

A Moral Reading of Mahfouz's Fountain and Tomb (Hekayat Haretna)

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### Recommended Citation

Al-leithy, Amal. "A Moral Reading of Mahfouz's Fountain and Tomb (Hekayat Haretna)." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.3 (2008): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1374>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1374)

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**Volume 10 Issue 3 (September 2008) Article 4**  
**Amal Al-Leithy,**  
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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss3/4>>

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.3 (2008)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss3/>>

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**Abstract:** In her article "A Moral Reading of Mahfouz's *Fountain and Tomb (Hekayat Haretna)*," Amal Al-Leithy analyses Naguib Mahfouz's *Fountain and Tomb*. In Al-Leithy's reading, Mahfouz delineates a gloomy picture of modern humanity still living in a struggle against destitution, ignorance, squalor, and the power of superstition. Society is portrayed as seeped in hopelessness as Mahfouz stresses the physical and moral degradation of his protagonists. He draws a dismal picture of life as swinging between two poles: the fountain of life and the tomb of death. In a symbolic alley in 1920s Cairo, Mahfouz describes humanity's predicament swaying between meaningfulness and absurdity and between the belief in God and belief in science. Through the episodes of the text, Mahfouz does not only refer to the implausibility of maintaining the sanctity previously associated with institutionalized religion if humanity wants to get rid of absurdity, but he also demythologizes the idea of an all-controlling, omnipotent God. Since he is not a dispassionate bystander, but, rather, a committed thinker with a clear stance, he asserts his belief in the dethronement of religion by modern science represented by the demolition of the famous *takiya* (a special building for mystic Sufis) in the alley and by the end of the myth of the High Sheikh, a God-like figure that has never been seen by any of the residents of the alley.

## Amal AL-LEITHY

### A Moral Reading of Mahfouz's *Fountain and Tomb (Hekayat Haretna)*

Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz describes -- especially in his social novels -- a societal panorama of Egyptian life. His renditions of modern Egyptian life are not just gripping literature; they are the musings of a philosopher and the notations of a sociologist. However, despite the fact that I feel spell-bound by his captivating style and his smooth flow of themes and the intimate liaison he establishes between reader and character, certain rigidity inhibits me whenever I read his novels. This rigidity, I contend, is due to the violation of his novels of a firm belief I cherish, namely that literature should educate and edify and not confine itself to entertainment or propagate misleading ideas. Edification means in this context to enlighten readers about the relation between man and God and the inevitability of His supreme control over the universe. In this paper I focus on a new reading of Mahfouz's text *Hekayat Haretna* commonly known in English as *Fountain and Tomb* from this moral perspective. Although I have read the original text in Arabic, all quotes in this paper are taken from the English translation as they are addressed for their thematic value and not for the scrutiny of stylistic virtues or lexical analysis.

