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The Public, the Private and The Sphere in-Between: Najib Mahfuz on Power, Status and Authority in Africa's Public Sphere*

Oladosu Afis Ayinde
University of Ibadan

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This paper is hinged on the following proposition: that in no other region in Africa are the arguments about the role of the artist in the "public" sphere more intense as is the case in North Africa; that the problematic of what constitutes the "public" sphere in North Africa is circumscribed by the struggle for and the contest over "power", "status" and "authority"; that the attempt by North African writers particularly Najib Mahfuz (d. 2006) to mirror the socio-political and cultural fissures and contradictions in the public sphere usually lead to conflict not only over what constitutes the "public sphere" and who governs it, but equally on how the "private" and the sphere "in-between"-in its quintessential slippery and highly charged textures- could be reclaimed for the "public good". In grappling with the foregoing the paper rereads Najib Mahfuz's **Awlād Hāratinā** *(1959). This work, written at a time Egypt was battling with such questions as "national", "religious" and cultural identities, foregrounds the contemporary contest, in Arab countries, between creativity and political reality even as it provides refreshing insights into the hiatus in-between the "religious" and the literary. In reading for "meaning" and the "meaning of meaning" in* **Awlād Hāratinā**, *the paper pays attention to the socio-political and cultural "codes" provided by Najib Mahfuz even as it searches for possible theoretical insights that the works of Arab-African and Euro-American writers including Ibn Qayyim, Abdul Qāhir al-Jurjānī, Edward Said, Michel Foucault and Benhabib could yield in an excursus which probes into how the trialetic of "power", "status" and "authority" continues to shape the "public" the "private" and the sphere "in-between" of the Egyptian society.*

Sovereigns are rulers over people, but it is the learned who rule over the sovereign

- Abul' Aswad

…to write is to become powerful; to author is to become an authority

- Oladosu Afis Ayinde

If in my title I have mentioned three types of spheres namely the public, the private and the sphere in-between, it is meant to call attention not only to the elasticity of spheres/spaces in North-Africa's cultural milieu but also to prevent discourse on the public and private spheres, whether in the Eastern or Western critical circles, from, in the postmodernist fashion, "being conclusive or teleological" (L. Hutcheon: *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* 1988; 110). Central to this approach is the proposition that the public sphere, with reference to North-African societies like Cairo[1], did not emerge, as was the case in Western societies, "in the eighteenth century" (P. Roderfold: *Endless Propaganda: The Advertising of Public Goods* 2000; p. 18). Rather, it can be said to have emerged in the Mosque *paripasu* with the advent of Islam in the 6th century. The sphere is usually constituted, as Habermas observes, by "private people, gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (J. Habermas: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* 1962; p. 176). These are people whose sole concern is to "uncover topics of relevance to …(their) society, interpret values, contribute to the resolution of problems, generate good reasons, and debunk bad ones" (J. Habermas: "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere" 1992: 421-461). Using the "democratic" space of the mosque and the market square as a platform, these "private people" usually become "public" in their vociferous campaign against "arbitrary political authority" (D. Woods: "Civil Society in Europe and Africa" 1992; p. 77-100) and unwarranted and unmerited privileges.

Reference to the public sphere as one made up of "private people", however, underscores the fact that the line separating the public from the private spheres in North-African societies, is usually arbitrary, polysemous and highly slippery. In other words, the Egyptian society, for example, image a strong relational link between the "public issue of justice" and "private conceptions of the good life", the "public interests" and "private needs" and "public matters of norms" and "private matters of value" (Benhabib 89). Thus an attempt to separate the public from the private spheres in such societies is both unrealistic and impossible. It is unrealistic because such an effort would fructify only if North-African societies cease to be, in Ibn Khaldun's words, "an historical group" (qtd by A. Al-Azmeh: *Ibn Khaldun* 1982; 38). The attempt would be impossible unless Islam, in line with the projection of the government of Egypt and its Western allies, ceases to be the focal point of postmodern Egyptian society.

In other words, the public-private sphere of the Egyptian society is premised on a number of received, irreducible and immutable principles. These include the sanctity of God and the

belief in His attributes, the preeminence of all Prophets of God, reverence of the '*Ulama* as the heirs of the Prophetic vocation and the necessity of obedience to those in authority in so far as they do not command disobedience to the Almighty. (A. A Oladosu: "The Muslim at the Threshold of the 21st Century" 1988; 86-108). Thus to separate the public from the private sphere would create a chasm in the very essence of the Egyptian society. It might lead "to the silencing of the concerns of certain excluded groups" (Benhabib, 1992; 82): the concern and interests of women, children, the poor, the needy and the under-privileged class.

