

ANNA NAWOLSKA

The Fate as a Literary Hero in the Historical Novel
Abath al-Aqdar by Najib Mahfuz

Abstract

The Mockery of the Fates is the first novel written by Najib Mahfuz (1911–2006), the Egyptian writer who until the present-day is the only one Arabian Nobel Prize Winner for literature. Since the author became famous rather for his later magnum opus called *The Cairo Trilogy* than previous works, my aim was to remind a little-known quasi-historical novel which was published in his youth. Due to a very interesting composition of the fable with build-up of suspense and its mature literary style, the work might have served for a perfect film screenplay. Despite the book was addressed mainly to teenagers, it still provokes the adult readers to reflect on the question of free will and destiny. The novel based on Mycenaean myths and old Egyptian legends indicates intermingling of ancient cultures and continuity of diverse traditions till these days.

1. Introduction

In the nineteen thirties, during his philosophy studies at the Egyptian University (now Cairo University), Najib Mahfuz began to write short stories and essays on different subjects which were not published until he met Salama Musa (d. 1958). Musa, an Egyptian writer and intellectual of Coptic origin, agreed to publish Mahfuz's historical novels. A characteristic conversation was held between Mahfuz and Musa which illustrates the beginning of their mutual cooperation.

On an occasion whilst visiting the office of the magazine "Al-Majalla al-Jadida", Musa asked Mahfuz if there was a chance that the Egyptian novel would have succeeded in Egypt because most native writers were under European influence and on this basis it would be very difficult to create an original Egyptian literary work. Mahfuz

answered him saying that the Egyptian novel was a new literary genre that was in its initial phase of growth and that he had made his first literary attempts to write some short novels. Taken aback by this response, M u s a asked him if they were published. M a h f u z was unsure of the value of his literary output, so he made no reply. However, on a future visit, he presented M u s a with the three novels – among them the *Ahlam al-Qarya* [“The rural dreams”]¹.

In spite of the fact that M u s a admitted that M a h f u z’s novels were not suitable for publishing, he still encouraged him not to stop writing. The subject of M a h f u z’s first novel was the ancient history of Egypt which he intended to reconstruct in the form of literary fiction similar to what Sir Wiliam S c o t t did with the history of his country². From the forty topics that he earlier prepared and intended to serve as the setting of the historical novel, M a h f u z used only three.

When M u s a delivered the manuscript of his first historical novel, titled *Hikmat Khufu* [“Khufu’s Wisdom”], to the editor’s office of the “Al-Majalla al-Jadida” magazine, it was suggested that the title would not appeal to contemporary readers. So, it was changed to *Abath al-Aqdar* [“The Mockery of The Fates”] and it was published in a separate, specialist magazine which was issued in September 1939. Thereafter, M a h f u z’s two other historical novels were published: *Radobis* in 1943 and *Kifah Tibah* [“The Struggle of Thebes”] in 1944.

Some Egyptian writers have emphasized the profound role of M a h f u z’s early historical novels, claiming that his novel *Abath al-Aqdar* serves as the beginning of the national historical Egyptian novel, which explores the glorious past of the Pharaohs and the sense of feudal dignity particular to the Egyptian people. Despite the fact that M a h f u z’s novel *Abath al-Aqdar* was not a harbinger of the Egyptian novel itself, the author still deserves to take a prominent place among writers describing the historical era of Pharaohs.

It is well known that there were two predecessors of M a h f u z. The Lebanese writers portrayed the significant events from the history of the Arabs and Islam, one of them, Salim a l - B u s t a n i (d. 1884) was the author of the first historical novel *Zenobia* (1871) which referred to Arab history and the other one was Jurji Z a y d a n (d. 1914). Over twenty three years, Jurji Z a y d a n wrote twenty-one novels on the history of Islam since the period of the Prophet until the Ottoman coup d’etat in 1908. He popularized the history of the Arabic-Muslim civilization like nobody before him.