Composed of seventy-eight tales or episodes, *Fountain and Tomb* is better referred to as a book of tales. The text contains a warm and minutely-observed collection of stories about the coming-of-age from the perspective of the narrator, a little boy who seeks awareness through his exploration of the nooks and crannies of the alley where he lives. He is shown to be a daydreamer with a beautiful voice and graceful features. Throughout the book, he recites his scrappy childhood memories tainted with the discernment only an adult can give to events in the remote past. Thus, readers learn about the life of the alley through his mind as his life unravels before him. Despite the fact that this narrator, whose name remains anonymous until the end of the book, is almost the only reciprocal connection between the tales, they unfold smoothly and simply, clues left behind in one tale are picked up in another to offer the readers the luxury of deducing connections and holding comparisons. Tales are juxtaposed, then, for contrast or reinforcement. *Fountain and Tomb* can be read on two levels: on the mere societal that concerns itself with reproducing a picture of life and the deeper philosophical that raises profound questions in the readers' sensibility. This reading suggests the text as a social panorama of the working class with its emphasis on portraying life-like people toiling and striving in anguish together with the more relaxed *petit bourgeoisie*. A well-trodden ground for Mahfouz, this social perspective suggests that the book is a kaleidoscope of a certain part of Cairo constricted by squalor and destitution during the 1920s. Such a reading would be dominated by the random vignettes described and the loaded texture of life in that particular neighborhood at a specific point of time. It focuses on various layers of Egyptian life from political protest to religious sentiments, and from gang feud to cultural tremors. The episodic structure of the book and the numerous slices of life render it hard to get into depth with a small number of characters, but are effective in revealing real sections of Egyptian society. Nazeer Ja'far comments on Mahfouz's social canvas saying that "his rich and variable literary world is the encyclopedia of Egyptian life in the 20th century" (19). The second level, which also makes use of the social aspects, addresses more significant issues. It regards the utilization of the minutiae of everyday life as a tool that serves to instigate readers to ponder the aim of existence and the rapport between the creator and creation, thereby examining the place of religion in modern life as conceived by the writer. Thus, situations are based on reality but are probed for universal significance through the analysis of arcane meanings. Although time, place, and detail figure prominently at this level of reading too, they are used to focus on the examination of changing human values. Thus viewed, *Fountain and Tomb* can be understood as a creation of the partial and the minimal that is conducive to the complex and the general. The neighborhood examined, then, becomes a microcosm representing the vicissitudes of humanity at large.

Through the seventy-eight episodes that constitute the text, Mahfouz depicts a dismal picture of the predicament of modern man who is still living in a struggle against destitution, ignorance, squalor, idiocy, and the power of superstition. Society is portrayed as seeped in hopelessness and absurdity as the writer stresses the physical and moral degradation of the protagonists. More biting criticized is their cherishing of ancient taboos and outmoded values. Mahfouz makes no attempt to glamorize this folk life; rather, he furnishes it with abstruse pessimism. Commenting on a similar situation in *Midaq Alley*, Marius Deap states that by depicting such an ominous picture, the writer is in fact "shattering the mythical aura which surrounds the old Cairene quarter as the embodiment of Egyptian authenticity by showing us, first, its utter uncomeliness, and secondly, its remarkable lack of any redeeming moral values" (129). The whole picture Mahfouz presents is that of a distorted existence. The cosmic plight of humanity is that it lives in an absurd and meaningless universe and this is illustrated, for example, in Tale Seventy-Seven when Anwar Gelil exclaims: "I've just realized that I'm a student among competing students in a school which throws together students from antagonistic little lanes, in an alley in the middle of warring alleys, that I'm a creature among millions of creatures both seen and unseen on the ball of mud awhirl amid a solar system over which I have no control, that this system is itself lost in endless space, that all my life, myself included, is but a dew drop on one leaf of a lofty tree, and that I have to accept all this and at the same time lead my life as if sorrow and joy were of any importance" (115).