The collapse of the "private" and the "public" spheres, and the consequent appropriation of the two to the religious have, however, occurred with serious implications and challenges for the Egyptian society. One of such implication is the emergence of conflict between the state and the individual, between the individual and the Other and between the individual and his/her religion. It includes the emergence of conflicts over the essence of the religious in relation or contradistinction to the mundane, the take-over of the public-private space by the tension between, in Arkoun's words, the "thought and the unthought, the thinkable and the unthinkable" (M. Arkoun: *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert?* 2002; p. 18); and the "struggle between the defenders of the living sacred and sacralizing tradition and the supporters of reformist or revolutionary change" (ibid). Whereas there appears to be a consensus among Egyptians with reference to the divine and the status of the Prophets in Muslim *weltanschauung*, there, however, exists much contestation on the role of the *Ulama* (religious scholars) and those who wield political authority/power in Cairo's public-private-religious life.

Put differently when Ibn Qayyim says "…since Islam is protected and upheld by the rulers and the jurists alike, this means that the laity must follow (and obey) these two -the rulers and the jurists"[2] (Ibn Qayyim: *I'ilam al-Muwaqqi'in an Rabb al-'Alamin* 10), he is actually calling attention to the dialectics and arguments in Muslim culture and civilization over the essence of power, status and authority and to whom they (should) belong. In other words, how could two apparently separate authorities, the ruler and the '*Ulama*, possibly merge into one in order to superintend the "public" sphere without necessarily causing friction? What happens in instances when juristic writs come in conflict with political edicts? Who has the authority to speak, punish or confer reward in God's name and in the name of the nation-the '*Ulama* or the political authorities? How does power/authority feed into the conception of status in Egyptian public-private life and how do the latter image the former? What type of

creativity could intervene in the hiatus, sharply mirror the trajectories in the categories of power, authority and status and through that catalyze its transformation for the good of the public? The apparent lack of consensus on the above has served as recipe for the movements of agents from the public-private sphere of the Egyptian body politic to the third sphere; it has made the emergence of the "sphere in-between" a categorical imperative.

The sphere in-between derives in part from Arab-Muslim's historical-theological experience in which Wasil b. Ata's famous statement, *manzila byna manzilatayn*[3] (the station between the two stations), finds relevance. It is also one which calls attention to Nashis Andy's idea of the "non-player"[4]. It is the realm in which meaning derived from and given to religion in the public-private spheres of North-African societies are re-analyzed, reconsidered, and reconfigured. Those who occupy this sphere in North-African societies are usually outside-insiders; they often posture as if they are defenders of authority- the sacred/religious; in the same breadth their vocation usually confounds and confuses the latter as it satisfies the yearning of the proselytizers of change, of revolution. Such is the case of Najib Mahfuz who situates himself in that realm which Hannah Arendt has described as the "third position": "a sphere … where people are with others and (are) neither for nor against them" (H. Arendt: *The Human Condition* 1958; 155).

In other words the sphere in-between is a dangerous one. It feels as if its occupiers are at the firing range, or as if their heads are put on the guillotine. Occupiers of this sphere in the extremely closed-open, public-private-religious space of Egyptian society, particularly Najib Mahfuz, are usually traduced for their penchant to, in their writing, question authority and lay claim to power. They are usually accused of apostacy/heresy, treason and corruption of the society. In an interview he granted the critic and novelist, Jamal Ghittani in the 1970s, Mahfuz says that to be a writer, to occupy what we have referred to as the sphere in-between, is to become subject of virulent attacks and, in fact, possible extermination. He says again "The minute we breathe somebody chokes and poisons our lives" (qtd in: M. Takieddine Amyuni: "The Arab Artist's Role in Society: Three Case Studies: Naguib Mahfouz, Tayeb Salih, and Elias Khoury" 1999 202-223)

But the sphere in-between is also highly 'useful' for its occupiers. It provides them with the opportunity to live with, study and critique the public-private-religious spheres of North-African societies more intimately and truly. For example by situating himself in this sphere,

Najib Mahfuz, becomes able to, along with Mehrez, "use" (S. Mehrez: *Egyptian Writers Between Fiction and History* 1994;p.34) the private-public-religious sphere, subjugate it and protect himself with it all at the same time- talk of being a friend to God and not an enemy to Caesar. Mahfuz has been able to do this partly because the sphere in-between is hinged on a methodology: it demands that its occupiers represent the world, the public-private-religious spheres, with neutrality without being overtly neutral. Mahfuz says: "when I represent the world with neutrality, I do so without being neutral" (ibid p.36). But the problematic of neutrality of the non-neutral has made his *Awlād Hāratinā* –Children of Our Quarter (hereafter AH), as is the case with such other extremely charged works of his[5], an important point of reference in an analysis of the dynamics that give the public sphere in Egypt its characteristic vigour and candour.

The novel, set in an Egyptian quarter as the title shows, begins with Jabalāwī summoning his children, Adham, Idris, Qasim, and Rifaa into the "Great House" in order to inform them of his decision to appoint his youngest son Adham as his representative to manage the Trust/Great House. All his children, including Adham, are shocked at his decision, but no one dares to speak up except his eldest son, Idris. The appointment of Adham, Idris argues, violates the patriarchal order- an order in which age, gender, color, ethnicity, social and economic status are used as indices in conferring honour and privileges. Idris's audacity to disagree with Jabalāwī leads to his expulsion from the Great House. But one day he reappears among the workers who have come to the Great House to collect their salary. He uses the opportunity to ask Adham, who now directs the affairs of the House, to help him have access to the great book that his father hides in the dark room. 'Umayma, Adham's wife, hears about the book and instantly becomes interested. She intervenes on behalf of Idris and encourages her husband to go against the instruction of Jabalāwī by stealing the book since, according to her, it might contain clues to their future and that of their children. Jabalāwī eventually catches Adham in the room and immediately throws him and his wife out of the House.

