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Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**From Sunrise to Sunset: Toponymic Allegory, the Parodic *Rihla*, and the Deferral of the Ideal State in Naguib Mahfouz's *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*****Dr. Muhammad Mahboob Ahmad**

Assistant Professor, Institute of English Language and Literature, GC University Lahore

mahboobahmad@gc.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

Naguib Mahfouz's Rihlat Ibn Fattūma (1983) is usually read as a political allegory in which a traveller visits the great systems of government in turn and finds each one wanting. This study argues that the novel is doing something else. It shows that the perfect state the traveller seeks could never appear among the others, because it is the standard by which they are judged.

*The novel parodies the classical Arabic travel account, or *rihla*, which assumes the traveller sets out from a secure home and returns to it, but Mahfouz withdraws both assumptions. The paper also recovers the Arabic place names, left opaque in English translation: sunrise, bewilderment, arena, safety, sunset, mountain. In sequence they turn the journey through political history into a single day and a single life. Thus, arriving too late is built into the design of the novelette. The hero's name, given as a slur on his mother, sets up a treatment of women the novel works through across six lands, and his patriarchal outlook is exposed rather than shared. Derrida's distinction between reversing a hierarchy and dismantling it explains why the apparently liberated land of Mashriq repeats what it inverts.*

Keywords: Naguib Mahfouz; *Rihla*; Postcolonial Allegory; Translation and Toponymy; Deconstruction

Introduction

Naguib Mahfouz's *Rihlat Ibn Fattūma*, translated by Denys Johnson-Davies as *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* (Mahfouz, 1983/1993), is among the shortest and most schematic of the Nobel laureate's late works. It has usually been read as a transparent political allegory, in which a traveller passes through a sequence of imaginary polities corresponding, more or less directly, to the known systems of government, and finds each of them wanting (El-Enany, 1993; Milson, 1998). Read this way, the novel becomes a compact history of political forms, and criticism's task reduces to assigning each land its referent.

Such a reading is not wrong, but it stops where the novel becomes interesting. What *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* stages is not a survey of political systems but the structural impossibility of the object that motivates the survey. Gebel is not one more polity that the traveller contingently fails to reach. It is the name of what cannot be reached, because it is the term against which every other term is measured and which therefore cannot itself appear within the series.

The present study makes four claims in this reading of the novel. Firstly, it claims that the novel is a parodic *rihla*—a deliberate rewriting of the classical Arabic travel account associated above all with Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (Dunn, 1986), whose name is audible in the protagonist's own, and

that Mahfouz makes this frame explicit within the text rather than leaving it to inference. Secondly, it argues that the itinerary's meaning is encoded in the Arabic toponyms, which compose a semantic sequence largely invisible to the anglophone reader, and that this sequence is corroborated by a lexical thread running through the novel in translation. Thirdly, the protagonist's own name, given to him as an insult, generates the gender argument that the book then plays out across six lands. Finally, the novel's much-discussed treatment of women is not a series of positions on the woman question but the site at which its deconstructive logic is most rigorously performed, such that Qindil's patriarchal focalisation functions as an object of the narrative's irony rather than as its limitation.

Methodology

Criticism of this novel has tended to treat binary opposition as a stable analytic instrument inherited from Saussure (1916/1966). His account of value-by-difference explains how oppositions signify; it does not explain how they collapse. For that one needs Derrida's (1972/1981) more exacting account, in which the critique of a hierarchical opposition has two phases: an initial reversal that overturns the hierarchy, followed by a displacement that unseats the oppositional structure as such. The reversal stops short of displacement and merely reinstalls the violence it meant to undo (Derrida, 1972/1981, pp. 41–42). This distinction is what the novel dramatises, land by land.

The Parodic *Rihla*

The classical *rihla* is a knowledge-genre. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's fourteenth-century account, like Ibn Jubayr's before it, is structured by the *rihla fi ṭalab al-ilm*, the journey undertaken in pursuit of knowledge, and is underwritten by two guarantees: that the traveller departs from a centre whose normative authority is not in question, and that he returns to it, bringing back an account that enriches the centre without unsettling it (Dunn, 1986; Youngs, 2013). As Euben (2006) argues in *Journeys to the Other Shore*, the Muslim travel account is a mode of comparative political theorising precisely because it holds together the encounter with difference, and the stability of the position from which difference is registered. The traveller sees strange things but does not become strange to himself.