The very first tale of the book establishes this overpowering sense of absurdity and engages in an implicit investigation of mystical religion that led to this murkiness and gloom. Yet, in this dark tapestry, the writer suggests, there is a bright spot which is the promise of scientific progress. Through the description of the setting, Mahfouz highlights the apparent contradiction between science and superstition -- an awkward term for religion. The alley is governed by the *takiya* where the Sufis live and its narrow path leading to the cemetery at one end, and the great square leading to the big, urbanized city of Cairo on the other end. This way, the question of the place of religion in modern society is immediately established: "I enjoy playing in the small square between the archway and the *takiya* where the Sufis live. ... But it stands like a fortress, this *takiya*, circled by its garden wall. ... Aloof isolation drenches the whole compound. Our hands stretch toward the wall reaching for the moon" (11). With these lines, Mahfouz introduces the topography of the alley which in itself stresses the explicit contradiction between the scene of mystical beauty and low social strata and the other one of secular scientific progress. The other part of Cairo, Mahfouz insinuates, is a place for the elite, filled with deluxe palaces, modern buildings, and a civilized population. So, whereas the *takiya* is inhabited by "men of God," the great square is populated by the aristocracy (11). The division of the setting mirrors the idea of poles as people are divided between the fading role of religion on the one hand, and their attempts to cope with the allurements of Western values equated with modernity on the other, as translators Essam Fattouh, James Kenneson, and Soad Sobhy of *Fountain and Tomb* state in their introduction to the book: "At its wide end, the alley debouches into a large square leading to the infinite possibility of Cairo, Egypt and the world; at the other it goes through an archway to the restful square and garden of the Sufi *takiya* and then becomes a narrow path to the cemetery and the tombs of ancestors" (iv). Therefore, it represents humanity's predicament in the universe swinging between the fountain of life and the tomb of death, between the spiritual and the physical, between meaningfulness and absurdity, and between the belief in God and paradise and the belief in science and society. Mahfouz does not only allude to the unlikelihood of maintaining the holiness previously associated with institutionalized religion if humanity wants to rid itself of absurdity and meaninglessness, but he also demythologizes the notion of an all-controlling, all-powerful God. In the *takiya* lives a High Sheikh among the dervishes in near seclusion inside a house standing in the middle of a garden surrounded by high, impenetrable walls. No one in the alley has ever seen this god-like figure and no one tries to do so. However, the young narrator claims to have seen him and describes him to his father: "A dervish unlike these I've seen before. He is great with age but extremely tall; his face a pool of glowing light. His

cape is green, his long turban white. Everything about him is munificent beyond imagining -- the sight of him filling the whole universe" (11-12). Despite this beautiful description of the High Sheikh, he is equated in the narrator's mind with two things. The first is the meaninglessness associated with some Persian verses he pronounces: "I'm sad and someone could relieve my pain" ("Khoon deli khord wakudi hasel khared" 12). It suggests that religion, turned into some absurd teachings in people's minds that they repeat -- just like the narrator -- but never comprehend. Its message now is obscure and does not relate to people's sufferings and ambitions. Haim Gordon comments on the strange influence of this legendary figure over the alley inhabitants and he writes that "although the residents of the alley have never seen the High Sheikh, they all believe in his existence. Without understanding the High Sheikh's religious message, all the residents vouch as to his significance for life in the alley" (90). This memory is also equated in the narrator's mind with his yearning to taste the mulberries of the *takiya* tree. The High Sheik tosses him one, but when he goes to pick it up, he finds nothing. This desire to taste the forbidden fruit brings to mind images of Adam's violation of his promises to God and draws the readers' attention to religious patterns permeating *Fountain and Tomb*. That the boy finds nothing alludes, among other things, to the unfulfilled promises of religion that yield only void and nothingness and implies humanity's need to the option of science which religion strives to curb so as to maintain its mythological power over people's minds.