The younger generation of writers such as Muhammad Awad M u h m m a d, Adil K a m i l, Jamal a s h - S h a y y a l, Ibrahim J a l a l and Najib M a h f u z (who in their majority graduated from the Cairo University and were under the influence of western historical novels as well as the works of the former Arabic writers) have concentrated mainly on presenting the cultural grounds of the urban and rural environments as well

¹ M. M o o s a, *The early novels of Naguib Mahfouz: images of modern Egypt*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville 1994, p. 22.

² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

as the diverse problems of their contemporaries³. The fact that they could perceive the similarities between events in the ancient and modern Egypt enabled them to set the historical novel on new national connotations. Najib Mahfuz, the main proponent of the fictionalized historical novel (containing a deep analysis of the various aspects of personality as well as the twists and turns of human nature), had an opportunity to inculcate the moral principles and didactic directions for the Egyptian society. In the thirties, however, on the rising wave of nationalism caused by the political and cultural British domination, interest in the great history of ancient Egypt increased more than ever and became one of the primary subjects of the Egyptian output.

Mahfuz created a psychoanalytic image of his characters which served him in that it presented and described the historical events of contemporary times. He paved the way for future generations of writers who concentrated, to a larger extent than their predecessors, on the behaviors and feelings of their protagonists in the context of past historical accounts. The behavioral analysis of the characters in the Egyptian historical novels came to a climax in the works of Mohammad Farid Abou Hadid (d. 1968), Ibrahim Ramzi, Ali al-Jarim, Mohammad Sayyid al-Uryan and Ahmad Bakathir⁴.

Despite the fact that most critics classify Mahfuz's work *Abath al-Aqdar* as the first historical novel based on an ancient Egyptian legend, Mahfuz (in one interview) pointed out "that only one of his three works, *Kifah Tibah*, was strictly a historical novel and the two others: *Abath al-Aqdar* and *Radobis* were fictional novels inspired predominantly by folk epics"⁵.

As suggested by the title, the fates, which freely manipulate the characters, play the principal role in the novel representing the fight between the strong will of the Pharaoh and the all-powerful, uncontrollable action of destiny which in the end conquers a "defiant" ruler.

2. The fable of the novel

Khufu (Kheops, 2609–2584 b.c.) was the king of Egypt during the period of domination of the Old Kingdom, the forth dynasty, and the builder of a great pyramid in Gizah. A prophetic prediction given by a sorcerer tells that Khufu's own offspring will not inherit Egypt's throne after him but that it will fall instead to the newborn son of the Priest of Ra. Disconcerted by this prediction, Khufu decided to lead a unit of his palace guard in order to urge the Priest to kill his own son thereby giving Khufu an opportunity to prove his loyalty to the Pharaoh and the Egyptian Kingdom. However, Khufu could not pander to his own whims because the Priest, who learnt of the same prediction, had arranged the escape of the newborn baby, his wife and her faithful maid shortly after

³ Ibid., p. 23.

⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵ M.N. Mikhail, *Studies in the short fiction of Mahfuz and Idris*, New York University Press, New York 1992, p. 11.

