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AN ANATOMY OF LOVE: NAGUIB MAHFOUZ'S CAIRO TRILOGY

*Sheikh Abd-Rabbih al-Ta'ih said:  
As you love, so you will be.*  
(Naguib Mahfouz, *Echoes of Autobiography* 109)

The primary theme of Naguib Mahfouz's Nobel-Prize-winning "Cairo Trilogy" (*al-Thulathiiyya*) (*Bayn al-qasrayn*, *Qasr al-shawq*, *al-Sukkariyya*) (1956-1957) is love. This "love" takes varied forms: deep family affection, animal lusts, and the soul-searing self-destructive passion of the "Romantic" idealist Kamal. The ravages—and consolations—of love are explored in the fortunes of three generations of the family of a middle-class grocer, al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad. Further themes are the harshly restrictive mores of certain sectors of the Egyptian middle class, the struggle for independence from the British (the Trilogy spans the period 1917 to 1944), and the marked evolution of Egyptian society over a period of thirty years. Although a multiplicity of characters appear in the Trilogy, the narrator gives the thoughts and motivations only of members of al-Sayyid's family.

In my discussion of the Cairo Trilogy, my references will be to the English translations published by Doubleday: *Bayn al-qasrayn*, translated as *Palace Walk* (PW); *Qasr al-shawq*, translated as *Palace of Desire* (PD); *al-Sukkariyya*, translated as *Sugar Street* (SS).

***Bayn al-qasrayn (Palace Walk)***

*Bayn al-qasrayn* presents the family of al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad, a grocer living on Palace Walk in the traditional al-Gamaliyya quarter of Cairo. The members of the family and their limited social setting are lovingly introduced, in lingering Balzacian manner, in the opening chapters. Domestic life and affections play a major role in the Trilogy; we are thus first presented with the female members of al-Sayyid's family: his submissive wife Amina and the two marriageable daughters, Aisha and Khadija. The major events of the novel are al-Sayyid's temporary banishment of his wife for the "sin" of leaving the house without permission and the death of al-Sayyid's son Fahmy in the political agitation against the British.

### *The Historical Moment*

Although domestic affairs take primacy over national concerns, the historical background is important in *Bayn al-qasrayn*. The British had unilaterally proclaimed Egypt a British Protectorate in December 1914. The novel begins in October 1917, when Prince Ahmad Fuad accepts the Egyptian throne. Unruly Australian troops control the pleasure districts of Cairo. To great Egyptian enthusiasm, the nationalist leader Sa'd Zaghlul demands on November 13 1918 the sending of a delegation ("Wafd") to London to demand Egyptian independence. The subsequent arrest and deportation to Malta of Zaghlul and his supporters lead to student demonstrations, brutally suppressed by the British.

Historical events are interwoven with the private affairs of novelistic characters. In the type of coincidence of which traditional historical novelists are fond, Khadija is wed on the day that armistice is declared (November 1918). English soldiers pitch tents in Palace Walk. Al-Sayyid Ahmad, a patriot but non-activist supporter of the Wafd, is humiliated by the British who force him to fill in a trench constructed by the nationalists. His son Fahmy, despite his father's prohibition, distributes handbills for the student demonstrators. The freeing of Zaghlul on April 7 1919 is celebrated by an authorized, peaceful demonstration, during which Fahmy is shot and killed.

Although Egyptians ardently desire the departure of the British, the occupying soldiers are not portrayed as monsters. Yasin is impressed by the politeness of an English soldier. The schoolboy Kamal entertains and hero-worships the English encamped in Palace Walk.<sup>1</sup>

### *Amina*

The first character to whom we are introduced in *Bayn al-qasrayn* is Amina, wed at the age of thirteen to al-Sayyid Ahmad. The qualities of Amina are love for her family, tolerance (she even prays for the English), acceptance of her lot in life, and a fundamental joy. Despite the tyranny of her husband, who allows her to leave the house solely to visit her mother and this only in his company, her marriage of twenty-five years has for her been happy: "No matter what happened, she remained a loving, obedient and docile wife. She had no regrets at all about reconciling herself to a type of security based on surrender. Whenever she thought back over her life, only goodness and happiness came to mind" (PW 4).

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<sup>1</sup>Egyptian children find British soldiers handsome in the semi-autobiographical *Hakayat Haretna* (1975) (*Fountain and Tomb* 28).

*Al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad*

Amina's husband, the middle-class grocer al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad, is a man of contradictions. At home he is a tyrant, imposing the strictest standards on his terrified family; his temporary expulsion of his wife Amina, for the sin of visiting the shrine of al-Husayn during his absence, is shocking even in the traditional Egyptian society to whose values he adheres. Without the knowledge of his terrified family, al-Sayyid leads a second existence at night as a *bon vivant*. Al-Sayyid Ahmad, with his powerful body and exceptional virility, overflows with vitality; he has a deep faith in a clement and merciful God, is patriotic, and loves music, wine, jovial conversation, the company of friends, and women:

When he worked, he put his whole heart into it. If he befriended someone, he was exceptionally affectionate. When he fell in love, he was swept off his feet. He did not drink without getting drunk. He was earnest and sincere in everything. Thus for him the mandatory prayer became a spiritual pilgrimage in which he traversed the expansive realms of the Master (PW 17).