Many critics of Mahfouz's text comment on his calculated choice of the Sufi *takiya* in order to symbolize religion: "Sufis or mystics," asserts David Watson, "live a life withdrawn from the rest of humanity, seeking close metaphysical connection with the divine life eschewing concerns of the here and now" (105). It is made to appear at odds with -- or at least detached from -- the turmoil and turbulence of everyday life, and thus people's clinging to believe in it seems absurd. The description of the *takiya* in opposition to the liveliness and dynamism coming from the other end of the alley in the form of hectic demonstrations and defiant anti-imperialist protests is significant. The narrator, the alley residents, and people at large live somewhere between these ends. Some are drawn closer to the introverted world of religion; others are nearer to the developing secular world of science and the majority of them fuse tradition and modernity into an awkward reality. Accordingly, the description of the place is not intended merely to indicate the framework within which the characters move. It is in itself a living, acting element. It is important to note that Mahfouz focuses again on this idea of the *takiya* and the High Sheikh in the last episode of the book. The wasteland of the desert area of the *takiya* is made to encircle the city just as death encircles life and nothingness existence. The other tales accentuate, through realistic detail, the excitement and positive effect of the world of fast-growing scientific advancement and the ambivalence and negativity of the world of the sanctuary. Weaving the palpable and the obscure, the subtle and the shocking, the outdated and the updated, Mahfouz then depicts a world of brutality, gloom, misery, and poverty in the rest of the tales. It is a world that abounds in wounded souls, bloody expectations, feverish wishes, and disgruntled hopes. Physical degradation is a noticeable mark of the inhabitants of the alley. Most of them are characterized by their physical imperfections, loud voices, demonic features, sharp tongues, diseases, and ailments. For instance, the narrator's next-door neighbor, Um Zaki, looks "as big as a cow" (13) and Um Abdu, the most well-known woman in the alley, is "as strong as a mule and as insolent as a gangster" (23). Hammam, the lover of Henaya, the nearly-literate daughter of Allwana the female deliveryman, dallala, is described as "an ugly gallabiya maker's apprentice with a bad reputation and a foul temper" (52). Radwan Effendi, whose son uses his strength "in the name of manhood and self-respect" (53) to bully his sister and turn her life into hell, locks himself up in the graveyard after the death of both son and daughter of consumption to be near their tombs. The blind beggar, Ibrahim the Ape, fights with the people and the police and turns into "a blind destructive force that engulfs the whole alley" (59). Hawash Adad, the rich man of the alley who gave a big holiday bash to many guests, wakes up in the morning to find everything in his house smashed to pieces. People are divided in their interpretation of the incident as some say it is the wrath of God that caused it and others allege that the *Jinn* did it because of a vow

Hawash made and never fulfilled. Abdu, the narrator's epileptic little friend falls on his face "with a scream ripping out of him. His body goes rigid, his arms and legs shake and he foams at the mouth" in an episode that combines both physical and moral degradation (75). When his condition improves, he scolds the thug of the alley who surprisingly does nothing to him except sympathizing with his touched soul. Thus, the disease is shifted "from natural phenomenology to the transcendental world" as it is clearly "not considered an ordinary illness, but rather the disclosure of nature's occult divinity" (Paladin 1060).

Moral degradation is also shown at work in the alley: the tales describe loose girls, prostitutes, extra-marital relationships, faithlessness, and lack of honesty. To prevent her daughter Henaya from marrying her criminal lover, Allwana visits shrines to make vows and reads the future in cards. Sitt Nagayah, the lonely lady, talks to cats and dogs and her "afreet brother" (38). Nazzlah, the whore, walks out on her husband when he falls seriously ill and leaves him "lying flat on bed, alone, spitting blood and coughing till his lungs burst" (40). The Lebanese-Greek wife of Patrick Al-Hamawy runs away from him for no known reason. Ahsan, daughter of Um Abdu, works as a belly-dancer and prostitute in a night club. Am Yansoon marries his dead son's fiancée who gives birth to a baby after a short while so that he becomes "the father of his own grandson" (55). The depressed Saqr Mowazeeni hates his family and calls it "a family that doesn't know death more than it knows life" (71). The character Gaalus Dananeeri forbids his cast-off wives from marrying again so "they're stuck with a tough choice between begging and whoring to stay alive" (73). Moreover, the characters drawn to the power of religious belief are presented as superstitious. Some of them show a dubious capacity to interpret dreams and read cards and others allege to talk to the *Jinn*. Key figures in the text are involved in sorcery and black magic and some work as fortune tellers. When Um Zaki falls ill and loses her weight and sense of humor, people suggest that it must have been caused by the *Jinn* and that she would never recover unless by undergoing the rite of exorcism (*zar*).