the arrival of the Pharaoh to the temple – he then committed suicide. In the meantime, Khufu mistakenly killed another newborn baby and mother in the temple, thinking them to be the persons mentioned in the prediction. Khufu then returned to the capital of his Kingdom, Memphis, satisfied that he had saved the throne for his descendants and so prevailed over the prophecy. Later, the mother of Djedef (the son of the Priest) and her maid, Zaya, lost their way and wandered through the desert. Zaya (being the barren herself) then kidnapped Djedef leaving his mother alone in despair. Soon the maid and the baby were captured by Beduins who took them to Sinai, where the soldiers of the Pharaoh carried them back to Memphis. Whilst claiming that Djedef was her son, Zaya began to search for her husband, after being informed that she would find him among the workers building the great tomb. Reaching the tomb, Zaya learnt that her husband was no longer alive and after some time she was assured by Khufu (who was feeling pity for her) that he had issued an order that she and her son would remain on state maintenance. Zaya then married a general supervisor for the construction of the great pyramid and together, with the baby, they moved to the palace where Djedef grew up among the Pharaoh's courtiers. As an adult, Djedef graduated from the Military Academy where he gained the Pharaoh's and Crown Prince's respect because of his top quality diploma and military talents. In the meantime, he fell in love with a beautiful girl from the village who afterwards turned out to be a daughter of the Pharaoh. After saving the Crown Prince's life, Djedef was rewarded with the Supreme Command and during his military expedition to Sinai he unknowingly took his mother into captivity. When the Crown Prince unexpectedly began to conspire against the king to replace his father, Djedef killed him and was afterwards appointed heir to the throne. The novel ends with the Pharaoh's statement on his deathbed noting that despite the fact that he declared war on destiny and opposed the gods, he was eventually defeated by them.

3. The influence of folk epic, myths and legends

Abath al-Aqdar is evidently an abridged version of the legend, mentioned in the James Baikie's book *Hordjedef's Tale*, created from a series of stories called *Khufu and the Magicians*⁶. These were preserved on the Papyrus Westcar in Berlin which were later translated by Najib Mahfuz into the Arabic language under the title *Misr al-qadima*⁷. Baikie's book describes the daily life in ancient Egypt and, among others, the royal trip by ship on the Nile to Thebes. Similarities can be noted between this and Mahfuz's novel *Abath al-Aqdar* which contains the same Egyptian names and descriptions of the royal family. In order to overdramatize the story, Mahfuz changed the plot of the ancient prophecy concerning the heir to the throne of the Crown Prince. In the Baikie's

⁶ M. M o o s a, op. cit., p. 22.

⁷ Naguib M a h f o u z, *Khufu's Wisdom*, transl. by Rymond S t o c k, The American University in Cairo Press, 2006, p. vi

book, after Khufu's died, the Crown Prince and subsequently Khufu's youngest son inherited the throne. Only later did the royal power fall to the three sons of the Priest of Ra. Moreover, the legend told by Baikié does not raise the question as to whether the Pharaoh, Khufu, tried to get rid of the Priest's sons. In turn, the folk story quoted by Baikié resembles the story cited by Egyptologist James Henry Breasted⁸ which was based on the original papyrus manuscript describing the day that the Pharaoh was bored and asked his sons to entertain him. One of his sons, Harzazef, told him that in his Kingdom lived a sorcerer who was able to work miracles even bigger than the protagonists of old stories would have experienced.

The sorcerer was admitted into Pharaoh's presence and after showing his miraculous abilities was asked by the Pharaoh what he knew about his future. The sorcerer answered that the three sons who were thought to be born to the Priest of Ra were in fact begot by the God Ra himself, who appointed them the kings of Egypt. After hearing such a prediction Khufu became sad but the sorcerer explained to him that there was no cause for a concern. He explained that first his son will inherit Egypt's throne after him and thereafter his grandson and only later would the children of the Priest take over royal power.

Therefore, as it can be noted that Mahfuz changed the story told by James Baikié and concentrated mainly on the conflict between man and destiny – a mysterious, relentless and external power – which not only controls all man's action but also opposes his will and transforms him into a listless puppet.

Yet, the above mentioned ancient Egyptian story is similar to the Greek folk tale about Edyp where Layus, convinced about the death of his son, acts exactly in the same way as Khufu did in *Abath al-Aqdar*⁹. This story is also similar to the biblical myths and in particular the story about Moses being saved from death (which is mentioned also in *Quran*). Moreover, the coincidence of these legends recalls the historical facts which confirm that in the Mycenaean times there were many sailors who travelled to Egypt and after they returned they spread stories about wonderful marvels, huge edifices and sculptures all over Hellada and Crete¹⁰.