Al-Sayyid's desire for women, such as the singer Zubayda, is lust, but a lust combined with a taste for refinement:

Despite his great number of amorous adventures, out of all the different varieties of love, al-Sayyid Ahmad had experienced only lust. All the same, he had progressed in his pursuit of it to its purest and most delicate form. He was not simply an animal. In addition to his sensuality, he was endowed with a delicacy of feeling, a sensitivity of emotion, and an ingrained love for song and music. He had elevated lust to its most exalted type. It was for the sake of this lust alone that he had married the first time and then for the second. Over the course of time, his conjugal love was affected by calm new elements of affection and familiarity, but in essence it continued to be based on bodily desire.... No woman was anything more than a body to him. All the same, he would not bow his head before that body unless he found it truly worthy of being seen, touched, smelled, tasted, and heard. It was lust, yes, but not bestial or blind. It had been refined by a craft that was at least partially an art, setting his lust in a framework of delight, humor, and good cheer (PW 99).

Al-Sayyid feels joy that Yasin has inherited his amorous temperament (although without al-Sayyid's delicacy of taste) (PW 389-91). Nonetheless, to preserve his friendship with Muhammed Iffat, al-Sayyid obliges his bestial son Yasin to divorce Iffat's daughter, Zaynab.

Al-Sayyid's treatment of his family does have elements of tenderness. His expulsion of Amina was the unfortunate consequence of his

failure to vent his anger immediately. The news of her injury in a car accident awoke his tenderness:

He had grown used to her and admired her good qualities. He was even fond enough of her to forget her error and ask God to keep her safe. Confronted by this imminent threat to her, his tyranny had shrunk back. The abundant tenderness lying dormant within his soul had been awakened (PW 194).

He advises his married daughter Khadija to imitate her mother in all things (PW 319), is tender to his pregnant married daughters, and thinks of Amina's distress when he learns of Fahmy's death.

### Yasin

The twenty-one-year-old Yasin is al-Sayyid's son from a first marriage. He sincerely loves his step-mother Amina. Despite her love for him as a child, he despises his own mother for having taken lovers and remarried. Yasin is, however, compassionate to his mother on her deathbed. Yasin is also religious enough to pray for forgiveness (but not for penitence, which would have implied the renunciation of pleasure).

The ox-like Yasin is a creature of unrestrained lusts:

Women like Zanuba definitely were not the only ones he craved. Just one beautiful feature was enough for him, like the kohl-enhanced eyes of the doum fruit vendor in al-Watawit, which had compensated for the stench of her armpits and the mud caked on her legs (PW 330).

His sudden and unprovoked sexual assaults on Amina's servant and friend Umm Hanafi and on his wife Zaynab's black servant Nur are bestial (and, in context, also comic). Marriage, for Yasin, is boredom; he soon reverts to the life of the coffeeshop, returning home drunk and at midnight. He justifies his neglect and infidelity with a cynical contempt for woman:

What more does any woman want than a home of her own and sexual gratification? Nothing! Women are just another kind of domestic animal, and must be treated like one. Yes, other pets are not allowed to intrude into our private lives. They stay home until we're free to play with them. For me, being a husband who is faithful to his marriage would be death (PW 338).

When Yasin, through his *liaison* with the lute player Zanuba, learns of his fathers merrymaking and amorous proclivities, he feels

unbounded admiration. Yasin realizes that he has inherited his lustful nature from both his father and his mother:

Both of them were sensual and pleasure-seeking. They recklessly ignored conventions.... I know now who I am. I'm nothing but the son of these two sensual people. It wouldn't have been possible for me to turn out any other way (PW 298).

### *Fahmy*

Al-Sayyid's elder son by his marriage with Amina is the law student Fahmy. Sensitive, sincerely religious, a dreamer, Fahmy is deeply in love with his pert twenty-year-old neighbor Maryam. (Unfortunately, Al-Sayyid will countenance no talk of marriage until Fahmy has finished his studies.) Fahmy's sensitivity is such that the sight of Maryam at Aisha's wedding is a violent and painful shock to him: "The sight of her ripped into his heart, disclosing to him that only he was suffering.... Good sense and wisdom are seldom happy with the impetuosity of emotion, which characteristically knows no limits" (PW 259-60). As Jalila sings to the wedding guests, Fahmy seeks by an effort of the will to penetrate Maryam's essence in an imagined shared experience: "Notwithstanding the distance and the thick walls separating them, he wished to live for a few moments inside her essence" (PW 261).

