

Naguib Mahfouz, Palace Walk

Monthly discussion group, ch. 1-26

1. Because Mahfouz's Cairo Trilogy is a sprawling family saga, a good way to prepare for the first discussion might be to clarify each of the main characters' relations to each other:

Al-sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad

Amina

Yassin

Fahmy

Kamal

Khadija

Aisha

Umm Hanafi

Maryam

Zabayda

Zanuba

2. Mahfouz opens a window that allows Western readers to observe life in a patriarchal family of early twentieth-century Egypt. What do we learn about this family structure?
 - What is the extent of the patriarch's power over his sons, his wife, and his daughters? Are there limitations to his power?
 - How has Ahmad's position in this patriarchal structure contributed to his double life and the contradictions that plague his inner life?
 - How have Amina, Khadija, and Aisha constructed identities within this patriarchal system? What agency, what spheres of power does each find?
 - How are the lives of Yassin, Fahmy, and Kamal marked in different ways by this patriarchal structure? What is each learning from his father? from his mother?
 - How are the customs of courtship, marriage, divorce, and extra-marital relations related to the structures of property distribution in this patriarchal system?
 - Why does no one in the family rebel?
3. Mahfouz also introduces the reader to women beyond the walls of the house on Palace Walk.
 - How do the female musicians, Zabayda and Zanuba, relate to the patriarchal structure? What agency, what spheres of power do they find?
 - Mahfouz also brings Yassin's mother into the family story. What do we learn from her involvement with the family about how marital status and property ownership influence a woman's access to agency and power?
 - Beauty has always been a source of female power. What are the standards of beauty that shape the lives of women in this novel? Are these women's veils, wraps, and long dresses a mode of patriarchal control or a provocation to lust or a tool for seduction? Who controls the messages sent through female clothing? Who controls the bodies under these clothes?

4. The three books of the Cairo trilogy are titled with the names of streets, and each novel presents a geography that carries meaning. The following links show images of Cairo houses of the early twentieth century:
 - o <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/820710732065898980/>
 - o <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/311241024259123844/>
 - o <https://www.dreamstime.com/interior-room-bayt-al-suhaymi-house-old-ottoman-era-museum-islamic-cairo-egypt-was-originally-built-abdel-image178374601>
 - How are the rooms in the house on Palace Walk arranged? Who exercises control in each of the different rooms of the house?
 - Where is there access to the street? How is this access regulated?
 - Beyond the house on Palace Walk, what locations are associated with Ahmad? Yassin? Fahmy? Kamal? Amina, Khadija, and Aisha?

5. Beyond the family home in Palace Walk, beyond the neighborhoods that the family frequents, Mahfouz reminds the reader that the world is on the cusp of major social and political change. World War I is being fought, Egypt is being occupied by British and Australian forces, the Ottoman Empire, of which Egypt was a part for centuries, is crumbling. How will Egyptians respond to these changes?
 - More specifically, how has the war affected the daily lives of the family members?
 - Where do their sympathies lie in the conflict?
 - At this moment, what future do they imagine for Egypt?

6. Since the seventh century Egypt has been a largely Muslim country, following primarily the Sunni branch of Islam. But Mahfouz creates characters with a variety of religious beliefs and practices.
 - What role does religious belief and practice play in Amina's life?
 - What kind of religious education is Kamal receiving, and why is he devoted to al-Husayn and his shrine?
 - In the episode of the shaykh's visit to Ahmad's store, what do we learn about everyday religious practice?
 - How do Ahmad and Yassin square their lifestyles with the tenets of Islam?
 - To what end do different characters quote suras of the Qur'an?

7. What do we learn from Mahfouz's narration about Egyptian conversation styles: between people of different social status, within intimate family gatherings, among friends, etc.?