By referring to the diverse ancient stories, we notice that Mahfuz was conscious of a mutual intercrossing of myths and various cultures within the centuries. He was anxious to show his compatriots the link between Egypt and the European civilisation in order to convince them that their pasts were worthy of praise and made a great contribution to other cultures. This was important for the Egyptians given that in those times they were under British occupation and needed to be raise their morale when they doubted their own strength.

⁸ M. Moosa, op. cit., p. 26.

⁹ M.H. Abdallah, *Al-Islamiya wa-ar-ruhiya fi adab Najib Mahfuz*, Al-Kahira, p. 3.

¹⁰ A. Krawczuk, *Siedmiu przeciw Tebom*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 1982, p. 74.

4. The conflict between the man and fate

In the novel *Abath al-Aqdar*, fate plays a superior role in the life of the protagonists. It seems that the author, as a young man, was interested in a discussion on the theory of fatalism which is contradictory to the philosophy of determinism (which is a cause-and-effect relationship). First, Khufu, convinced of his divine omnipotence, tried to fight fate in order to subjugate it to his own will. Then, the Pharaoh discovered the mysterious power of fate in the moment when all that he was going to undertake was thwarted by a chain of events and circumstances which he could not logically explain and after being in opposition to them was doomed to fail.

When, for the first time, the Pharaoh heard the sorcerer's prediction telling that his son would not inherit Egypt's throne after him, he began to consider the relationship between man and his fate. He asked his minister, Hemiunu, if it was possible to avoid destiny after man had done his best to protect himself against it. Hemiunu answered that he did not have any illusions about this because according to the ancient Egyptian wisdom, the protective measures taken by the man to prevent misfortune do not help to overcome his fate.

Because this sounded very pessimistic, Khufu who was still unconvinced asked the same question of his son, the Crown Prince. The Crown Prince only stared severely at his father in response as he wanted to say that he also did not believe that man could preserve himself from a destiny planned for him in advance regardless of the various applied precautions.

Then Khufu smiled and said that if such was true then they would be agreeing that the creation of the world and life itself (not to mention the rising to eminence) would have made no sense because there would be no difference between labor and laziness, strength and weakness, rebellion and obedience¹¹. So Khufu convinced his listeners that fate is nothing more than a false belief which should not be taken into consideration by powerful and sovereign men such as himself. However, the chain of events showed that Khufu was indeed wrong and despite his enormous power he could not defend himself against destiny which determined his life in its entirety. In the end, on his deathbed, Khufu admitted the futility of his efforts to change the course of events.

When recalling the past, Khufu confessed that, more than twenty years previous, he was leading his unit in order to kill a nursing child whom he was convinced was to inherit Egypt's throne after him. However, another child was killed in error and as a result of an ironic twist of fate, the baby who was to be murdered grew up to be the man that he allowed his daughter to marry and to become his successor. Earlier he thought that he had overcome his destiny and secured his son's futures but in the end he was humiliated before Gods who he said "battered my pride"¹². Khufu's final statement is meaningful

¹¹ N. Mahfouz, *Khufu's Wisdom*, op. cit., p. 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 188.

because his destiny amounted to ordinary coincidence and pure chance, supported by the determined command of divine power, which acts beyond the reach of human will.

Since *Mahfuz* was brought up in a religious family it could be expected that fate here has Islamic connotations. According to Muslims, fatalism assumes that every event in history is determined by God and is independent of the human being's will – this deprives man of all hope. When exploring the meaning of fatalism, there is a customary phrase, taken by the Muslims from the *Quran: In sha allah* which means “If God would wish”.

The above-mentioned opinions were diffused by Muslim scholars who claimed that: “Everything that was created by God is good and everything that was not created by Him is evil”. Through acceptance of this interpretation, fatalism became an integral part of traditional and folk Islam since its beginnings and this brought about the following consequences:

- people are deprived of hope in wordly life because all their deeds are determined by God.
- lack of individual responsibility for sins, creating the tendency to remain in a state of defeatism or to tyrannize the others; eventually the fatalism which denies the freedom of free choice leads to anarchy or to repressive rules.
- God is burdened with the direct responsibility for all evil and this excludes him absolute welfare and gives the evil (because the eternal God is the cause of evil) its justification in that it makes the God is not a dear father but rather an impersonal power, untouched by the suffering of people.