Dreaming of performing heroic deeds before the admiring eyes of Maryam, Fahmy plunges ardently into the movement for national liberation in which he will achieve patriotic martyrdom:

In that magical universe he could visualize a new world, a new nation, a new home, a new people. Everyone would be astir with vitality and enthusiasm.... Fahmy did not know exactly what Sa'd would do or what he could do himself, but he felt with all the power of his being that there was work to be done. Possibly there was no example in the real world, but he sensed it existed in his heart and blood. It had to manifest itself in the light of life and reality. Otherwise, life and reality would be in vain. Life would be a meaningless game and a bad joke (PW 326).

The news that Maryam has been seen flirting with an English soldier induces in Fahmy a reaction that will be typical of his younger brother Kamal, that of flight into an inner world in which to examine the evidence provided by the "reality" of others' opinions and behavior:

Fahmy could not bear to stay with them any longer. He responded to the inner voice that was anxiously calling for help and encouraging him to

flee far from other eyes and ears, so that he could be all alone, repeat the conversation to himself from start to finish, word by word, phrase by phrase, sentence and by sentence, in order to understand and fathom it. Then he could see where he stood (PW 41).

### *Khadija*

Al-Sayyid's elder daughter Khadija is religious, energetic, sharp-tongued, physically unattractive, and full of affection for her family. Aisha's engagement provokes a torment of jealousy, which she is forced to suppress (PW 238). Nevertheless, a tranquil side to her character, inherited from her mother, reconciles her to her destiny. When finally engaged (to the forty-year-old widower Ibrahim Shawkat), Khadija is distressed at the impending separation from her family:

It was exactly what one would expect of a girl whose heart pounded with love for nothing so much as for her family and house — from her parents, whom she adored, to the chickens, hyacinth beans, and jasmine (family PW 316).

### *Aisha*

At the beginning of *Bayn al-qasrayn*, al-Sayyid's younger daughter Aisha is sixteen-years old, good-looking (with blonde hair and a white complexion), slack in her household duties and religious observances, and secretly in love with a police officer at whom she casts glances through the *mashrabiyya*. (Al-Sayyid rejects any possibility of such a marriage.) Finally, al-Sayyid, under the cajoling of the forceful Widow Shawkat, agrees to allow Aisha to marry Khalil Shawkat, an uneducated twenty-five-year-old with a private income. Aisha is happy in marriage, finding the rules of the Shawkat household less onerous than those of her father. Almost at the end of *Bayn al-qasrayn*, Aisha painfully gives birth to a daughter Na'ima, who is born with a weak heart (possibly symbolizing the weakness of impending Egyptian "independence"); Aisha is not informed of Na'ima's frailty.

### *Kamal*

Al-Sayyid's younger son Kamal, who will be the leading character of the two later volumes of the Cairo Trilogy, is a ten-year-old elementary school student. Kamal is sincerely religious, likes to sing (as does his father), and adores his mother. (His demand that his father restore Amina to her home leads to a beating.) Kamal, with his large

head and big nose, is physically ugly. His character traits are already present: a certain voyeurism (he spies through a keyhole bride and groom kissing at Aisha's wedding), his enthusiasm for inventing and listening to stories, and a sensitivity to others. Thus, he enjoys entertaining and making friends with the English soldiers encamped in Palace Walk; his special friend is the sensitive Julian, who attempts a flirtation with Maryam.

### *Qasr al-shawq (Palace of Desire)*

*Qasr al-shawq* begins in 1924, five years after Fahmy's death. Amina and al-Sayyid have aged considerably. Al-Sayyid, the conqueror of women, becomes enslaved by passion for the lute-singer Zanuba; he frees himself from his infatuation only with a painful exertion of will. Aisha and Khadija are taken up with family life. Yasin, still a creature of uncontrolled lusts, makes two further marriages, the last one with Zanuba. The main theme of *Qasr al-shawq*, however, is Kamal's total, devastating love for the aristocratic Aïda Shaddad.<sup>2</sup> Because Kamal's obsessive love has its origin from within himself and because this passion represents the essence of his being, we are granted, through the comments of Isma'il Latif, a further, "impartial" view of Aïda Shaddad. However, it is for the reader, rather than the narrator, to determine whether Latif's "objective" vision has any more value than Kamal's "intuitive" grasp of Aïda Shaddad's qualities.

Contemporary events appear in *Qasr al-shawq* only as backdrop to the domestic concerns of al-Sayyid's family: demonstrations against the English; the assassination of Sir Lee Stack (November 1924); Egyptian coalition governments; King Fuad's hostility to Sa'd Zaghlul and the Wafd; the death of Sa'd Zaghlul (August 1927), which occurs on the day that Yasin's wife Zanuba gives birth and when two of Aisha's children are dying of typhoid (possibly symbolizing the uncertain future of Egyptian "independence").