Mahfouz installs this frame openly. Sheikh Maghagha al-Gibeili's curriculum for the young Qindil runs from Quran and jurisprudence through to what the novel calls "the literature of travels" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 3). The sheikh speaks of an unnamed ancient traveller, and he has himself made the journey, reaching Mashriq, Haira and Halba before a civil war in Aman halted his caravan (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 5). The itinerary Qindil will follow is thus a route already mapped, a pedagogical inheritance rather than a discovery. The purpose is declared in the genre's own terms: Qindil tells his mother and his teacher that he wants to learn and to return to his ailing homeland "with a remedy to heal her" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 15). The *rihla*'s contract go out, gather, come back, cure is stated by the protagonist in his own voice before he leaves.

The novel then withdraws both guarantees. The centre is not a normative fixed point but the first of the book's failed polities. It is a land where a chamberlain can take a betrothed girl

between one day and the next, where Islam, as Maghagha puts it, "skulks in the mosques" and does not reach the world outside them (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 4), and which Qindil leaves cursing as an "adulterated land" after what he calls a threefold betrayal by religion, by his mother, and by Halima (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 13). He does not depart from virtue toward vice. In fact, he departs from disillusion and travels further into it.

The novel does not cancel the homecoming. It suspends it in a way that is more damaging than cancellation. Qindil reaffirms the intention to return at every stage. On the road to Haira he is urged to bear off "healing remedies for the wounds of your mother country" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 52). In Halba, he insists that Gebel "is not my final goal," since he hopes to carry something back from it to his homeland (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 95). In the final chapter, he plans a second, separate journal devoted to Gebel, to be written should he be destined to visit it and return home (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 148). The return is promised repeatedly but never verified. What the novel produces is not a *rihla* that fails to come back but a *rihla* whose coming-back recedes indefinitely into a future the text declines to enter, which is exactly the structure it attributes to Gebel itself.

Knowledge behaves the same way. It does not accumulate across the itinerary; it is serially undone. The reader is left not with a comparative political science but with an account of why comparative political science, pursued to its end, dissolves the ground it stands on.

The Semantics of the Itinerary

The most consequential dimension of the novel's design is largely lost in translation, and criticism written from the English text has correspondingly under-read it. The lands are not invented coinages. They are ordinary Arabic common nouns, and in sequence they compose an argument:

- Mashriq (*mashriq*): the east, the place of sunrise
- Haira (*hayra*): bewilderment, perplexity, confusion
- Halba (*halba*): the arena, the racecourse, the ring in which contests are held
- Aman (*amān*): safety, security, protection, also the granting of quarter
- Ghuroub (*ghurūb*): sunset
- Gebel (*jabal*): the mountain

Two structures emerge. The first is solar: the itinerary runs from sunrise to sunset. The passage through the history of political forms is figured as a single day, and, since the traveller leaves at barely twenty and is a middle-aged man on release from Haira's prison, as a single life. Political history and the finite nature of life are equated. This establishes that the search is bounded by mortality, that the traveller runs out of time before he runs out of lands, and it makes the failure to arrive constitutive rather than accidental. One does not fail to reach Gebel by taking a wrong turning. One fails because the sun sets.

The second structure is diagnostic. Each toponym names not the system's self-description but its characteristic subjective effect. Haira is not called despotism; it is called bewilderment, which is what deified power produces in those subject to it. Halba is not called democracy or liberty; it is called the arena, which reframes liberal freedom as agonistic contest, with all the

exhilaration and all the brutality it implies. Aman is not called socialism; it is called safety, and the whole critique of the egalitarian security state is compressed into the observation that safety is indistinguishable from confinement.

Crucially, this reading is corroborated from inside the English text. The novel's opening sentence names life and death, dreaming and wakefulness as "stations for the perplexed soul" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 1). In Haira's underground prison, the political detainees describe themselves as "the bewildered," standing between an ugly reality and a dream that never comes true (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 70). At Ghuroub, the master, asked whether he rules, replies that there is no ruler there and that he is "the instructor of those who are perplexed" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 138). The condition that gives the third land its name is announced in the first line as the soul's own condition, claimed by dissidents as a collective identity, and finally offered as the very category the spiritual teacher exists to address. A reader who does not know Arabic can follow this chain, while a reader who knows Arabic can see that it is the same word.