Outside the Great House, life becomes a hell for Adham and his wife. After a series of scandals and tragedies, Idris and Adham soon die. Thereafter the quarter becomes an abode for a new generation; it becomes a space of terror where the strong and the powerful–the *Futuwwat*-oppress the people, rob them of their belongings, while the Trustee's only concern remains that of collecting taxes. Other children of Jabalāwī including Jabal, Rifaa, Qaasim

and his grandson, 'Arafah, take turn to wrest power from the brigands. In the climax it is Arafa who not only succeeds in laying his hands on the secret book which Jabalāwī keeps in the Great House he is also the one people in the quarter believe is responsible for the death of the former. But as it is with those who came before him, Arafa's hegemony over the quarter also laps into infamy- his magic, his ability to invent things, soon becomes an instrument with which oppression is perpetrated in the quarter. In closing the narrator tells us that as far as the quarter is concerned knowledge (science) alone is incapable of transforming people and society. Rather it is power, wisdom and collective action that could guarantee equality and peaceful coexistence. (N. Mahfuz: *al-A'māl al-Kāmila* 1982; p.1-364)

AH did not emerge all at the same time. The Egyptian magazine, *Al-Ahram* began, sometime in 1959, to do its serialization. But the magazine had hardly gone far into the series when the novel left the sphere in-between, the sphere occupied by its author, in order to become the property of the public-private-religious discursive spheres of Egyptian society. Three Scholars (Shaykhs) of al-Azhar University in Cairo came together to issue a theological decree banning the publication of the novel an action they believed was in the interest of the "public sphere"; the decision was in the interest of the Egyptian and indeed Arabs' societies as a whole. The scholars' edict immediately achieved the desired effect. The novel was taken off the pages of the Egyptian journal while its author became Egypt's number one enemy, at least in its religious and cultural contexts, and one whose life could lawfully be taken[6]. The decree also awakens us to one other fact: that the Egyptian public sphere is, in line with Bakhtin, heteroglotic. Heteroglosia is that "condition that ensures the primacy of context over text" (M. Bakhtin: *The Dialogic Imagination* 1981; p. 42, 426).

But exactly what does AH mean for an engagement with the public sphere in Egypt? AH is a work of fiction which derives its strength from its employment of rhetorical tropes and techniques such as *Isti'āra* (metaphor), *Kināya* (connotation) and *Tawriya* (allegory). The employment of these tropes has led, in part, to the perspectival studies on the novel. In other words approaches to AH could be divided into two: the religious and the literary[7]. Critics with strong affiliation to the public-private-religious sphere of the Egyptian society including Abdul Hamid Kishk see the novel as a complete desacralization of the very spirit that gives North-African societies its characteristic vigour and identity. Evidences, according to him, abound in the novel. Take for example the naming device. The title of the novel, as far as he is concerned, is nothing but an allegory of the Egyptian society. This might be found to be

true at least going by the structure of Muslim cities in the pre- and early modern period. During these periods, North-African cities were usually divided into hārāt-quarters. Usually walled and enclosed, the quarters were sometimes established based on kinship ties, "occupation, place of origin, (and political) patronage" (M. N. Pearson: "Pre-modern Muslim Political Systems" 1982; p. 47- 58) of the citizens. Reference to the "quarter" in the title of the novel, therefore, puts Mahfuz in no position of "neutrality". He is seen as a writer whose sole interest is the negative portrayal of his society.

Characters in the novel appear to take the arguments of the religious critics further. There appears to be close parallels, they contend, between the character of Jabalāwī and that of Almighty God, and between such Quranic-Biblical personages as Adam, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and fictional characters in the novel like Adham, Jabal, Rifā'a and Qāsim. Reading the plot further they identify close similarities between the role of Idris in the novel and that of Satan in the primordial period even as the "The Great House" not only parodies the garden of paradise mentioned both in the Bible and the Qur'ān but could also be read to mean the Ka'aba, the holiest site in Muslim eschatology and modernity. While religious critics are struggling to reconcile questions which the novel has occasioned in their minds- questions that border on belief and unbelief, questions that hinge on the conflict between reason and revelation, questions that are so pertinent as to throw open the otherwise closed door of inquiries and contemplation into the necessity of revelation in the age of reason (science) - AH still lends itself to more scrutiny: it is a narrative with one hundred and fourteen sections exactly like the Qur'an!