### *Amina*

Amina, approaching fifty, is now older and thinner, an excessive drinker of coffee and restricted to the company of her servant Umm Hanafi. She has considerably more freedom, visiting her married daughters, Fahmy's grave, and the mosque of al-Husayn as frequently

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<sup>2</sup>Kamal's passion is modeled in large part on a similar unrequited love which shattered Mahfouz in his adolescence; see Marie Francis-Saad 47.

as she wishes. Amina is now on occasions given to anger; she resents Maryam and her family, suspecting them of gloating over Fahmy's death. The honesty of her feelings leads to sound judgment; thus, she supports Kamal's decision to follow a life of learning: "Amazingly, his mother's advice was better than his father's. It was not based on opinion but on sound feelings, which, unlike his father's, had never been corrupted by contact with the realities of worldly life" (PD 58).

### *Al-Sayyid Ahmad*

In *Qasr al-shawq* al-Sayyid is less brutal in his relations with his family. He fails to coerce Kamal into becoming a civil servant. Despite his pretence of anger, he inwardly recognizes that Khadija, in her defiance of her mother-in-law, is made in the same pattern as himself. Yasin, meeting Kamal in a brothel, reveals al-Sayyid's magnificence as "a master of jests, music, and love" (PD 363). Kamal, who loves his father, ponders his contradictions:

I admire your charm, grace, impudence, rowdiness, and adventuresome spirit. That's your gentle side, the one all your acquaintances love. If it shows anything, it reveals your vanity and your enthusiasm for life and people. But I'd like to ask why you choose to show us this frightening and gruff mask? ... We've never known you as a friend the way outsiders do. We've known you as a tyrannical dictator, a petulant despot (PD 372-73).

Since Fahmy's death, the grieving al-Sayyid has renounced the company of women (Zubayda, Umm Maryam). When he finally visits the houseboat of his friend Muhammad Iffat, he discovers that he feels aversion for his former loves, the aging entertainers Jalila and Zubayda: "There was a change in his heart too. He felt aversion and repulsion. It had not been that way when he arrived, for he had come in breathless pursuit of a phantom, which no longer existed" (PD 79). Instead, concerned for his waning virility, al-Sayyid falls prey to an obsessive passion for the lute-player Zanuba, who manipulates him into establishing her in a costly house. Degraded and humiliated, it is only with an immense effort that the anguished al-Sayyid regains control of himself to resist the demand by Zanuba (already the secret mistress of Yasin) that he marry her: "He attacked himself, scolding and railing against his humiliation. Eventually he began to acknowledge his disgrace, wretchedness, and loss of youth" (PD 302).

A year after breaking with Zanuba, al-Sayyid returns to Muhammad Iffat's houseboat to realize that his youth is over. The singers of al-Sayyid's past have been replaced; he finds no pleasure in the new

singer Umm Kalthoun. Jalila, no longer beautiful, now makes money as a brothel owner; Zubayda is addicted to alcohol and cocaine. Al-Sayyid suffers a stroke. Bedridden for a while, he is surrounded by the affection of family, friends, and fellow merchants. "It was merely the prestige enjoyed by a good-hearted, affable, and chivalrous man," Kamal decides (*PD* 411). At the end of the novel, al-Sayyid visits the mosque with his sons, the hour of repentance now arrived.

### *Yasin*

The twenty-eight-year-old Yasin (who lives in Palace of Desire Alley), to satisfy his lust, now wishes to marry Maryam, who has entrapped him, as he knows full well, by the ancient female strategy of "seduction and evasion" (*PD* 113). But before marriage to Maryam, Yasin gratifies his senses with her lusty mother. (Two weeks after Yasin's marriage to Maryam, Maryam's mother marries a seller of fruit drinks, younger and of lower social class; three weeks later, Maryam's mother dies of diabetes.)

Soon bored with Maryam, a drunken Yasin takes an equally intoxicated Zanuba to his house. When Maryam protests, Yasin utters the formula of divorce. To enormous family scandal, Yasin marries the lute-player Zanuba. Although the easily-bored Yasin continues his dissolute life, Yasin finds Zanuba more devoted to him than his previous wives. Yasin refuses his father's order to divorce Zanuba; at the end of the novel, Zanuba is giving birth to Yasin's son.

In debate with the idealistic, "romantic" Kamal, Yasin offers with considerable lucidity a down-to-earth view of love:

It seems to me that crazy people become lovers because they're crazy. Lovers don't go insane just because they're in love. You'll observe these lunatics talking about a woman as though she were an angel. A woman's nothing more than a woman. She's a tasty dish of which you quickly get your fill. Let those crazy lovers share a bed with her so they can see what she looks like when she wakes up or smell her sweat or other odors. And after that are they going to talk about angels? A woman's charm is a matter of cosmetics and other seductive devices. Once you fall into her trap, you see her for the human being she really is. The secret forces holding marriages together aren't beauty or charm but children, the dowry's balance demanded in exchange for a divorce and the support payments (*PD* 367).

Unlike Kamal, who cannot accept human impurity, Yasin loves women as they are:

The fact is that I love them. I love them with all their faults. But I wanted to demonstrate that the angelic woman does not exist (PD 368).