Coming-of-age in various forms is also described in episodes relating to the narrator's growing sexuality. In Tale Five while he was still apparently too young, the narrator describes how he escorts his mother to visit the prefect's wife and provides a sensual description of her welcoming attitude: "She lifts me high into the air, then crushes me to her breast. I shrink into deep softness and feel her great paunch, a lush mattress which floods my being with warmth" (17). In Tale Six, he explains how he starts a sensual relation with one of his mates in the mosque school experiencing the drunkenness of pleasure. In Tale Seven, in a scene in which neighbors gather on the roof of the building to chat and enjoy good weather, he notes that his heart finds real ecstasy "in the presence of feminine beauty" (20). In Tale Ten he highlights his physical relationship with Ahsan, daughter of Um Abdu. Showing a more mature narrator, Tale Twenty-Four centers on how he fools around with his neighbor Senaya who "lures [him] into the rose garden where she kindles all the fires of hell" and how they know "neither peace nor safety and pluck buds while [they] tremble in fear of the guardians" (37). In the next tale, he becomes involved in an emotional relationship with Fathaya, the sister of Senaya. Nudity is a recurrent motif that is so much spread throughout the book that it seems forced upon the kind of life lived by simple working-class people. In Tale Two, the narrator tells how he sees Um Zaki, his neighbor sitting on a sofa tanning and combing her hair "utterly naked" (13). Heavy with the feeling of guilt for not revealing the truth about a murder he witnessed, the caller for prayer in the mosque is seen naked, shouting his long-suppressed confession and in Tale Sixty-One, the character Sitt Mashallah is caught by her husband naked and is therefore killed.

Violence is another aspect of the life of the alley and several tales in *Fountain and Tomb* end in murder and suicide often accompanied by disgrace, fire, nudity, epilepsy, and near insanity. Fights are almost the daily routine of the alley residents. Sturdy children bully the weak at the mosque school and thugs brutalize residents. In order to get a date with a beautiful prostitute, Senan Shalaby kills Um Elish, the egg peddler to steal the necessary money. Bergowi, who works in the falafel shop, fights with his customers and when one of them scolds him, he grabs the falafel pan and beats him over the

head with it until he dies. Then, the two families of both men swarm and start a bloody battle where bricks, clubs, and knives are put to work: "Several men get killed and the rest end up in jail" (60). In Tale Sixty, the character Bayumi is hanged after being convicted of murdering Zenab, the glass-bead peddler. But, Rumana, his best friend, confesses that he killed her because he was betrayed in love and friendship: they both "left him nothing but treachery and emptiness" (93). In Tale Sixty-One, Ibn Ayesha, the beggar, sneaks into Sitt Mashallah's house one night certain that she is at a wedding but suddenly she comes back and he hides under the bed trembling where he hears her agreeing with a man to kill her husband. They make love and "their love-making takes a long time" (94). Naked and treacherous, she is caught red-handed with her lover by her husband who then kills both.

The notion of "ignorance is bliss" is introduced in several tales and episodes of the text. For example, in Tale Seventy, Anwar confirms "Whoever enjoys the kingdom of life ignorant of his origin and purpose, ignorant of the meaning of life, is worthy of the reverence due to sanctity" (106). When the young narrator massages his bare female neighbor's body, Um Zaki, he promises not to tell his mother and she is amazed at the fact that at this early age he "even know[s] that certain things are better left unsaid" (13). Good people are either defeated, disclosed to be dishonest and hypocrites, or melt into murky oblivion. The benevolent Mohamed Al-Zumr, who donated a large sum of money to build the alley mosque, is seen suffocating Sitt Sikeena, the widow. Shalaby Ilaly, who was so proud of his father, discovers after his death that he was accused of theft and jailed for a year. Yet, he goes on pretending to be proud of him claiming that the most important thing in the world is "knowing the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth" (69). Abdoun, the good man who "prays every evening in the small mosque, attends Friday lessons faithfully and makes a brother of the imam" ends up one day jumping from a high place killing himself (103). Salama, the local policeman, who is regarded as the embodiment of moral perfection and spotlessness, is defeated and forced to resign at the end by the deliberate mischief of his step-son in Tale Sixty-Four.