Perhaps the quintessential source of discord between the religious critics and AH lies in the climax when Jabalāwi, the owner of the quarter, is supposedly killed by his grandson-'Arafa. Aside from the fact that Arafa has been read to mean a metaphor for science and its eventual triumph over religion and revelation, the mere thought of the possibility that God could die and Mahfuz's audacity to, in Foucaltian manner, "fiction" (M. Foucault: "The History of Sexuality" An Interview 1980; p. 193) such a possibility is enough to put him on the stake; it is enough to warrant the issuance of a *fatwa* that would make his assassination a categorical imperative. . (A. Kishk: *Kalimatuna fi al-Radd 'ali Awlad Haratina* 1990; p. 156).

To give AH such a religiously coded reading as the "intellectuals and "Muslim Fundamentalists" (F. M. Najjar: "Muslim Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals: The Case of

Naguib Mahfouz" 1998; p. 139-168) have done is to delimit the horizon of the work; it means depriving the work of its other essence; it implies glossing over not only its meaning but, in line with Al-Jurjani, the meaning of its meaning –"ma'anā al-ma'anā" (al-Jurjani:*Asrār al-Balāgha* 1959:31). In other words, an assessment of AH not as a close text which "limits the interpretive activity of the reader but as an open text which stimulates constructive interpretive activity (U. Eco: The Role of the Reader 1979; p. 47-65) is capable of enriching scholarly efforts which are targeted at the re-engagement of the dynamics and the socio-cultural and political forces in Africa's public sphere. Such an exercise would most likely lead to the discovery of, again Umberto Eco's phrase, the "discreet and deeper meaning" (U. Eco: *Interpretation and Over-interpretation* 1992; 45-66) of the trialectic of power, status and authority in Africa's public sphere; such an exercise might facilitate the engagement of "authority" in the hands of the authoritarian, the reassessment of "power" in the hand of the powerful, and the inquiry into how, in the public-private spheres of the Egyptian society, the categories of "authority" and "power" usually combine together to define, structure and determine people's status.

We might begin with the contestations, in AH, over the Great House. The latter amply images the public-private sphere of the North-African societies in the modern period. That the Great House is a public sphere and a metaphor/allegory for modern day presidential palaces and government houses in contemporary Arab societies is imaged in the fact that workers in the quarter usually go there to collect their salary every month (AH p.20). Here the House can be said to belong to all- the powerful and the powerless, the rich and the poor. In order to exist in the quarter, the inhabitant must visit the House. That the Great House is a public sphere is also instantiated in the event of the marriage of Adham, the director of the Great House, to the negro girl, Umaymah.

On the day of the marriage, the House hosts two categories of citizens of the quarter: "those who love Jabalāwī and those who detest/hate him" (AH 15). Those who love the maximum ruler of the public sphere in the quarter visit the Great House out of compassion; those who hate him attend the wedding feast out of fear of his punishment. Whatever may be the status of the visitors to the House it is evident that the wedding feast affords everyone in the quarter the opportunity to partake or share in its resources and wealth in a manner the like of which they never witnessed before. There is enough food and drinks for everybody; movement into and outside the Great House is also unfettered. On this day the House becomes the extension

of the alleys, the streets, and the market-place in the quarter; it becomes, in the Foucaultian manner, an "external space" (Foucault: "Of Other Spaces" 1986; p.22-27) or in Lefebvre's phrase, the lived space (*le vecu*). The *lived space* is that which belong to the "inhabitants" and "users"; the dominant and the dominated, the King and the proletariat, the *Ulama* and the laity; it is the "dominated space which imagination seeks to change and appropriate…" (H. Lefebvre: *The Production of Space* 1991; p. 39, 129, 143)

But the Great House could also be interpreted to mean a private sphere. This is for two reasons. On the one hand it is private because it belongs, *de facto*, to Jabalāwī and members of his immediate family; members of "the inner quarters" (AH 13)-women, children, and the servants; the "faceless" authorities inside authority. On the other hand the Great House is private, like other locales of authority and power in Arab and non-Arab democracies, because it excludes and is forbidden to the members of the public; it is forbidden to people like Umaymah, "the poor" (AH p.10) and the less privileged in the quarter. To venture into the private sphere without express invitation/permission of the sovereign/president, as is the case in the event of the marriage of Adham to Umaymah, is to risk the anger of the King; it is to risk at least imprisonment or at worst death.

While reading the Great House as a private sphere we are reminded by characters in the novel, particularly Idris and Adham, that the sphere is also a detested, contested and conflicted one. It is a detested sphere because nobody experiences tranquility in it except the "cowardly - those who rejoice in taking morsels of food while they are despised (AH p. 12); it is detested because its residents are happy in their "worship (of) their oppressor (ibid). The Great House is a private but contested sphere because within it Idris and Adham are locked in a deadly struggle over power and authority; it is a conflicted sphere because, in line with Idris, "the racially inferior is …(its) director" (AH 12). Thus the Great House becomes a caricature of the modern day government houses: houses which cut the image of happiness but are riddled by grief and sadness; houses which appear on the outside as tranquil and serene but are engulfed by fire and brimstones; houses populated in the open by individuals supposedly sharing mutual love and compassion but which, in reality, suffers internal disunity and discord.