### *Aisha and Na'ima*

Aisha is too kindly and cowardly to rebel against her domineering mother-in-law: "She was a benevolent person with a heart disposed to friendship and affection" (PD 44). Similarly, Aisha will not support Khadija in her complaints about the Widow Shawkat's tyranny. Despite Amina's disapproval of the couple, the generous Aisha visits Yasin and Maryam. Khadija, in her bitterness at Aisha's lack of support, accuses Aisha of moral laxity (smoking, drinking alcohol). Aisha's daughter Na'ima, a golden-haired beauty, loves to sing. At the end of *Qasr al-shawq*, Aisha's husband and two sons are desperately ill with typhoid fever.

### *Khadija and Ibrahim Shawkat*

Despite their frequent quarrels and Ibrahim's idleness, Khadija and Ibrahim form a successful couple: "They were a successful couple, and each of them sensed deep inside that he could not do without the other, regardless of flaws. Strangely enough, it was when Ibrahim fell sick once that Khadija was able to reveal the love and devotion she harbored for him" (PD 37). Khadija devotes herself to house and children; herself almost illiterate, she intends her sons to receive university degrees. Khadija also stands up to the domineering and senile Widow Shawkat to obtain an independent kitchen.

### *Kamal*

*Qasr al-shawq* is above all a *Bildungsroman* relating the blighted dreams of the oversensitive and highly lucid Kamal. The novel begins with the seventeen-year-old Kamal's celebrating the obtaining of his baccalaureate. Against his father's wishes that he prepare a profession, Kamal determines to enroll in the Teachers Training College, believing "that the life of thought was man's loftiest goal, rising with its luminous character high above the material world" (PD 51). His wish is to study literature, history, languages, ethics, and poetry (PD 54). At first deeply pious, Kamal's studies of philosophy lead to a loss of religious faith and to a belief in materialistic science as "the key to the secrets of existence" (PD 339). Kamal, rendered in many respects power-

less by love, nevertheless has dignity to protest to Aïda that he has been slandered by the jealous Hasan Salim.

Kamal's very being has since the age of fourteen been centered on his intense passion for Aïda Shaddad, the sister of his wealthy school friend Husayn Shaddad. Page after page of *Qasr al-shawq* are devoted to Kamal's outpourings of idealized love and inner suffering. Kamal converts his love into "literature," whether in the form of an inner monologue or committed to his diary for subsequent reflection:

Solitude and communion with his soul called him. Thought of the diary slumbering in the drawer of his desk stirred the passions of his breast. A person exhausted from putting up with reality seeks relaxation deep inside himself (PD 75).

Here are a few of Kamal's heartfelt renderings of his love; the "love," it must be noted, is no less intensely experienced for having been shaped into a "literary" form:

Then you submerged yourself in the melody of her voice, savoring its tones, becoming intoxicated by its music, and soaking up every syllable that slipped out. Perhaps you did not understand, you poor dear, that you were being born again at that very moment and that like a newborn baby you had to greet your new world with alarm and tears (PD 17).

Call up her blissful image and contemplate it a little. Can you imagine her unable to sleep or left prostrate by love and passion? That's too remote even for a fantasy. She's above love, for love is a defect remedied only by the loved one. Be patient and don't torment your heart. It's enough that you see her. Her image shines into your spirit and her dulcet tones send intoxicating delight through you. From the beloved emanates a light in which all things appear to be created afresh. After a long silence, the jasmine and the hyacinth beans begin to confide in each other. The minarets and domes fly up over the evening glow into the sky. The landmarks of the ancient district hand down the wisdom of past generations. The existential orchestra echoes the chirps of the crickets. The dens of wild beasts overflow with tenderness. Grace adorns the alleys and side streets. Sparrows of rapture chatter over the tombs. Inanimate objects are caught up in silent meditation. The rainbow appears in the woven mat over which your feet step. Such is the world of my beloved (PD 165).

You're walking with Aïda in the desert near the pyramids. Ponder this ravishing fact and shout it aloud until the pyramid builders hear you. The beloved and her suitor are strolling together over the sand. The lover's rapture is so intense that the breeze might almost carry him off, while the beloved amuses herself by counting pebbles. If love's malady were contagious, I would not mind the pain (PD 181).

Since Aïda is by Kamal's definition perfection itself, the suffering resulting from her cruel mocking of his big nose and head must be accepted as if by "divine decree":

Her visage had been disdainful, sarcastic, and harsh. How cruel she had seemed! She had toyed with him mercilessly.... He deserved to suffer. It was his duty to accept this with ascetic resignation, like a devotee who believes implicitly in the fairness of a divine decree, no matter how harsh it appears, because the decree has been issued by the perfect beloved whose attributes and acts are beyond suspicion (*PD* 204).

His agony was like a severe illness that lingers on as a chronic malady after its worse symptoms subside. He was not consoled. How could he find any consolation for love? It was the most exalted thing life had ever revealed to him. Since he believed deeply in love's immortality, he realized he would have to bear it patiently, as if destined to live out the rest of his days with an incurable illness (*PD* 246).