In sum, a sense of imprisonment and confinement pervades Mahouz's text. The confined setting of the alley, the repetitive nature of things done and said inside its boundaries, and the suffocating atmosphere of taboos, superstitions, and traditions lead to the downfall of some characters. The mosque caller to prayer locks himself up for days to relieve the punctures of his conscience for confessing to witnessing a man killing a woman. Except for Tawheeda, daughter of Am Ragab, who works in the government, all other women in the alley are caged, either physically locked up at home, or morally imprisoned by the power of customs and tradition. In Tale Forty, an unidentified youth who is locked up by his own father in a basement room shouts from behind the barred window "O darling, where are you?" (57). An unnamed child similarly calls upon passers-by to set him free by unlocking the door, as his mother locked it and left. Thus, Mahfouz portrays a repulsive picture of living where people suffer from all kinds of agonies and live a life devoid of beauty, comfort, or even adequacy. This picture of life is made all the more hideous by thugs who brutalize people and who are surrounded by an aura of sacredness and impregnability. Their mere existence in the alley provides protection and security; however, just like the power of institutionalized religion and belief in God that domineered people's lives for long eras, thugs brutalize residents by the overuse of their power. While they spread security for the people against the thugs and criminals of other alleys, they also fill their own people's hearts with fear and panic. They stretch their blind authority over the residents so that the narrator observes: "Woe to us when district strife grows uncommonly fierce" (81). Gaalus Dananeeri, the tyrant thug who spreads horror and injustice is offered the "holiness of fear." His vocal cords cannot make any sounds except growls of wrath and shrieks of rage and his small talk is a deluge of abuse: "He curses religion on his way home from worship. His rein is a time of terror, cowardice, shame and hypocrisy, a season of nightmare, hushed moan and misery, an age of devils and scabrous stories, the heyday of hopelessness and blocked roads (74). In this respect, Gordon suggests "Since thugs rule the alley, since the residents of the alley do not share a belief in working together for justice, one is struck by its similarity to Gebelawi Alley where Mahfouz puts forward his most manifest statement

in the issue of the precedence of science over religion" (90). The one who kills the thug is just a little boy who was trained by his mother to avenge his father's death. When the thug dies, "with him falls all his bold power, all his brutality, all his confidence in himself and the order of things" (74). The narrator calls this "a moment of lightening" (74). After his death, no one can take his place; there is no big boss for a time until people "were wondering if it wasn't about time to get the old protection system back in order again" (79). Then, the new thug, Zaghreb Balaqeeti, comes to assume power. He is kind and benevolent, unlike previous thugs. But, "despite his good intentions and kind character, one word from him puts [them] in chains" (86). He used to stop marriages he thinks would not work out and prevent divorces even if the couple cannot stand each other. So, with him a sense of awful dread, calamity engulfs the alley again.