Put differently when "private citizens" behold the locus and location of power and authority in the public sphere, they usually come away with awe and reverence for it. They usually

behold a "great" house; a house built with steel and iron. But upon close scrutiny, they usually discover that the house which is originally built for the protection of its occupiers often becomes a prison for them. Government houses in North-African societies, as we have it in the Great House in AH, are built to make the occupiers safe and secure. But human history exemplifies a situation in which occupiers of "Great Houses" do not actually experience security; the more the safety measures put in place by security agents the more insecure the authorities become; the more insecure the authorities become the more violent their instrument of repression and oppression. Thus the Great House becomes, once again in Lefebvre's notion, a perceived sphere (*le percu*) –a sphere whose link to the sphere outside it is, poetically, like the "link that binds inanimate objects like the spider to the web that issue forth from its body" (J. E. Soja "Heterologies" 1995; 13-14); it is from within its otherwise "catholic"/private space that conflict, chaos, turmoil and tragedy ensues and extends to the public sphere.

Conflict begins in the Great House –the public-private sphere- over the distribution of power and authority. Here the quarter, along with the religious critics, is an allegory of the political space in North-African societies- a space where political authority/power is attained not by consensus but through arbitrary means; where people are selected not elected by those over whom they would exercise authority. Jabalāwī appoints/selects Adham, not Idris or another character, as the director of the Great House contrary to the norm even in the patriarchal setting of the quarter. His action calls attention to the monarchical set-up in a number of Arab countries in which succession to political authority is determined by the patriarch. In other words, in Arab monarchies, the patriarch usually conducts himself in the manner of Jabalāwī - someone who is completely obsessed with power, someone who believes he is omniscient. This becomes evident when Idris, Jabalāwī's eldest child, confronts him on his choice of Adham. Jabalāwī looks him straight in the face and says: "it's for the good of the public" (AH p.6). In other words, the public sphere in AH, as we have it in reality, does not actually belong to the public since the latter, going by Jabalāwī's omniscient posture, lacks discernment. The public in the public sphere –a metaphor for the masses, the proletariat, the powerless and faceless members of North African societies-is like a child in the cradle whose sense of judgment is at best asinine.

But in selecting Adham for the position of the director of the "Great House" Jabalāwī is playing the role of an astute politician; he postures as somebody who desires to step out of

power but who, in reality, actually desires to remain in authority. This is because whatever political influence Adham would exercise in the Great House would be under his "supervision" (AH. 10). This calls attention to yet another sphere in Africa's public sphere- the sphere behind the public sphere: the authority that controls the authority. Such authorities usually include the rich and the notables- the owners and controllers of the economic superstructure of the society. Such authorities in the Arab public sphere could also be the *Ulama*, the religious scholars, the heirs of the Prophets of God.

But the sphere behind the public sphere, the authority that controls the authority, might actually belong to the female members of the society- the mothers, the wives, the aunts, the daughters. This is evidenced in that instance in the novel when Adham, immediately he is selected by Jabalāwī as the Director designate of/for the Great House, goes to its inner quarters in search of his mother. Adham seeks out his mother not just to inform her of his new status but to request for her blessing. In Africa's (Muslims) cultural set-up children are acculturated to revere and adore their mothers. In fact they are taught right from the cradle that their "paradise lies at the feet of their mothers"[8]- a metaphor for the mother's blessing for the child. To enjoy the blessing of one's mother, therefore, means enjoying the blessing of God. Thus in an apparent expression of joy and happiness Umaymah embraces her child and prayerfully says thus:

-may success be your shelter…you are a good child and unto the good ones would be success at the end (p.9)

The character of Umayma also awakens us to the dynamics and the forces that usually operate behind the public sphere. Umaymah is a beautiful negro lady and one whose beauty makes her inability to read and write (AH 15) of no significance. She gets married to Adham, the director, and takes up a position behind the man in the eye of the public. But from within this sphere, the private sphere, the sphere behind the public sphere, she employs her feminine power in order to influence the day-to-day running of the Great House by her husband. Even though her character is a caricature of the traditional Egyptian society- a society that plays little premium on education of the girl-child- Umaymah nonetheless images the ability of her type to turn their otherwise pitiable circumstance to maximum benefit. Thus her character essays the traditional notion that no woman is useless in and by herself. To be a woman,

whether literate or otherwise, is to be endowed with quaid power; to have quaid power is to have the ability to influence the man no matter his status in the public sphere.