The pain provoked by her marriage to Hasan Salim is devastating:

History itself had concluded. Life was at an end. Dreams worth more than life itself were terminated. He was faced with nothing less than a boulder studded with spikes.... He was overcome by a sense of having been the victim of an atrocious assault. Conspiring against him had been fate, the law of heredity, the class system, Aïda, Hasan Salim, and a mysterious force he was reluctant to name. To his eyes he seemed a miserable wretch standing alone against these combined powers. His wound was bleeding and there was no one to bind it (*PD* 313).

The thought of Aïda's loss of virginity on her wedding night causes even greater pain:

"Savor this new form of distilled pain," Kamal told himself. "It's the essence of pain, the pain of pains. Your consolation is that your pain's unique. No man before you has ever experienced it. Hell will seem easy for you by comparison if you're destined to be carried there by demons who dance you over its tongues of fire. Pain! It's not from losing your love, because you never aspired to possess her. It's because she has descended from heaven and is wallowing in the mud, after living grandly over the clouds. It's because she's allowed her cheek to be kissed, her blood to be shed, and her body to be abused. How intense my regret and pain are..." (*PD* 317).

Kamal is unable to envisage that the object of his worship has physical needs. He refuses to conceive that Aïda possesses bodily functions (*PD* 17, 192), that Aïda can be compared to other women (*PD* 42), and that marriage can be reconciled with spiritual love: "People who

are really in love with ideals superior to life itself don't get married." (PD 75) Nonetheless, Kamal in his idealism is refusing to recognize the physical side of his own nature. The passage from page 317 quoted above, as Kamal imagines Aïda's loss of virginity, indicates Kamal's unconscious—but nonetheless real—sexual desire for her. The denial of Aïda's sexuality is the denial of Kamal's own lust. Intoxicated with the purity of his love for Aïda, Kamal looks back with disgust at his own fondling of the prepubescent, lower-class Qamar (PD 74). When Kamal, fortified with alcohol, frequents the prostitute Ayusha-Rose, Kamal converts the experience into an intellectual questioning of the meaning of existence, truth, and beauty:

At that moment his soul yearned for purification, isolation, and meditation. He longed to remember the tormented life he had lived in the shadow of his beloved. He seemed to believe that truth would always be cruel. Should he adopt the avoidance of truth as his creed? He walked along the road to the bar, so lost in thought that he scarcely paid any attention to Isma'il's chatter. If truth was cruel, lies were ugly.

"The problem's not that the truth is harsh but that liberation from ignorance is as painful as being born. Run after truth until you're breathless. Accept the pain involved in re-creating yourself afresh. These ideas will take a life to comprehend, a hard one interspersed with drunken moments" (PD 357-58).

Even after loss of religious faith, Kamal is tormented by the problem of love, which for him is the key to essence:

[In debate with Yasin] "It would only be fitting if he'd change his opinion on seeing Aïda," Kamal told himself. "But you better rethink this question of love. You once considered it an angelic inspiration, but now you deny the existence of angels. So search for it within man's essence. Insert it into the list of theoretical and practical realities you wish to confront boldly. In this way you'll learn the secret of your tragedy and strip the veil away from Aïda's hidden essence. You won't discover her to be an angel, but the door of enchantment will swing open for you. How wretched it makes me to think of things like pregnancy and its craving, Aïda as an overly familiar sight, and body odors" (PD 367).

Intellectual speculation, as well as alcohol and sex, become Kamal's refuge from pain:

I depend on the study and analysis of love, as previously mentioned, and on minimizing my individual pains through speculations that embrace all of existence so that by comparison man's world seems a trivial speck. I also refresh my soul with alcohol and sex (PD 389).

### *The Shaddads*

For the bedazzled Kamal, the millionaire Shaddad family are “noble souls cleansed of all wickedness and baseness” (PD 151). (Less attractive qualities of the Shaddads are their tightness with money and their fawning over powerful politicians.) Kamal’s meetings with his friends Husayn Shaddad, Hasan Salim (the son of a superior court judge), and Isma’il Latif in the gazebo in the garden of the Shaddad mansion in the wealthy al-Abassiya district take on an enchanted quality for the impulsive, sensitive Kamal. Some three years older than Kamal, the half-Persian Aïda Shaddad is a self-confident beauty who had grown up in Paris and was educated in a Catholic school. (The Shaddad family know little about the Muslim religion.) Interestingly, as an example of non-sexual affection, the three-year-old Budur, Aïda’s sister, has an instinctive love for Kamal.

The “reality” of Aïda clashes with Kamal’s adoration. At their first meeting alone, Aïda is coldly mocking: “She looked like anything but a woman engrossed in a romantic conversation. He felt a cold, gnawing sensation in his heart. He wondered whether he had been destined to be alone with her like this so his dreams could be demolished in one blow” (PD 202). Kamal is devastated by her cruelty and disdain (see above, PD 204). Hasan Salim (a jealous suitor who wishes to discourage Kamal) tells Kamal that Aïda enjoys the role of young men’s “dream girl.” For Isma’il Latif, Aïda is flirtatious, had deliberately used Kamal to provoke Hasan Salim into proposing marriage, and is not particularly beautiful (too slender); girls like Aïda are plentiful: “I wonder if you don’t have a higher opinion of her than she deserves” (PD 262).