The situation becomes more critical because the neighborhood is getting more educated: "people with tender sensibilities and insolent tongues" (86). The alley people decide to make a campaign against the protection game and they get rid of him: "At last the awesome position of Boss is eliminated and the gates open on a new age" (89). His dethronement by a bunch of "educated people" denotes the beginning of the disintegration of the institution of religion. Here, Mahfouz delineates clear religious symbols in the text: Labeeb, the sheikh of the mosque school, the imam of the mosque, and the caller to prayer. Sheikh Labeeb who is involved in sorcery and magic does virtually anything to provide himself with power including helping lovers meet and elope. However, in time he loses his authority and influence; he grows poor; his health decays and he only "threatens people with hellfire in the world to come, curses the age, and sighs with great regret for the good old days full of good folk now long gone" (101) and "schoolboys no longer venerate his sanctity but chase him around and jeer at him with taunting ditties" (101). Thus symbolized, religion is thereby demythologized by the newly-gained knowledge coming from schools while at the same time the sheikh of the mosque school is known for his pitiless treatment of the young children, together with his sharp tongue and narrow-mindedness. The imam of the mosque is depicted as a name-caller, a pathetic figure, unworthy of respect, and capable of absolute cruelty. When Ashur Iddenf, the toiling father of ten, complains to him that "Allah creates wealth but neglects [his] children," the enraged imam yells back "Our prophet Mohamed, God bless and grant him salvation, spent several nights with a big stone bound tight against his stomach to still the pangs of hunger, so get out of here, God damn you" (65). The caller to prayer, sheikh Aml Al-Mahdi, who is supposed to enjoy the courage and honesty associated with a cleric, sees Mohamed Al-Zumr, who donated a large sum of money to build the mosque, suffocating Sitt Sikeena, the widow, and "never has the nerve to confess it to the police" (64). Irked with a heavy sense of guilt, he is finally seen in a disgraceful, humiliating episode, naked and nearly insane the moment he reveals to Al-Zumr that he witnessed the murder. Unable to balance his religious instinct with the pressure of financial neediness, he is revealed as a hypocrite where "his piety and fear of God were one thing, his courage another" (64). These overt references to and descriptions of religion and religious symbols indicate Mahfouz's belief of how feeble an institution religion has become and how irrelevant it is to the concerns of everyday life of society as he sees it.

In contrast to the decaying symbols and presence of religion, there are powerful, confident symbols of science. Abdu, the son of Am Sukry, in Tale Sixty-Seven, wins a scholarship to study in England. This denotes the advent of Western solutions for the alley's problems as the narrator observes: "Thanks to him, we got electricity in our alley" (102). Thus enlightenment is acquired from afar by the reliance on the power of science presented as the alternative to religion. This is emphasized in the last two tales where Abdu (see above) reveals his desire to abolish the *takiya* to allow the new road that connects the alley and the outside world of Cairo to be paved. Many characters in *Fountain and Tomb* question the relevance of religion to people's worries, pains, and aspirations and express their far-fetched inquiries about the purpose of life and the plausibility of God. The character Okla Issuramati wonders in Tale Seventy-Two "where the land of Waka-Waka could be? And the wall of the world, where's that? And if a man looks over it, what will he see?" (109). Mahfouz gives them a vent to voice



these concerns by creating a character who does not only question these worries but also negates long-established facts and pronounces the inadequacy of myth: "Skepticism enters the alley in the person of a free-thinking schoolteacher. The whole district is scandalized when a young woman takes a job as a government clerk but it is clear that such behavior is soon to become acceptable and proper. ... The order of society has changed" (Fattouh, Sobhy, Kenneson v). These events coincide to denote the fast change that befalls the alley and its inhabitants. Tawheeda, daughter of Am Ragab, joins government service and is thus faced with a storm of protests and rumors. Although people misinterpret her objective, it is not clear in the text whether she did so for mere opposition against outdated norms or for other less significant reasons. Trevor Le Gassick comments that Mahfouz creates characters "whose dilemma reflects the values and mores of an Egyptian society that is changing rapidly through contact with the catalyst of an intrusive alien and materialist civilization advancing from the west" (3).

