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The Cool Air

A rush of cool air greets me as I enter the brightly lit room. The chill contrasts sharply with the stifling Cairo heat—still almost unbearable on an October afternoon—that pervaded the obstetrics clinic on the other side of the threshold. Wails of crying infants and worried murmurs of mothers and mothers-to-be fall silent as the door closes behind me. Shelves laden with “specimens” quickly catch my attention as my eyes adjust to the room’s sanitized light.

Before me, a scene from a horror film: a glimpse into the laboratory of a doctor pushing the boundaries between science and sadism. Deformed fetuses, ruptured uteruses, extracted fibroids, excised vulvae, and other gruesome parts float lifelessly in jars of yellow liquid fitted with QR codes. A diorama presents a fetus floating in a barrel of fluid. Headless torsos of pregnant women, lifelike diagrams of pelvic anatomy, and color illustrations of specimens on display adorn the wall space above the shelves. To my left, a framed collection of gynecological equipment glistens ominously like instruments of torture.

Sorrow suddenly overcomes dread. Tears slide down my face. A shiver overtakes my body; I realize the cool air is not for the relief of visitors but to sustain the flesh-filled jars surrounding me. I am reminded of H. P. Lovecraft’s story about cold drafts and the experiments of moribund doctors they obscure.¹

This place is the newly renovated Naguib Mahfouz Museum of Obstetrics and Gynecology, located in Egypt’s oldest and busiest gynecology ward at

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1. H. P. Lovecraft, “Cool Air,” in *The Complete Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft* (New York: Chartwell Books, 2014), 373–81. Also reminiscent of the importance of scientific refrigeration’s importance to biomedical research, see Joanna Radin, *Life on Ice: A History of New Uses for Cold Blood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

Cairo University's Obstetrics and Gynecology Hospital.² The institution has a storied history.³ The macabre museum, although meant for teaching, largely functions as a shrine to the doctor who founded it. Naguib Mahfouz Pasha (1882–1974) is Egypt's most esteemed gynecologist and fistula surgeon, one of the few Egyptians lionized alongside the colonial doctors at Qasr al-Ainy Medical School and Hospital. Existing histories glorify him as a nationalist hero, more deity than man, a success story of postcolonial medicine after the triumph of Egypt's anticolonial movement and independence from Britain.⁴ In over thirty years of medical practice, what began as experiments in an office sink became a collection heralded as one of the best in the world.

This very real museum is no weird fiction, yet the morbid viscosity of the good doctor's work resonates with Lovecraft's reminder: "It is a mistake to fancy that horror is associated inextricably with darkness, silence, and solitude," and not the brightly lit domains of that which we call science.⁵ These jarred specimens were people once. Many of them were Egyptian and Black African domestics treated by Mahfouz at Qasr al-Ainy Hospital, and in the free clinics and infant welfare centers he established in Cairo in the 1920s and 1930s.⁶ Mahfouz used these women to perfect surgical techniques for ailments like fistulas—techniques he would later boast had a 100% success rate.⁷ These women's stories are neither found on specimen labels, nor gestured to in the exhibit signage. Traces of their

2. Shehab Fakhry Ismail, "Al-Tajammud Fi al-Zaman: Ziyarat Ile Mathaf Naguib Mahfouz Pasha Lil Walada," *Medina*, May 29, 2017. www.medinaportal.com/naj

3. On the history of midwifery, obstetrics, and gynecology in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egypt, see Khaled Fahmy, "Women, Medicine, and Power in Nineteenth Century Egypt," in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 35–72; Hibba Abugideiri, *Gender and the Making of Modern Medicine in Colonial Egypt* (Farnham, Surrey, England & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010); Sherry Sayed Gadelrab, *Medicine and Morality in Egypt: Gender and Sexuality in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

4. See, for instance, Yusuf Sumaykah, *Al-Doktor Naguib Mahfouz: Tabib Amrad al-Nisa Wa al-Wilada Takrim Wa Taqdir* (Al-Qahirah: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1983); Mohammed Jawadi, *Al-Doktor Naguib Mahfouz: Ra'id Atibba' al-Nisa' Wa al-Wilada* (Cairo: al-Hayah al-Misriyah al-Ammah lil Kitab, 1986); and Beth Baron, "Of Fistulas, Sutures, and Silences," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 1 (2021): 133–37.

5. Lovecraft, "Cool Air," 373.

6. Naguib Mahfouz, *Hayat Tabib* (al-Qahira: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1966), 136; Naguib Mahfouz, *The Life of an Egyptian Doctor* (Edinburgh, 1966), 85.

7. Mahfouz, *Hayat Tabib*, 120; Naguib Mahfouz, "Urinary Fistulae in Women," in *Comptes Rendus Du Congrès International de Médecine Tropicale et d'Hygiène*, ed. Mohamed Khalil, vol. Vol. III (Le Caire: Imprimerie Nationale, 1931), 532–35.

lives, and their consent to be preserved, are similarly difficult to recover from Mahfouz's own published research and writing.