A Name Given by Enemies

The novel's gender argument begins with its title. "Ibn Faṭṭūma" is phonically a diminished Ibn Baṭṭūṭa; it is also a matronymic, and the text is precise about where it came from. Qindil's father named him Qindil. His half-brothers, seven established merchants, enraged by their eighty-year-old father's marriage to a seventeen-year-old girl (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 2), gave him the name Ibn Fattouma, Son of Fattouma, "washing their hands of any possible relationship" with him and casting doubt on his mother (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 3). In a system of descent through the father, to be named for the mother is an insult. The novel's protagonist carries, as his popular name, an accusation against his mother's chastity.

This implies two things. Firstly, the arrival in Mashriq is not an encounter with an exotic custom but a confrontation with his own name. When Arousa bears his first child, the boy is called "Ram the son of Arousa," and Qindil's recorded reaction is not anthropological interest but injury, "as though she had produced him on her own and I had nothing to do with it" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 47). This is precisely the operation his brothers performed on him. The matronymic that in his homeland functions as a slander is in Mashriq the law, and it inflicts on him, from the opposite direction, the erasure he has carried since childhood. He experiences Mashriq's naming rule as an attack because at home it was one.

Secondly, the novel builds an exact symmetry of religious accusation around the same child. Qindil raises Ram on the principles of Islam, while Arousa objects that he is bringing the boy up in godlessness and preparing him for a life of misery (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 47). From within Mashriq's moon-worship, Islam is the other. Qindil, who has spent the chapter asking God's forgiveness for what he is witnessing, is handed his own charge from the other side. He is then arrested and expelled, and the woman and children are removed to her father's household (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 49). The name, in other words, is not a piece of local colour attached to the protagonist. It is the mechanism by which the novel establishes, before

the first land, that its hero's grievances are structurally identical to the grievances of those he judges.

Reversal Without Displacement: Mashriq

Mashriq inverts the traveller's world at almost every point. Property is not accumulated, clothing is minimal, worship is directed to the moon, union is chosen and dissolved at will, and children take the mother's name. Read as inversion, Mashriq is emancipation, and readers have often taken it so. However, nothing structural has changed, and the novel says so in the plainest available way. Each town belongs outright to its overlord, who holds the grazing land, the animals and the men who tend them as a single undifferentiated estate, and the inhabitants are "his slaves" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 27). The chamberlain confirms as much when Qindil seeks Arousa: they are all "the slaves of the overlord," who is "our legal owner," and the arrangement must therefore be negotiated at the palace (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 42). What Qindil concludes there is not a marriage but a tenancy of three dinars a month, terminable at Arousa's wish (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 44). The relation is proprietary throughout. What Mashriq reverses is the direction of ownership within a household, not the fact that persons are owned. The state that enforces Arousa's freedoms is the same state that expels him and disposes of the children without consulting either parent.

This is Derrida's (1972/1981) point about the insufficiency of the first phase. To overturn a hierarchy without displacing the field in which hierarchy operates is to remain within the closed field of the opposition, confirming it. Mashriq is the novel's demonstration of a reversal that stops at reversal, and its failure explains a feature of the text that has troubled readers: why an apparently liberatory arrangement is narrated with such unease. The unease is not conservatism. It is the recognition that a society in which women dispose of men is not the negation of a society in which men dispose of women but its repetition in a different key. Neither contains any principle by which a person is not disposable.

The other inversions confirm this. Mashriq's near-nakedness is not the absence of a dress code but a dress code of different content. Qindil's clothing marks him as foreign to this land. Its moon-worship is not the absence of dogma but a dogma that punishes deviation as his own society would. The land of the sunrise is not the dawn of anything. Instead, it is the first light in which the traveller mistakes a reflection for a horizon.

Wars of Liberation: Haira, Halba, Aman

The single most underexamined pattern in the novel is that it stages the war of liberation three times, under three incompatible ideologies, with identical results. Haira, the theocratic despotism whose god is its king, invades Mashriq. The crowd outside the inn explains that the war will "liberate a people from five tyrants" and inaugurate a new history for Mashriq "under the rule of a just god" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 54). Qindil sees through it at once: what drives Haira is not liberation but "greed for pastures and the treasures of the five overlords," and the outcome will be coercion (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 55). The innkeeper Ham raises his daily rate from one dinar to one and a half to meet the burdens of the war (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, pp. 53, 55) and assures him it is little to pay in such a cause. Asked

why Haira does not free the slaves of Haira, the caravan owner declines to answer and changes the subject (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 57).

