

Naguib Mahfouz, Palace of Desire

Every 7 weeks discussion group, ch. 20-44

1. We learn about the character of Aida from the outside—from descriptions of her visits to the gazebo, from narration of her conversations with Kamal, and from what Hasan and Isma'il tell Kamal about her.
 - How do you understand her motivations, in her relations with Hasan and Kamal? Can we trust what Hasan and Isma'il say about her?
 - With her freedom of movement, cropped hair, western clothes, and up-bringing in Paris, is she the one “modern woman” in the novel?
 - How would you compare Aida to other young, marriageable women in the novel: Khadija, Aisha, Maryam, and Zanuba?
 - Why do you think that Mahfouz does not provide an interiority for Aida, as he does for Amina and, to a lesser degree, for Khadija?
2. Mahfouz shows the reader how the quest for marriage dominates the lives of all the young women in the novel. But how does he portray their married life once these women achieve their goal? Does he hint at the married life that awaits the as-yet unmarried?
 - What kind of wife is Khadija? Aisha? What trials do they face? As wives, how do they compare to their mother?
 - What kind of wife is Maryam? What trials does she face? How does she compare to her mother?
 - Given what we see of married life, why is Zanuba so determined to get married? What kind of wife might she become?
 - What kind of married life awaits Aida, who becomes engaged to Hasan?
3. Of course, Ahmad's out-sized desires finally clash with the realities of passing time.
 - Does he learn anything about himself from his confrontation with Zanuba's “infidelity”?
 - Does he learn anything about Yasin from this experience?
 - Does he learn anything from the stroke he has while trying to revive the joys of his manhood at his friend's houseboat?
 - Are the repentance and prayers for forgiveness, which he offers when visiting the mosque after his illness, sincere?
 - What psychological/spiritual resources does he have for confronting the family tragedies previewed at the end of the novel?
4. Of course, Kamal's excessive idealism finally crashes against the reality of human imperfection.
 - How does Aida's engagement to Hasan shake Kamal's ideal vision of a perfect beloved, whom one could love disinterestedly, without hope of recompense? Why does the thought of Aida's pregnancy shake his ideal of female perfection?
 - How does what he learns from Yasin about their father's double life shake Kamal's view of the family, the state, the divine?

- How does Sa'd Zaghlul's attempts to form a coalition with his former political rivals shake Kamal's political ideals?
 - At twenty, does he turn to alcohol and prostitutes as a natural stage of young adult experimentation, as a consolation for his losses, or as part of a radical philosophical shift from idealism to materialism and hedonism?
 - How does Kamal's trajectory from religious reverence for the prophet's grandson's head (claimed by the Al-Husseini mosque) to the scientific materialism of Darwin parallel the spread of European secular thought in the first half of the twentieth century?
 - Has Kamal totally lost his idealism? Is there anything comical about his predicament?
5. Of course, Yasin's dissipation finally clashes with the exigencies of work/money, fatherhood, family responsibilities, and sickness.
 - Do you note any maturation in Yasin, or will he remain a "mule," as Ahmad once calls him?
 - Why does he continue to visit his family, and why do they continue to accept him?
 - What kind of brother does he become to Kamal? What kind of stepson to Amina? What kind of husband to Zanuba?
 6. Do you find humor in any parts of these shocks to Mahfouz's characters' world views and/or their domestic woes? If so, how would you describe Mahfouz's humor? If not, what prevents these reversals from being funny?
 7. The novel begins with Jalila, Zubayda, and Zanuba pursuing the same profession—entertainer and courtesan. With the passage of time and social change, what choices are available to them?
 - How do their paths diverge?
 - How do their situations resemble or differ from that of Ayusha-Rose, Kamal's favored prostitute?
 8. The political backdrop to Palace Walk is the Egyptian fight for independence from British control. In Palace of Desire the struggle has shifted to internal problems confronting the nascent nation: (a) controversial negotiations with the British to form an alliance, not a protectorate; (b) continued social unrest and violence; (c) wrangling between rival political parties, the Wafd vs the Liberal Constitutionalists. (For a summary of Sa'd Zaghlul's role in these struggles, see <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saad-Zaghloul>.)
 - Where do Kamal's loyalties lie in these conflicts?
 - Where does Ahmad locate himself and his family in Egypt's struggle to transform itself into a democracy?
 - What does the death of Zaghlul (coming on the heels of the typhoid outbreak that afflicts Aisha's family) signify in this family saga?
 - Why do both Palace Walk and Palace of Desire end with momentous political events coupled with family crises?