

Naguib Mahfouz, Sugar Street

Every 7 weeks discussion group, ch. 1-26

1. In 1935, eight years after the deaths of Aisha's husband and two sons (as well as the death of Sa'd Zaghlul), much has changed.
  - How has the house on Palace Walk been rearranged to adapt to changes in the family of Ahmad and Amina? How is the household (now including Aisha and her daughter, Na'ima) confronting their tragic family losses and the social/cultural changes swirling around them?
  - How has the neighborhood around Palace Walk changed, and what social changes are evident?
  - How are the inhabitants of the Sugar Street house (Khadija and Ibrahim; their sons, Abd al-Muni'm and Ahmad) adapting to the changes in their family, as well as to the social/cultural changes swirling around them?
  - In the house on Palace of Desire Street, how has Yassin's growing family (his wife, Zanuba; his young daughter, Karima; and his son by his first wife, Ridwan) incorporated itself into the lives of the other houses? What kind of father has Yassin become? What kind of mother has Zanuba become?
  - What social/cultural changes are reflected in the lives of the third generation of Ahmad's extended family?
  
2. As Sugar Street opens, Kamal is twenty-eight, and he seems stuck. Why?
  - How has he pursued his quest for "Truth"? What has he found?
  - After the death of the national hero Sa'd Zaghlul what has become of Kamal's political hopes? How does he reconcile philosophical skepticism with fervent political yearnings?
  - Having lost the love of his life, Aida, and having discovered sex and alcohol, how does Kamal reconcile sexual desire with philosophical objectivity?
  - Kamal still occasionally sees two remaining friends from his youth—Fuad, the son of Ahmad's assistant in the store; and Isma'il, who now works outside of Cairo. How does each serve as a foil to highlight Kamal's views about his own career and the possibility of marriage? Why won't Kamal marry?
  - Why is Kamal devastated upon learning that the Shaddad family has lost all its fortune, and that the father of Husayn, Aida, and Budur has committed suicide?
  - Does Kamal's meeting with the translator Riyad Qaldas in the offices of the Al-Fikr Magazine suggest a path forward for him?
  
3. This third novel in the trilogy juxtaposes the arrangements of marriage and sexuality as practiced in Ahmad's generation to the potential for new arrangements of marriage and sexuality in the third generation of the family.
  - How have the lives of the aging Zubayda and Jalila diverged from each other, and from the life of Zubayda's niece, Zanuba? What might a feminist critique of their available choices look like?
  - What choices are available to Na'ima and Karima? How does the novel represent maternity—young mothers of babies and older mothers of adult children?

- How do you view Abd al-Muni'm's insistence, at eighteen, that his father find a wife for him because "I am not willing to do what [other young men] do"? Does his refusal to share in the sexual hypocrisy of men like his grandfather represent progress in gender relations or does it suggest continued (and perhaps more extreme) control of women?
- How do you view the younger Ahmad's shock and fascination upon discovering that his article will be summarized by a female editor at The New Man, as well as his interest in a fellow female student in the university?
- How do you view Ridwan's relationship with Hilmi Izzat and his introduction to the young men who surround Abd al-Rahim Pasha Isa? How does this coterie balance political engagement with the pursuit of pleasure?

4. As the three male cousins choose career paths, each finds a mentor. Toward what do these mentors seem to be leading their protégés?

- the Shayk whose preaching Abd al-Muni'm attends in the coffee house
- the editor of The New Man where Ahmad wants to publish articles
- the senior statesman to whom Hilmi Izzat introduces Ridwan

What do these career paths suggest about the future of Egypt?

5. As the family's third generation of sons moves toward careers and confronts the expectations and/or hard realities of marriage and children, how are the first and second generation coping with the passage of time (up until the eve of World War II and Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939)?

- the first generation (Ahmad—his work and friendships; Amina—her work and her piety)
- the second generation (Kamal—his work, political views, and relationships; Yassin—his work, pleasures, and family life)

6. Here is an excerpt taken from Wikipedia that outlines the political movements and events referenced in The Cairo Trilogy:

"The Egyptian Kingdom was the legal form of the [Egyptian state](#) . . . from the [United Kingdom's recognition of Egyptian independence](#) in 1922 until the abolition of the monarchy of Egypt and Sudan in 1953 following the [Egyptian Revolution of 1952](#). Until the [Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936](#), the Kingdom was only nominally independent, as the [United Kingdom](#) retained control of foreign relations, communications, the military, and [Sudan](#). . . .

On 15 March 1922, Fuad issued a decree changing his title from [Sultan of Egypt](#) to [King of Egypt](#). In 1930, he attempted to strengthen the power of the Crown by abrogating the [1923 Constitution](#) and replacing it with a new constitution that limited the role of parliament to advisory status only. Large scale public dissatisfaction compelled him to restore the earlier constitution in 1935. . . .

The 1923 Constitution granted Fuad vast powers. He made frequent use of his right to [dissolve Parliament](#). During his reign, cabinets were dismissed at royal will, and parliaments never lasted for their full four-year term but were dissolved by decree. . . .

[Throughout] the reign of King Fuad [1922-36], the monarchy struggled with the [Wafd Party](#), a broadly based nationalist political organization strongly opposed to British influence in Egypt, and with the British themselves, who were determined to maintain their control over the [Suez Canal](#). Other political forces emerging in this period included the [Communist Party](#) (1925), and the [Muslim Brotherhood](#)(1928), which eventually became a potent political and religious force. . . .

King Fuad died in 1936, and the throne passed to his 16-year-old son, [Farouk](#). Rising nationalist sentiment in Egypt and Sudan, and British concern following [Fascist Italy's recent invasion](#) of [Abyssinia](#) led to the [Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936](#), which required the United Kingdom to withdraw all troops from Egypt proper (excluding Sudan), except in the [Suez Canal Zone](#) (agreed to be evacuated by 1949), but permitted the return of British military personnel in the event of war."

- How do we see these political movements and events reflected in Ahmad senior's family, almost as a microcosm of these inter-war years?
- How do the characters' discussions of art, philosophy, science, and religion expand Mahfouz's portrait of inter-war Cairo beyond political struggle?