Halba, the liberal democracy, then invades Haira on the same pretext and annexes both Haira and Mashriq. Its own citizens contest the account. Pamphlets circulate accusing the state of sacrificing the sons of the people not to liberate anyone but for the benefit of its propertied and commercial classes, in "a war of convoys of goods, not of principles" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 106). Counter-pamphlets accuse the pamphleteers of being agents of Aman. The state then repudiates its agreement with Aman over the water wells, and the next war becomes inevitable (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 107). Aman, the egalitarian security state, then occupies Ghuroub, the one land in the novel with no ruler, no walls, no guards and no customs post. Its commander explains that because Halba may be planning to occupy Ghuroub in order to encircle Aman, "considerations of safety demand" that Aman occupy it first (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 144). The land whose name means safety annexes a stateless forest on the grounds of safety.

Three regimes, three ideologies, one grammar. And the resemblance extends to the domestic image. In Haira, Qindil finds a fenced field of poles bearing the heads of those executed for insurrection against the god-king (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 58), and later watches a victory procession in which horsemen carry the heads of the five overlords on their spears (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 63). In Aman, at the Victory Day festival, a troop of cavalry rides into the square with human heads on their lance-tips, and Fluka explains curtly that they were "Rebellious traitors!" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 129). The theocracy and the socialist republic produce the identical spectacle. Halba does not display heads during peacetime. The novel is careful, but its own sage concedes that its freedom was won as "heads fell, revolutions flared, civil wars broke out" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 96), and that it still contains rich and poor and criminals.

Justice Under Surveillance

Aman deserves separate treatment, both because the criticism has neglected it and because it is where the novel's argument is hardest. Aman has genuinely achieved what the other lands could not. There are no rich and no poor. Buildings are uniform, wage differentials are slight, and the lowest wage suffices for lodging, food, clothing, education, culture and entertainment. Old people are provided for in vast parks, and Qindil notes with surprise how many people are over eighty (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 119). Children are educated and their talents identified in a children's park the size of a small city (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 120). The factories, businesses, schools and hospitals are in no way inferior to Halba's, and Qindil records that they shook his "firm belief in the superiority of the land of Islam in matters of civilization and production" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 122).

Against this, the novel sets a single sentence from Fluka, the state-appointed companion who shares Qindil's room and declines to leave him alone even in the lavatory (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 116): the state has made justice the basis of its system, and has "placed freedom under surveillance" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 125). Everything follows from that formulation.

The streets are empty by day because everyone is at work. The city is clean, elegant, orderly and, in Qindil's word, "dead" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 117). The crowds that appear at sunset move in ordered files, faces serious and exhausted, without merriment and almost without sound. Parents are replaced by state teachers, and Qindil's objection that "nothing can replace the tender love of parents" is dismissed as belonging to a stock of "proverbs that no longer have any meaning in the land of Aman" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 120). Interference in what does not concern one is punished by execution.

The novel then does something subtler than critique. At the festival, Qindil observes that the president is "excessively fat" and that his retinue is no less so, and concludes that they eat differently from the people. What follows is a remarkable passage in which he imagines the justification Fluka would offer modest privileges tied to performance, granted "within narrow limits" that permit no class distinctions and bear no relation to hereditary privilege elsewhere and then accepts the imagined argument on Fluka's behalf, concluding that he sees things more clearly than before (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 127). The reader watches the focaliser talk himself out of the evidence of his own eyes, supplying the state's defence before the state has thought to make one. It is the most precise piece of ideological analysis in the book, and it is performed at the narrator's expense.

Qindil's summary judgement is nonetheless worth taking seriously, because it is not the one the political allegory would predict. He does not rank Halba above Aman. He concludes that Halba has "a target that it has painstakingly realized," that Aman likewise has one, and that the land of Islam announces one target and achieves another, "thoughtlessly, shamelessly, and without reckoning" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 128). The criterion is coherence between declared and achieved ends, and by that criterion both foreign systems outperform home. This is Mahfouz at his most uncomfortable, and it should not be softened.