At the end of *Qasr al-shawq*, Husayn Shaddad, Kamal’s sincere friend, leaves for Paris to study the arts in dilettante manner. Aïda, pregnant by her diplomat husband Hasan Salim, is living in Brussels.

### *al-Sukkariyya (Sugar Street)*

*al-Sukkariyya* (“Sugar Street,” where the Shawkats live) portrays aging, death, change, and —with some irony— hope for the future. Amīna, Al-Sayyid, and his companions suffer health problems, become old, and die. The fun-loving Aisha is destroyed by the deaths of husband and children. The Shaddad family are ruined in the economic depression. Aïda Shaddad, after an unhappy marriage, becomes second wife to a man not much higher in the social scale than Kamal and dies of pneumonia. The former entertainers have diverse fortunes: Jalila, having become rich as a brothel owner, decides to repent; Zubayda, with her addictions, is reduced to destitution.

Egyptian society has changed. Children, with education, escape the control of their parents; girls now attend universities, although generally limiting their studies to the Arts or nursing. Fuad, the son of al-Sayyid's clerk, is, with a law degree, moving up the social scale and refuses to marry al-Sayyid's grand-daughter Na'ima. Radio and electric light provide comfort in al-Sayyid's house. Maryam's mother's house is replaced by a glittering store. The Shaddad mansion is torn down to construct apartment buildings.

Kamal, always indecisive, tortured by his lost love for Aida, incapable of committing himself to marriage or a consistent philosophical position, remains the despairing central figure of *al-Sukkariyya*. At the end of the Trilogy, Kamal is still engaged in the desperate struggle for faith which has marked his whole existence (SS 306). The uncertain future of Egypt is represented by Yasin's son Ridwan (a homosexual making his career as a politician's hanger-on), the Marxist Ahmad Ibrahim Shawkat, and the Muslim Brother Abd al-Muni'm Shawkat. The family heredity is obvious: Ahmad has Kamal's sensitivity to love; Abd al-Muni'm the brutal lusts of his uncle Yasin. Nevertheless, Ahmad can overcome unrequited love to make a happy marriage (Marxist style) and commit himself to political action. Abd al-Muni'm will control (Islamic style) his lusts and also enter the political struggle.

The historical background covers the restoration in 1935 of the 1923 Constitution (following the efforts of Mustafa al-Nahas and the Wafd), the replacement of King Fuad by his equally inadequate son Faruq, splits in the Wafd, the outbreak of war with Germany and Italy, and the expulsion of the Copt Makram Ubayd from the Wafd (which previously had been a truly nationalist party without regard for ethnic and religious interests). National life affects the novelistic characters, even apart from the political involvement of al-Sayyid's grandchildren. Karima and Abd al-Muni'm marry during the Battle of Alamein; al-Sayyid is forced to flee his house during a bombing raid; Ahmad, the Marxist, and Abd al-Muni'm, the Muslim Brother, are placed in preventive detention on the same day.

### *Amina*

Amina at age sixty looks ten years older; her body is withered and she suffers from high blood pressure. Only Umm Hanafi is there to befriend her. She visits the saints in their shrines whenever she wants. Her mourning for al-Sayyid is intense: "Every hour of my day is linked to some memory of my master. He was the pivot of the only life I've ever known. How can I bear to live now that he has departed, leaving noth-

ing behind him" (SS 209)? When Amina dies of pneumonia, Kamal somewhat self-centeredly compares her life of love and achievement with his own wasted existence (SS 304).

### *Al-Sayyid*

Al-Sayyid, aged and suffering from heart disease, now retired from the store, is confined to the first floor of his house. His cosmos is turned upside down when he consents to his grandsons' marrying before completing their education. His bosom companions have died. At death, he is mourned by the weeping Yasin and by the compassionate Kamal, now his friend: [Kamal] "How I feared him when I was young ... but in his later years he revealed to me a totally different person, indeed a beloved friend. How witty, tender, and gracious he was ... unlike any other man" (SS 212). Grotesquely, his funeral is converted into a political affair, with the presence of Muslim Brothers and Ridwan's political cronies.

### *Aisha and Na'ima*

Aisha, prematurely aged (toothless, listless, with sunken eyes and cheeks), after the deaths of her husband and sons, depends on cigarettes and coffee. Her only hope lies in her daughter Na'ima, a beautiful young woman of sixteen. When Na'ima dies in childbirth, Aisha sinks into a deep depression, communing with the dead. Kamal sees a connection between his and Aisha's failed lives:

The striking similarity between their misfortunes did not escape him. She had lost her offspring and he had lost his hopes. If she had ended up with nothing, so had he. All the same, her children had been flesh and blood, and his hopes had been deceptive fictions of his imagination (SS 180).