But the circumstance of Umaymah and her role in AH as an illiterate wife of the power that governs the public sphere returns us to yet another perspective in the unfolding dynamics of the public-private sphere in the novel. In the beginning of the novel the owner of the quarter and the benefactor, Jabalāwī picks Adham as the director. This according to him is for two reasons: "his (Adham's) knowledge of the nature/names of the tenants/workers, and his knowledge of the book of account (p6). But knowledge of accounting, in the estimation of Idris, is inconsequential where race is a factor. In other words, by virtue of the fact that Adham is born of a "negro slave" (p7), he ought not to have been picked for the important position of the director of the Great House. Here Mahfuz is striking at one other core of the public-private sphere of North-African society; he is trying to destroy one other hierarchy in Arab's socio-cultural, political and economic sphere- the inscription of authority and power with racial superiority. This perspective is particularly important in any attempt at reading the Mahfuzian aesthetics and "politics"[9]. Thus the characters of Idris and Adham awaken us, in part, to the binary between knowledge and ignorance, between virtue and vice. Whereas Adham, in this instance, images the ideal for which the public sphere should strive, Idris on the other hand, amplifies the reality, the mentality and the racial proclivity of the upper class of the Egyptian/Arab society/ies. Whereas Adham could be seen as the goal for which the public sphere should strive, Idris images a prevalent tendency in the public sphere- the tendency to privilege mediocrity over and above excellence; the tendency to sacrifice the eternal for the transient and the ephemeral. In the estimation of Idris, colour is not the only factor that should disqualify Adham from taking control of the Great House, (the public sphere), his size, in comparison, probably to that of his own, is diminutive.

In other words, ascension to power and authority in the public sphere, according to Idris, should, as we have it in contemporary *dem-all-cracies*[10], be based on size, on numerical strength, on the political spread of votes cast for contestants, not on the intellectual capabilities of the candidates or on their knowledge. In privileging size over essence the character of Idris in AH becomes a caricature of the public sphere in Africa where, as we have it in the West, *demo-cractic* practice involves the placement of a high premium on the "number of heads" in the body politic not on their qualities.

Thus the stage becomes set for the occurrence of a myriad conflicts in the public sphere of AH. The lack of consensus over how authority and power should be shared creates, in the first instance, an eternal chasm and disaffection among members of the upper class represented by the immediate family of Jabalāwī. Idris not only becomes an eternal enemy of his younger brother, Adham, but also a sworn enemy of his own progenitor, Jabalāwī. Again in line with the Mahfuzian philosophy[11] verbal conflicts soon degenerate into violence and tragedy. Idris goes after his younger brother Adham and ensures he is removed from his exalted position. The sons of Adham become arch-enemies of one another; sexual immorality, debauchery and intrigues become the order of the day. But despite these vicissitudes, the Great House remains a center of political and economic gravity in the quarter; the locus of power, status and authority. But exactly what do these categories mean for Najib Mahfuz, the author, the Egyptian society and Africa's public-private sphere as a whole?

Power, when viewed literally as a person's ability "to control people or things" (*Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* p. 1129) does not enjoy a particularly positive patronage among Arab cultural practitioners. Al-Jahiz, for example, says that "the person in power is like he who rides a lion-people are afraid of him but he is more afraid of his ride" (*al-Ibshihi: al-Mustatraf fi kulli fanin Mustadhraf* 1942; 90). Thus power is nothing but a signifier- it images success even as it is a metaphor for tragedy in the waiting. Power, as portrayed in AH, is contingent and impermanent; it lies not in the hands of the person who wields it- reference Adham- but in the hands of the person who bestows it –reference Jabalāwī.

But our engagement with this problematic should necessarily start not inside the text but outside it; we have to look for Mahfuz's notion of power in order for us to appreciate the extent to which he has portrayed it faithfully. In the preface to AH, Mahfuz creates a meeting point between himself and one of the characters in the novel by name Arafah. It is the latter who, once, says thus:

You are one of the few ones who know how to write, why don't you write the story of our quarter? It is being told without cohesion…(AH p.3)

Here two elements in Africa's notions of power and how it is wielded in the public sphere appear for our contemplation-the ability to write and knowledge of the hi/story of humanity.

One the one hand, Mahfuz appears to be suggesting that the ability to write has the potential of conferring on the writer power and authority. Thus to write is to become powerful; to author is to become an authority. On the other hand, the power that writing confers on the writer is however hinged on what is written; on the subject matter of the intellectual endeavour; on the knowledge of history. Writing of history, Edward Said reminds us, is "one of the essential foundations of power, guiding its strategies and charting its progress". (E. Said: "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals" 2001). Thus Mahfuz chooses the history of the North-African public sphere as a fountain of his creativity. But in re-writing the history of Egypt in order to re-write the history of the world, Mahfuz sets for himself an agenda; he treats history as a means toward an end - "…the documentation of the …complaints of the oppressed and those in need" (AH p.3). The end for which Mahfuz strives also includes the sharp portrayal of Egypt's public sphere in which "private citizens" move about "with bodies that are virtually naked …" (AH p.4); it includes the necessity of speaking "truth to power' (E. Said: Peace and Its Discontents, p. 184-85); it also includes the necessity of waking the oppressed up from slumber- "those whose body have become accustomed to injustice… (those who) have sought refuge in patience and held on to hope" (AH. P.3). Thus while speaking "truth to power" through the act of re-telling the story of the quarter, Mahfuz actually desires to *speak courage to the poor*. Thus he re-writes history of Egypt with a view towards confronting "dogma and orthodoxy" (E. W. Said: *Representations of the Intellectual* 1994; 11); his creativity is targeted at embarrassing power, the powerful and the powerless in the public-private spheres of Arab society.