The Sage and the Legitimation of Power

The recurring sage is the novel's account of how orders secure consent. In each land Qindil seeks out the authority on ultimate questions, and in each the encounter follows one arc: initial illumination, then the discovery that the sage cannot or will not account for the order's central contradiction.

The pattern precedes the journey. Sheikh Maghagha is an admirable teacher. He is open, encourages doubt, is critical even of the Sultan, and marries Qindil's mother. In Haira, the pattern recurs at its harshest. Daizing the sage explains the king's system with complete conviction, describes a "twofold philosophy" by which power is taught to the elite and contentment to everyone else, demands to know whether this is not "perfection itself," and, when Qindil mentions Gebel, shouts that "the land of Haira is the land of Gebel" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, pp. 61–62). In Halba the pattern recurs at its subtlest: sages who are moderate, hospitable to doubt, ready to mock the systems of Mashriq, Haira, Aman and Islam alike, and who cannot explain why a free people is invading its neighbours. Aman refuses even the interview. Its sages, Fluka says, are engaged in their duties, and he will supply the information

himself (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 123). The state has dispensed with the sage and made the minder his substitute, which is a form of candour.

Thus, the sage's function is not to know but to render the unaccountable unquestionable, and this holds across the entire ideological spectrum. But Mahfouz adds an ending the criticism has missed. Twenty years on, a new prisoner is thrown into the Haira dungeon: it is Daizing, deposed with the king, condemned to life imprisonment, weeping. He offers Qindil his remorse and confesses that his punishment has been twenty years "living with a woman who didn't for a moment stop hating me" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 75). The legitimator is consumed by the power he legitimated, and is left in the same pit as the men he helped put there. When the general pardon comes, everyone is released except Daizing.

Samia, Arousa, and the Focaliser's Blind Spot

The novel's treatment of women requires a firm distinction between what Qindil believes and what the narrative knows. The chain of events is important: Qindil's mother remarries; his fiancée is taken; he contracts for Arousa in Mashriq and loses her; he buys her outright at auction in Haira for thirty dinars (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 65) and loses her again; he marries Samia in Halba; and he leaves Samia when Arousa walks into his shop. He construes this last as fidelity. However, in reality, seeing Arousa among the captives, he pictures her as he first saw her, "or rather as I had seen her leading her father in the lane which witnessed my birth" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 64). Arousa is explicitly perceived through Halima. And Halima occupies the place vacated by the mother, whose remarriage he experienced as dispossession. No woman in the novel is encountered as herself; rather, each stands in for the one before. This is not romance but the structure Derrida (1967/1976) calls supplementarity, in which the origin is discovered, retroactively, to have already been a substitute.

The self-exculpating habit is visible in the novel's finest small detail. Sheikh Maghagha argues for marrying Fattouma on the grounds that "it won't be easy for you to marry and to leave your mother on her own" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 11). At the opening of the following chapter, departing on his caravan, Qindil tells himself, "In any event, I have not left you on your own" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 17). He has taken his teacher's justification for taking his mother and repurposed it as his own licence for abandoning her.

The abandonment of Samia is worse than impulsive. After the encounter with Arousa, Qindil tells Samia what happened "straightforwardly and with apparent indifference," acknowledges a feeling of guilt, invents doubts about the journey, and then postpones it while preparing people to accept it (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, pp. 110–111). The desertion is planned over a year. In fact, what he deserts is the answer to the question he set out with. Samia is a paediatrician. She talks with a directness Qindil finds more astonishing than Mashriq's nudity (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 90), questions him about the position of women in the land of Islam, and tells him that "Islam is wilting away at your hands and you are just standing back and contemplating" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 91). Her formulation of the difference between Halba's Islam and his own is that hers "has not closed the door of independent judgment"—that is, of *ijtihad*—"and Islam without independent judgment means Islam without reason"

(Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 103). Qindil records that this reminded him of his old master's lessons and then leaves.

Here is the essence of the argument then: the traveller departs his homeland to find a remedy for it, crosses four lands, marries a woman who diagnoses the disease precisely and names the remedy in the vocabulary of his own tradition, and abandons her to keep looking. The cure is not in Gebel. It was in Halba, in his own house, and it was articulated by a woman whose speech he could only describe by comparing it to men's.

