and the often bewildering changes at that date in the relations between men and women, could hardly be more serious. Some of the incidents in the novel - the charity event, the marriage of Mahgub and Ihsan, the bedroom farce with which the novel ends - are exaggerated and even absurd. Nevertheless it is a novel which is founded on reality.

Reality, in later novels, is something that Mahfouz does very well.

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