Two of such powers that are evident in the public sphere in Egypt are religion and science. The first is treated with familiarity and divinity, the second with mooted reverence and awe; the first speaks to and about the cultural identity of the Egyptians, the second functions in raising questions about future destinies and possibilities of the Egyptian nation. In confronting these powers, or rather in imaging the essence and consequence of these powers in Egypt's socio-political and economic reality, the writer in Mahfuz outrightly discards the rule of neutrality in the sphere in-between and pitches his tent with science. One day Arafah's wife, in a typical characteristic manner of an ordinary Muslim member of Egypt's public sphere, says thus: "God is all powerful". Her husband quickly counters by saying: "It is the same with magic [science]; it is all powerful.' In another instance in the novel Arafa says with effrontery: 'I have something no one else has, not even Jabalāwi: I have magic, which can achieve things for the quarter that Jabal, Rifa'a and Qasim put together could not have achieved" (AH 333). Thus he, in this instance, dismisses the powers in the hand of

religion as being mythical, reactionary, retrogressive and primeval and adulates and celebrates the power of science and scientific endeavor.

The conflict over the status of science and religion in Egypt's public sphere returns us to the problematic of status with reference to the public office in AH. This is evidenced in the character of Adham. Before his ascension to the office of the director of the Great House, he used to live a reclusive life. But as soon as he becomes the director he becomes remorseful about the paraphernalia of public office; of the limitations that public office puts on its occupiers; of the change in status that it usually brings to its occupiers. Thus he says: "woe unto the Great House, it tires me, changes people's perception of my person and deprives me of peace. Let it go to blazes (AH p. 18). In other words, Adham is unable to make himself as adequate as possible to his status "by means of a set of signs and marks pertaining to physical bearing, clothing and accommodations, gestures of generosity and munificence, spending behaviour and so on" (M. Foucault: *The Care of the Self* p. 85). Unlike Jabalāwī who revels in his status as the sovereign in the quarter and who is "charmed by the sound of praise" (AH. p.13) Adham sees nothing to be happy for in his status. He images characters in Africa's public sphere who find themselves in power not by choice but by compulsion; characters who see the public sphere as that of service not an opportunity to enrich themselves. In fact Adham shows his hatred for the public office when he says "God damn this estate" (27). His expulsion from the Great House, therefore, does not come to him as a surprise. (49)

The above is, however, only a perspective. The other perspective is a caricature of the notion of status in the patriarchal setting of Egypt's public-private sphere where a man's worth and status in the pubic sphere lies in and is determined not by his contribution to the public weal but in/by the number of women under his care. One of the characters in the novel named Zakarya is seen in his constant pursuit of women. Upon being questioned over his behaviour he responds by saying that his marriage to women from the quarters lies in his desire to strengthen his link with them. But the narrator goes on to say: "In our alley the capacity to love women is a thing men boast of, and it gives a man a prestige as great or greater than that of being a chief". (AH 286). In other words in North-African societies, love of women is synonymous with the search, by men, for authority; the urge in men to establish their authority over women.

But just as the category of the woman remains, as is the case with Abu Ris in Tayyeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, a myth that men may never be able to unravel (A. A. Oladosu: "Authority Versus Sexuality" 2004:113-139), the provision of a precise definition for the word "authority"[12] - a definition that would be consensual and applicable to the multiplicity of disciplines in which the category is relevant, remains a problematic. However, in reading for "authority" in AH, I find Friedman's perspective quite useful. He distinguishes between "being *in* authority" and "being *an* authority". (R. B. Friedman: On the Concept of Authority in Political Philosophy" 1990: 56-91). Being *in* authority means occupying some official position that empowers a person to issue commands or directives while being *an* authority involves accepting the law, utterance, or position of a person by another person even though the latter "does not or even cannot comprehend the grounds on which the utterance rest" (ibid 57).

AH amplifies the above categorizations in the public sphere of the quarter and, by extension and implication that of Arab-African societies. These include the authority of those *in* authority represented by Adham, Gabal, Qasim, Rifaa and 'Arafah and the trajectory of being *an* authority represented by Jabalāwī. The first authority is contingent and bestowed, the second is presumably self-endowed, self-subsisting; the first is accountable, questionable and persuasive, the second is self-accounting, unquestionable and coercive. To be *an* authority, along with Hannah Arendt, is to make people obey you "without demanding to be persuaded" (H. Arendt: "What is Authority?" 1968; 91-141). This is exactly what Jabalāwī does in the novel. His authority is premised on coercion not persuasion; it is meant for the pursuit of his own good not for the good of the public. Thus he employs the services of the gangsters in order to maintain his stranglehold over the public sphere and the latter subsequently make the quarter inhabitable (AH p.170). The ordinary masses in the quarter, having been denied their rights, and having lost hope of living a good life, soon take flight from the normal to the abnormal- they resort to "drugs, terrorism, and begging" (AH 94). Thus AH could be said to have been deliberately written by Mahfuz to, in line with the narrator in Tayyeb Salih's *magnum opus*, *Season of Migration to the North*, dismantle the authority of the Egyptian bourgeoisie-a bourgeoisie that is "in no way connected with the reality of …(Egyptian) life, (a bourgeoisie) which is more dangerous to the future of Africa than imperialism (T. Salih: *Season of Migration to the North*1969; 120)