For example, one of *hadiths* reports that when A'isha, the Mother of Believers, announced that the child has passed away, it was said to her: “It is a good fortune for this child which now is a bird among the other birds living in a paradise”, because God said: “do you not know that Allah created paradise and hell as well as those who will inhabit paradise and those who will become the residents of hell?”.

As it is well known, the mutazili's doctrine (which originated in the eight century) raised a discourse concerning the difference between man's free will and fate. The mutazili scholars referred among others to the verse of the *Quran* stating that: “The person who does good is doing it for the sake of himself and the person who does evil is doing it against himself”¹³. This verse is in opposition to the *Quranic* divine *mashiya* which means that everything that we are doing is consistent with the “divine's deep desire” and is written down in a heavenly register and should be perceived by believers; the mutazili explain that *mashiya* is not an act of divine will (*irada*) or moral dictate (*amr*)¹⁴ imposed on the human but rather an eternal intention and the genius of God's creation which as a metaphysical being does not contradicts the free will of a human being.

¹³ Ibid., p. 631.

¹⁴ H. Corbin, *Historia filozofii muzulmańskiej*, transl. by K. Pachniak, Dialog, Warszawa 2005, p. 103.

Therefore, according to mutazili's teachings, Islam does not justify the ruler's wicked deeds and also does not allow them exemption from their responsibilities or to get away scot-free. Hence, it seems that Mahfuz's wish was to change the mentality of the Egyptian people and incline them to fight against fatalism which has formed an inseparable part of their folk tradition for many centuries.

Finally, after Djedef's killing of the Pharaoh's son (who schemed against his father), the Pharaoh's will coincides with destiny which means that the author of the *Abath al-Aqdar* equipped Khufu with reasonable and logical thought which allowed him to solve his problems in an identical way as it was planned by fate. Yet, levelling the Pharaoh's will with the fate determined by God, Mahfuz aimed to underline that a rational comprehension of phenomena and their cause-and-effect perception plays an important role in a man's life.

Moreover, Mahfuz's novel like mostly *adab* literature seems to be a kind of a didactic manual not only for rulers but also for ordinary people who when taking decision should be guided by common sense and thereby make use of their free choice and will.

5. The imaginary Pharaoh

Mahfuz uses Islamic terminology through the preislamic meaning of words – for example, he prefers the word *sahaba*¹⁵ (companions) to *hashiya* to describe Khufu's royal military guard and the Quranic's designation *hawari* (apostle)¹⁶ to describe the commander of his army. It seems that this kind of terminology (taken directly from the Islamic vocabulary) introduces the reader to a contemporary Islamic atmosphere in order to illustrate the ruler's attitude to his people. The Greek toponymy as Thebes and Memphis as well as the Coptic name "On" for the Greek designation of the Heliopolis city or its ancient Egyptian equivalent (Junu) presents Egypt as a country which was famous for its cultural diversity.

Mahfuz, being overwhelmingly influenced by Greek philosophy and accounts of Herodot and Strabon, gave the places Greek names and adopted Plato's conception of the king-philosopher in his creation of Khufu's character. Already at the start of the novel, the Pharaoh appears as a completely shaped figure with clear features. The detailed descriptions, dialogues and (in particular) the accounts concerning the meetings of the Pharaoh's family members as well as the depictions of the royal library, pompous receptions (celebrating the hunting) and the educational system in Egypt are a reflection of ideas and imagination of the author¹⁷.

¹⁵ M. M o o s a, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The excessive abundance of descriptions might occasionally seem superfluous but Mahfuz's intention was to present nothing but the authenticity of events without an in-depth analysis or reconstruction of the ancient history of Egypt. Therefore, he met some difficulties when placing the characters in appropriate perspective.