Malti-Douglas's (1991) account of gender and discourse in Arabo-Islamic writing describes the narrative pattern in which woman functions as the sign through which male knowledge is organised, tested, and frustrated. Qindil actually reads politics through women. Dress and marriage rules are his first diagnostic instruments in every land. Women are his epistemology. An epistemology that treats persons as indices will fail, and the novel arranges its failure with some precision: the one woman who refuses the index function by being simply an equal is the one he leaves.

The final turn of the screw is Arousa's. In Aman, Qindil learns from the travellers' centre that her husband "died on the way and was buried in the desert," and that she continued alone to Ghuroub (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 131). At Ghuroub the master tells him that she has already gone to the land of Gebel, and that she qualified "by virtue of the pains she suffered in her life" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 141). The woman contracted for once and bought once, widowed in the desert, stripped of her children and paraded naked through Haira, reaches the destination. The man who has pursued her across six lands, and who has organised his life around the search, does not. Suffering is the qualification, seeking is not.

Ghuroub, and the Charge of Desertion

Ghuroub is not a polity. It has no ruler, no wall, no customs officer, and no guards. The caravan owner tells Qindil to leave his baggage where it lies and go in unchallenged. Its inhabitants sit under date palms in silence, refusing greeting, preparing themselves for emigration to Gebel through concentration and song. The master instructs them to "love work" and to disregard "the fruits and the reward" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 141), tells them that the first step is the ability to concentrate fully, since "by full concentration man merges into his essence" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 142), and says that success will be known when the disciple is able to "fly without wings" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 139).

The master is also the only figure in the novel who accuses rather than legitimates, and his accusation is the hinge of the book. Told that Qindil's motherland needs him, he replies that Qindil is "a deserter," that he made his journey "a pretext for fleeing from your duty," and that no one has emigrated to Ghuroub except after discharging his duty. Qindil protests that he was a lone individual in the face of total tyranny, and is told that this is "the excuse of a man weak in spirit" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 140). The judgement is prepared by the master's earlier observation that Qindil has "turned aside from the target many times" and wasted valuable time in darkness (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 137).

The novel has thus produced, from within, an exact critique of its own protagonist's substitution-chain. His twenty years in Haira's dungeon were not the price of resistance. They were the consequence of a sage's desire for the woman he had bought. The master's distinction is between imprisonment for principle and imprisonment as a by-product of the chase, and Qindil falls on the wrong side of it. It reframes the itinerary retroactively: the journey has not been a search but an evasion, elaborately sustained. Every departure from a land that disappointed him has also been a departure from the work of repairing a land that disappointed him, beginning with his own.

Disillusion, the novel suggests, is not the opposite of complicity. It can be complicity's most refined form.

"The Beginning": Optics, Expulsion, and the Unwritten Journal

The final chapter is titled "The Beginning" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 145). A novel whose entire momentum is toward an ending name its last chapter for a start, and everything in it works to justify the title. Three details govern the reading, and each corrects the assumption that Qindil sets out for Gebel as the culmination of his quest.

First, the departure is a deportation. Aman's army encircles Ghuroub and its commander gives the inhabitants a choice: remain and work the land as labourers, or take a caravan to Gebel; whoever is found there after the caravan moves off "will be regarded as a prisoner of war" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 144). The pilgrims call out for Gebel, and the master warns that they will encounter hardship for want of training. The final journey is not the ripening of a discipline but a forced evacuation of untrained people under military ultimatum. The chapter opens with a caravan composed wholly of travellers and emigrants, with not a single merchant among them—the first in the book with no commercial reason to move—and with the narrator registering the anxiety and sadness that enfold it (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 145). Second, Gebel is seen. From the crest of the Green Mountain the master points, and there it is: a city on a far peak, tall and extensive, its great domes announcing an unmistakable grandeur. Qindil records that it was "no longer a dream but a reality, a reality that was close at hand," with only a descent, a short stretch of desert and a climb between the caravan and a customs director who would welcome them to "the land of Gebel, the land of perfection" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 146). Even the fantasy of arrival is bureaucratic: the ideal state, imagined, has a customs post like every other land in the book (see Mahfouz, 1983/1993, pp. 20, 52, 80).