This paper has attempted to explore the notion of spheres in Egypt's cultural milieu using Najib Mahfuz's novel, AH, as guide. It is evident from the above that notions of spheres/spaces among the Arab-African is like a palimpsest-it features the public, the private, the sphere in-between and, indeed, the sphere behind the public sphere. Whereas much studies on AH have been focused on its portrayal of the socio-religious, cultural and political situation in the Arab world, this study might be found to be significant in its attempt to establish a nexus between creativity and political reality; in its engagement with the dialectics, both in fiction and in reality, of the categories of power, status and authority in Africa's heterotopia; in its affirmation of, in line with Said, the connection between literary practice and "existential actualities of human life" (E. Said: *The World, the Text and the Critic* 1983;5). All these constitute the internal elements in Najib Mahfuz's aesthetics, his language of referentiality and the goal of his vocation; the elements, in turn, assist us derive meaning from and in Africa's public sphere even as they enrich our pursuit of the meaning of their "meaning".

1.   Reference to Cairo and the North Africa in this paper is strictly to the Arab-Muslim context of the city and the region.

2.   The text of Ibn Qayyim's goes in part thus: "properly speaking the rulers (al-Umara) are obeyed (only to the extent) that their commands are consistent with the (articulations) of the religious sciences (al-Ilm). Hence the duty to obey the rulers derives from the duty to obey the jurists (fa ta'atuhum taba'an li ta'at al-ulama)". For analysis of Ibn Qayyim's opinion on power and authority in Islamic culture and legal history see: K. Abou el-Fadl: *Speaking in God's Name* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003)

3.   Wasil b. Ata emerged as a theologian during the second Islamic century. His school was then known as the Mu'tazilites. The common story often quoted in the heresiographical works is that during the confusion caused on the status of a sinful person and whether such a person could still be regarded as a Muslim or not. Before Wasil's teacher al-Hasan al-Basri could reply, Wasil b. 'Ata interjected and claimed: 'Such a person is not a believer, nor a

disbeliever, rather he is of 'an intermediate rank between the two ranks (of faith and disbelief)' (al-manzila bayna al-manzilatayn)'. On Wasil and the Mutazilite school see: M. M Sharif: *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowits 1963)

4.   See N. Andy: *The Intimate Enemy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1893)

5.   Some of Mahfuz's novels that have generated much controversies include *Tharthara fawq al-Nil* (Chattering on the Nile) and Miramar. For an analysis of this novel and the controversies they generated in Cairo see: F. M. Najjar: "Islamic Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals: The Case of Naguib Mahfouz" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* vol. 25 no. 1 (1998) 139-168

6.   On attempts that were made on Mahfuz's life see the above.

7.   Here reference is being made to studies on Mahfuz in Arabic language and most of which are accessible and available to the public in Cairo. For insights into the religious criticism of Mahfuz see: M. J. Kishk, Awlad Hdratina fihd Qawldn (Cairo: al-Zahra' li-'lam al-'Arabi, 1989) and for the literary see, among others: S. Khashaba: "Awlad Haratina lil-Iman, lil-Insaniyya, wa li Misr,' al-Ahrdm, 11 November 1994; Ahmad 'Abd al-Mu'ti Hijazi, 'Awlad Haratina bayna 'Alam al-Mu'allif wa Wahy al-Waqi' al-Ahram, 30 November 1994

8.   This statement is credited to the Prophet of Islam in a famous tradition (Hadith).

9.   What I have termed Mahfuz's politics is his penchant to be "open" and "hidden" with his personal conviction; his unpreparedness to give straight answers to straight questions. On this see his: N. Mahfuz: *Hawla al-Din wa al-Dimuqratiyya* (Cairo: al-Dar al-Misriyya al-Lubnaniyya, 1990); Najib Mahfuz, Atahaddath Ilaykum (Beirut: Dar al-'Awda, 1977); Ahmad Muhammad Atiyah, Ma'a NajTb Mahfu; (Damascus: 1971); In English see M. Mikhail, Studies in the Short Fiction of Mahfouz and Idris (New York University Studies in Near Eastern Civilization, No. XVI 1992)

10.   This is taken from a track of a record produced by the late Nigerian (Afrobeat) musician, Fela Anikulapo Kuti.

11.   Generally Mahfuz has a negative perspective to life. According to him "humanity is of tragedy, lives in tragedy and is destined for tragedy". Most of his characters either commit suicide, as is the case in *Bidaya wa Nihayat,* get killed or imprisoned as we have it, for example, in *al-Tariq* . On this see: S. Somekh: *The Changing Rhythm* (Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers 1973)

12.   On the difficulty posed by the word authority to researchers in the humanities   and the social sciences see: R. Tuck: "Why is Authority Such a problem?" in *Philosophy*, *Politics and Society* (ed) P. Laslett, W. Runciman and Q. Skinner   (Oxford: Oxford   University Press, 1972)

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