Despite its grotesque curatorial logic, Mahfouz's museum and its records are the sole remaining archive of these women's existence. When the museum opened in 1932, Mahfouz had already successfully preserved approximately three thousand specimens.⁸ More would soon follow. Vivid color illustrations of each specimen fill the pages of the collection's three-volume catalog, *The Atlas of Mahfouz's Obstetrics and Gynecological Museum*.⁹ Even after death, the doctor ensured these women's bodies would be put to work.

Cold, "objective" histories of modern science and medicine tell us that these women's pain, their deaths, were not in vain. They are deemed necessary to ensure the progress of medicine and its disciples, to ensure that others might avoid similar fates, to think only of lives saved and never those lost. Looking around the macabre museum, I rub my arms to ward off its cool air.

I can't help but think of the global history of medical experimentation and demonstration on Black women; of the violent history of gynecology; of the controversial legacy of J. Marion Sims, whose research Mahfouz admired and expanded upon; of Sims' experimental surgeries on Betsey, Anarcha, Lucy and all the enslaved African women who suffered under his knife, whose names are lost to history; of the women in this museum whose names remain lost as well.

Bettina Judd's poetry rings in my mind: *Great discoveries are made / on cushioned lessons and hard falls / Sims invents the speculum / I invent the wincing*.¹⁰ I think of Henrietta Lacks—of the Black women today, like myself, my mother, and my grandmothers, who fear death at the hands (or indifference) of good doctors, like Mahfouz. *Like any other curiosity, upon her death she will be dissected*.¹¹

I mourn the women in jars before me.

Their bodies, however fragmented, speak volumes to those who choose to listen. Like other collections of human remains in the museal archives of the history of science and medicine, they whisper stories of racialized medicine; of the ethics of

8. Naguib Mahfouz, *The History of Medical Education in Egypt* (Cairo, 1935), 84; Mahfouz, *Hayat Tabib*, 216; Mahfouz, *The Life of an Egyptian Doctor*, 140. On the preservation process used, see Boris Boulgakow, "The Use of Antiseptics in Prohibiting Bacterial Growths in Museum Jars," *Museums Journal* 33, no. 9 (December 1, 1933): 318.

9. Naguib Mahfouz, *Atlas of Mahfouz's Obstetric and Gynecological Museum*, 3 vols. (Cairo, Egypt: Fouad I University. Faculty of Medicine. Mahfouz's Obstetric and Gynecological Museum, 1949).

10. Bettina Judd, "Betsey Invents the Speculum," in *Patient* (New York: Black Lawrence Press, 2014), 32.

11. Bettina Judd, "The Researcher Presents Joice Heth," in *Patient* (New York: Black Lawrence Press, 2014), 6.

collecting and displaying human remains. They speak of the heavy, difficult burden of writing histories that are accountable to those whose labors (in life, death, and beyond) subsidized the careers and knowledge of distinguished experts.

Should you ever visit Mahfouz's museum, reflect on the untold stories of those forcefully interred there. Beware that unnatural chill.



FIGURE 1. Specimen and color-plate illustrations from the Naguib Mahfouz Museum. Photo: Author, 2019.

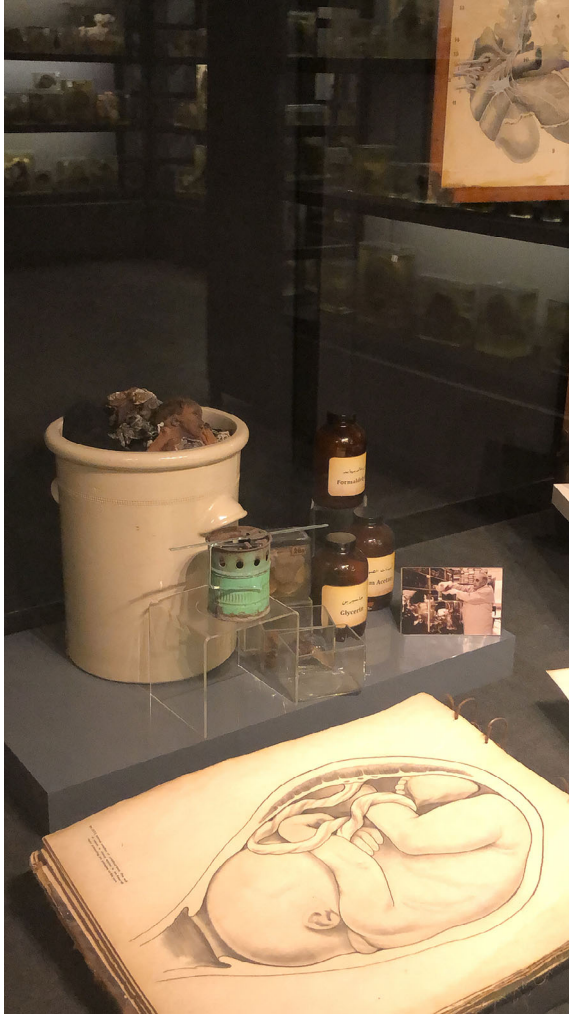


FIGURE 2. Diorama illustrating specimen preservation. Photo: Author, 2019.