Because in ancient Egyptian legend, transmitted since the time of the Khufu's reign, there was not much information on the Pharaoh's daily life, his thoughts and conversations with others, Mahfuz was compelled to use the specific form of narration including a variety of characters and events covered only by a thin layer of the historical facts.

The novel *Abath al-Aqdar* begins by presenting the Pharaoh's attributes on two extremes. In the first, Khufu (son of Khnum) appears as a Possessor of Divine Grandeur, an absolute ruler who usurps the divine origin and deprives his subjects of the opportunity to criticize the government and his divine representatives. In the other, Khufu suddenly evolved into his own subject which is depicted in one of the family gatherings: "In them he became a companionable father and affectionate friend, as he and those closest to him took refuge in gossip and casual conversation. They discussed subjects both trivial and important, trading humorous stories, settling sundry affairs, and determining people's destinies"¹⁸.

Therefore, the Khufu created by Mahfuz is not only a divine ruler of Egypt to whom nobody can oppose but also a sensitive, compassionate man who loves his family and takes care of his friends. This unexpected conversion seems to be not only bizarre but also totally unpredictable and prompts us to ask why... Does a transformation of God equating with sun, wielding power and deriding a trivialism of humankind, not mean that He descended from heaven to earth to the material world?

The duality of nature used by Mahfuz humanizes the image of a new ruler who becomes an imaginary idea of the ancient Pharaoh. In a dialogue between Khufu and his architect, Mirabu, concerning the construction of the greatest tomb-pyramid, Maribu emphasizes the extraordinary efforts of millions workers who over ten years, have accomplished things that giants and devils could not have done"¹⁹. and their hard labor is a "splendid religious obligation, a duty to the deity to whom they pray, and a form of obedience owed to the title of him who sits upon the throne"²⁰.

Because the people forced into submission are mere tools in an absolute ruler's hands and their unquestioning obedience is part of their religious duty, Mahfuz's Pharaoh equates himself with God and equates divine and earthly submission in a common system brought into existence without force. The Pharaoh therefore becomes a ruler shaped in modern fashion, who rather like a Muslim caliph or a French king is asking: "Was it right for so many worthy souls to be expended for the sake of his personal exaltation? Was it proper for him to rule over so noble a people, who had only one goal – his own happiness?"²¹

¹⁸ N. Mahfouz, *Khufu's Wisdom*, op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

²¹ Ibid.

All of a sudden, this inner whispering of the Pharaoh is changed into the question put to his friends: “Who should give up their life for the benefit of the other: the people for Pharaoh or Pharaoh for the people?”²²

How it could be possible for a sovereign ruler to pose such a question – a ruler who forced people to abandon their rural abodes and coerced them into backbreaking work in the construction of his tomb which lasted twenty years? It seems that it is only possible in the author’s imagination, the author who when presenting the fictional Pharaoh possessing human attributes is searching for a harmony between the extremities: dictatorship – democracy, God – humankind, heaven – earth and independence – slavery.

For the Pharaoh, the dictator would not be troubled by human existence except as it relates to his own divinity. When the Pharaoh was filled with serious misgivings, Arbu, the commander of his army called out: “All of us together – people, commanders and priests – would give our lives for Pharaoh”²³.

These words reflect a victory of the Pharaoh’s comprehensive divinity over his material and human figure. Hemiunu, the Pharaoh’s minister added: “My lord, Your Divine Majesty! Why differentiate your lofty self from the people of Egypt, as one would the head from the heart or the soul from the body?”²⁴

Hemiunu’s statement attempts to dissolve the dissonance which evoked the dissatisfaction of the Prince Khafra, heir to the throne, who demanded that human components not be combined with the divine rule of his father, and said to him: “You rule according to the wish of the gods, not by the will of men. It is up to you to govern the people as you desire, not to ask yourself what you should do when they ask you”²⁵.