Then the optics fail. Descending, they find the desert opening out without apparent limit, the far mountain lost in distance, and Qindil "astonished at how our eyes had deceived us" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 146). Ridges and rises push them off their line; a whole lifetime seems to elapse; and at the base the mountain rises beyond measure, indifferent to everything they want from it. The caravan master announces that the caravan ends here, since the pass is too narrow and "gives no room for a camel" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 147). They must continue on foot, as those before them have done.

This is stronger than non-representation, and it is why the chapter is the argument's completion rather than an evasion of it. Gebel is not withheld from view; it is shown, and its showing is the deception. The novel gives us the asymptote in its purest narrative form: the closer the approach, the further the object, until the apparatus that carried the traveller through five polities the caravan, the institution, the collective and provisioned means of travel reaches the point at which it cannot proceed. What remains must be done on foot, unequipped.

Third, the manuscript. The opening chapter established the premise: Gebel is "a closed secret," and Maghagha has never met anyone who visited it nor found any book or manuscript about it (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 6). The prisoners of Haira repeat the point. And in the final pages Qindil, contemplating the ascent and the circumstances that might prevent his return, decides to write out a journal of his travels and entrust it to the master of the caravan for delivery to his mother or to "the custodian of the House of Wisdom" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 147), making him a present of a hundred dinars and reciting with him the opening chapter of the Quran to seal the agreement (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 148). He adds that it would be "no bad idea to set aside a special journal for the land of Gebel," should he be destined to visit it and return.

That separate journal is the book we do not have. The text we hold is precisely the non-Gebel manuscript, deposited at the foot of the mountain by a man about to walk up it alone; and the novel's opening chapter has already told us that no manuscript of Gebel exists anywhere. The circle closes with complete economy. The book we are reading is the documentary proof of Gebel's unwritability, and it was produced by the traveller himself, in the last hour in which writing was still possible.

The closing frame confirms it. An editorial voice announces that the manuscript of the voyage of Qindil Muhammad al-Innabi ends here, that no history book makes further mention of him, and then asks whether he completed the journey or perished, whether he entered Gebel and how he fared, whether he stayed to the end of his life or returned as he intended, and whether a further manuscript will one day be found. Knowledge of all this, the novel concludes, "lies with the Knower of what is unseen and of what is seen" (Mahfouz, 1983/1993, p. 148). The unrepresentable is not merely narrative here; it is explicitly theologised, handed over in a Quranic formula to a knowledge that is by definition not ours. And this is why the chapter is called "The Beginning." It is the beginning of the ascent, the beginning of the unwritten second journal, and—for the reader who now returns to a first chapter in which a boy is told that no book about Gebel has ever been found the beginning of the book. The novel's last chapter delivers the premise of its first.

Coda

To read *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* this way is not to convert it into a counsel of despair, and the Ghuroub master's accusation is the safeguard. If the ideal polity is structurally unattainable, two responses are available. One is Qindil's: a serial disillusion that dignifies itself as a search and licenses a permanent refusal of the work of any actual place. The other

is the one the novel withholds from its protagonist and holds out to its reader that the impossibility of the ideal makes political labour interminable rather than pointless. Gebel's unreachability does not indict the lands. It indicts the expectation that a land might be Gebel. The Egyptian moment sharpens this. *Rihlat Ibn Faṭṭūma* appeared in 1983, into a situation of exhausted possibility: Nasserist Arab socialism discredited, the Camp David settlement bitterly contested, Sadat assassinated in 1981, the Iranian revolution of 1979 having installed a theocratic answer to the same question, and the superpowers conducting proxy wars under the sign of liberation. Halba's war on Haira, Haira's on Mashriq, Aman's on Ghuroub: the pattern needs no single referent, because the decade supplied several. Mahfouz, whose support for Camp David cost him readers across the Arab world, is not writing from outside this pattern but from within it. His refusal to hold a fourth system in reserve is a considered position, not a failure of nerve, and it belongs to the wider ambivalence that al-Musawi (2003) identifies as constitutive of the postcolonial Arabic novel rather than incidental to it. Read against the formal trajectory Somekh (1973) traced through the earlier fiction, and against the genre history mapped by Allen (1995), the schematism of the late work is a narrowing of means, not a thinning of thought.

What the novel offers instead is a diagnosis of the desire for one the desire that made the traveller leave, that kept him leaving, that cost him the only person who had actually named a remedy, and that left him at sunset with a manuscript he could not finish and a mountain he could not climb.

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