Although still retaining an abstract idea of God, Mahfouz seems to be so overwhelmed by scientific wonders that he supports the notion that "belief in God demands belief in His lack of concern for our world, just as it implies that we're on our own" as a character says in the text (111). But, since there are still supporters for the other line of reasoning, he sets up dialogue and argumentation between the two opinions. For example, the narrator's father defends religion apologetically and feebly rather than vigorously and assertively in the sense that truth might ultimately do more harm than good and that "certain things are better left unsaid" as Um Zaki puts it previously (13). The writer gives way to the doubtful teacher to express his unsavory philosophy: "Mankind won't take life lightly just because God has left the world; there is no avoiding high resolve and new achievements, no escape from morality, law, and punishment. People might even begin to look to medical science for help in fighting weaknesses of thought and behavior just as they now seek its aid against physical disease. ... They will find themselves in a ship without a captain on a sea without a shore in a time without a beginning or end" (111). Mahfouz conceives God as a metaphysical force of oppression that leaves humanity altogether in life alone, and he administers the final blow of death to engender in the reader an awareness of the incongruity between taboos and facts of life and to underscore the idea of opposite poles. Thus, his presentation of the two poles makes it easier to discern his own intellectual position as he is not merely a dispassionate onlooker, but rather a committed logician with a clear stance. The argument for the incessant suitability of religion to modern society appears frail and fragile compared to that of secular science, as if the author debilitates the first to make the second look all the stronger and all the brighter: "Let us then establish without further ado that the social creed which the novelist adopts is that of the secularist socialist and the one he discards is that of the revivalist Islamist" (El-Enany 73). Then comes the moment when the impact of science tries to oust religion: the government decides to tear the *takiya* down for an urban-renewal project. People defy the decision, although not as strongly as believers are supposed to. They just comment that the blessings of the *takiya* protect them and that songs in praise of God are heard only from it. For them, religion represents a sort of sanctity and safety despite the fact that the Sufis reside in aloof isolation and are unavailable for direct advice. It is significant that Mahfouz reveals that the originator of this urbanization project is Abdu Sukry, the one who brought electricity to the alley: "The *takiya* blocks the natural flow of the main street ... the cemetery is slated to be moved to the Khafeer desert leaving that space for full urbanization" (114). The symbolic as well as real-life power of the *takiya* is the stabilizing counterweight to change, and when it is razed, science and modernity will take over. By the narration of the rejoicing in the demolition of the *takiya* Mahfouz suggests that it is certain that modern society has no place for religion dismissing it as "myth."

In Tale Seventy-Eight an attempt is made at reconciling both sides. Sheikh Omar Fikri opens a business office between the mosque and the school as a connection between the alley and the big city and the narrator expresses his desire to see the High Sheikh of the *takiya* and sheikh Omar responds: "Don't you think the *takiya* lies outside the walls of life?" (116). Fikri's attempt ends in a firm belief

that "Here's a whole neighborhood repeating his name [that of the high sheikh] in spite of the fact that almost no one claims to have seen him" (116) and he expresses his skepticism of the presence of that God-like figure. Having marched once to the *takiya* to see him, all the dervishes were startled. He thus came to realize that "Legal penetration of the *takiya* was difficult or downright impossible and sneaking in was clearly against the law" (116). To further explore the initiation of religion's impact on people's minds, Fikri goes to the Bureau of the Waqf (Endowment) and gathers information about the High Sheikh, but finds nothing except that he has miraculous powers and so he says, "We see the *takiya* and the dervishes, but we don't see the high Sheikh." However, he insists that "there must be a way to prove his existence" (117).

To conclude, Mahfouz's attitude consists manifestly in denouncing institutionalized religion while retaining a belief in the abstract idea of God. Through anecdotes, legends, and reminiscences of the narrator, Mahfouz combines the distorted existence of the people of the alley with a deformed belief in religious fatalism and a mythology that thwarts any attempt to bring about a change for the better. Thus, the irrelevance of religion to the social predicament of modern humanity and the fiasco of resorting to religious mysticism is underscored. The secular, Western world of science is thus trumpeted and glamorized as a solution for the lives of the alley's people and their predicament. Mahfouz raises the question of where salvation would lie: with modern science or with traditional religion and suggests science as the answer. A strong belief in society rather than heaven, and science rather than religion, is held: "Someday mankind will achieve a certain wholeness in themselves and in society. Then, and only then, by virtue of this new human personality will we understand the meaning of divinity" (111). Mahfouz thus demarcates the role of God and the status of mankind while at the same time supporting science as the legitimate heir to religion indicating that human goodness created its spiritual power and not the other way around.

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