Khufu treated Khafra’s speech as one directed toward the omnipotent Pharaoh of Egypt who could not reject tyranny (which was a primary component of an absolute regime since the dawn of time) and when attempting to institutionalize the dictate, he justified himself with these words: “And what is Egypt but a great work that would not have been undertaken if not for the sacrifices of individuals? And of what value is the life of an individual? It equals not a single dry tear to one who looks to the far future and grand plan. For this I would be cruel without any qualms”²⁶.

There was a conversation between Khufu and his chief architect, Mirabu, in which the Pharaoh states that divinity is nothing more than rule and power. Next, Mirabu answers Khufu that divinity means also a compassion and love.

It seems that Mahfuz, when presenting the Pharaoh as a person who sacrificed his subjects in order to build the great nation, thought about him as a symbol of the Egyptian latter-day king who (regardless of the difficult situation in which Egypt was involved) put a lot of effort into transforming the country from one that was backward to one that was considered advanced.

²² Ibid., p. 9.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 9–10.

6. The clash of fictional and historical facts

There are some depictions in *Abath al-Aqdar* showing that Mahfuz preferred literary effects to period accuracy. For example, the horses and wheeled vehicles or chariots were not known in the Old Kingdom until the 1788 b.c. when the Hyksos conquered Egypt and brought the horses there²⁷. There is also no evidence that studios were hired out by painters in those times; that the advertisements of their artistic creations were placed in public places or that the miniature portraits were carried under one's clothes.

Although the mention of people possessing gold and silver money differs from the historical truth (because of a barter exchange in the Old Kingdom) there were some transactions involving golden and copper rings, at fixed weights, which were in circulation as currency²⁸. The depiction of the educational system during Khufu's rule seems to be identical to the contemporary Egyptian education of Mahfuz's youth, including the higher education institutions (examples are The Ptah University and The Institute of Fine Arts) that, on behalf of Khufu or The Military Academy, Djedef, the coming Pharaoh, was a graduate. The description of the supervisor's study which is located on the construction site of the pyramid reminds us of the interior of the office of a public institution in modern Cairo or in another contemporary city. It is beyond all doubt that the historical Khufu who believed that he was the highest God ruling over his state and people could debate his royal divinity or try to define it in any way. The "Good God" was one of his titles in the Old Kingdom, adored by his people. So, the image of Khufu reminds us rather the Islamic ruler, Plato's or French king rather than the divine Pharaoh.

7. Summary

In summary, it should be said that Mahfuz, when presenting the conflict between man and fate, praised the wisdom of a king who regardless of the predictions given to him by the sorcerer, made the right decision in the end. The author showed contempt for fatalism and superstitions which were (and still are) the main axis of the religious mentality of the Muslim majority. He felt that such diverted them from logical thinking with the result that they could not break free from their cultural and economic backwardness. The building of the gorgeous pyramid that reached toward heaven was a symbol of the indestructible power of Egypt which will last into the future, only thanks to the great efforts of the Egyptian people and their wise rulers. Some descriptions referring to the contemporary world mixed with its ancient counterparts, the Greek and Coptic toponymy as well as the tale itself (based on the old Egyptian legends which were transmitted to the Mycenaeans) suggest that Egypt was not only the primary source of cultural and historical heritage in Europe but also a continuation of ancient European thought. The aim of the

²⁷ M. M o o s a, op. cit., p. 32.

²⁸ Ibid.

author was to lift the spirit of the modern Egyptians (being at the time under British occupation) and to convince them that Egypt's wonderful past could be restored, but only when they built a new future based on their own marvelous "pyramid" for the glory of the entire nation. Some elements of the surroundings such as the educational system; the modern appearance of the offices on a building site and the horses and carriages do recall the country from the nineteenth or beginning of the twentieth century rather than the era of the Old Kingdom. However, because the novel brings the readers closer to a very realistic world and despite the fact that the Mahfuz's first published book was meant for teenagers rather than adults, it still contains a very mature message for contemporary readers.