### *Kamal*

Kamal, successful as an English-language teacher and writer of a monthly philosophical column in the magazine *al-Fikr*, is consumed by a nightmare of loneliness, anxiety, and doubt. Yasin, who believes that "truth" lies in involvement, not in libraries, accuses Kamal of fleeing commitment (SS 24). Kamal, the detached, ironic skeptic, finds temporary community with others in a Wafdist political demonstration. Kamal diagnoses his malady, his living in his sentimental past, as "Romantic":

Perhaps the past is the opiate of the Romantic. It's a most distressing affliction to have a sentimental heart and a skeptical mind. I don't believe in anything, it doesn't matter what I say (SS 43).

A memory of love, not love itself, was at work. We're in love with love, regardless of our circumstances, and love it most when we are deprived of it (SS 46).

Kamal is not totally cut off from others. His friendship with the writer Riyad Qaldas, a Copt, restores spiritual energy. Although the part-time prostitute Atiya loves Kamal, Kamal is unable to feel "love and lust" (Kamal's definition of stability) for a single human being (SS 102). Isma'il Latif, now happily married, blames Kamal's books for his inability to live "a normal life" (SS 174).

Kamal is offered an opportunity to redeem his life in the person of the student Budur, Aïda's younger sister. The charming Budur is willing to marry Kamal. Indecision, however, leads Kamal to spurn the offered love. The torment Kamal feels when seeing Budur with her new fiancé offers the same mixture of pain and "mysterious delight" which Kamal experienced on Aïda's wedding night (SS 265).

Kamal's "wound" is intimately bound up with his desire to know his own truth by discovering the "truth" of Aïda:

[On learning of Aïda's visit to Cairo] I wish I had learned she was here in time. I wish I had seen her again after our long separation. Now that I am liberated from her tyranny, I need to see her so I can learn the truth about her and thus the truth about myself. But this priceless opportunity has been lost (SS 234).

And what was Aïda to him now? The truth was that he no longer wanted Aïda. But he still wished to learn her secret, which might at least convince him that the best years of his life had not been wasted (SS 239).

### ***Yasin and Zanuba***

Yasin, now forty, continues to be a wastrel, drinking in taverns and watching women in the street. He is affectionate toward his children, although unwilling to pay for his daughter Karima to attend secondary school. Zanuba has worked hard to ingratiate herself into the family; her beauty fading, she dresses simply and succeeds in gaining the respect that once would have been considered impossible.

### *Khadija*

Khadija, now plump, is happy with her generally successful marriage, manages to persuade her idle husband to perform his religious duties, and takes delight in her sons Abd al-Muni'm and Ahmad. She is affectionate toward the suffering Aisha. At the age of forty-six, however, she is lonely now that her career as a mother has ended.

### *Ahmad Ibrahim Shawkat and Sawsan Hammad*

Khadija's son Ahmad has much in common with his uncle Kamal. Ahmad is interested in philosophy and at the age of sixteen submits an article on educational theory to the socialist *The New Man* magazine. Like Uncle Kamal, Ahmad falls in love with a girl of superior social class, the student Alawiya Sabri, a slender beauty of aristocratic demeanor. Alawiya rejects Ahmad's marriage proposal, awaiting an arranged marriage with a wealthy husband. Unlike Kamal, Ahmad recovers from the torment of unrequited love and finds harmony and happiness with the working-class Sawsan Hammad, a serious and intelligent Marxist journalist colleague with a forceful personality. Although Sawsan refuses all talk of "love" (for her a purely bourgeois concept), Sawsan and Ahmad do "love" each other and marry despite Khadija's opposition. (Yasin and Kamal support the match.) The two work to raise the level of proletarian consciousness until they are arrested under wartime emergency regulations.

### *Abd al-Muni'm Shawkat*

Ahmad's brother Abd al-Muni'm is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, dedicated "to understand Islam as God intended it to be: a religion, a way of life, a code of law, and a political system" (SS 119). He is also, like his uncle Yasin, devoured by lust. After seducing a thirteen-year-old girl, he recalls the teaching of his mentor Shaykh Ali al-Manifi: "You cannot conquer the devil by ignoring the laws of nature" (SS 106) (counsel that Uncle Kamal would well have been advised to heed). The eighteen-year-old Abd al-Muni'm therefore persuades his father to let him marry Na'ima, his double first cousin. After Na'ima's death, he marries Yasin's daughter Karima. At the end of *al-Sukkariyya*, Abd al-Muni'm is arrested for his political activities.

### Ridwan

Yasin's son Ridwan is a Wafdist who ponders Egypt's future problems after the British are expelled. Ridwan, a homosexual, is protected by the senior statesman Abd al-Rahim Pasha. Ridwan, once he has received his university degree, is appointed secretary to a cabinet minister; he can thus favor the careers of Abd al-Muni'm, Yasin, and Kamal. Ridwan's contempt for women, his protector suggests, will condemn Ridwan to a life of solitude (SS 284).

### The Shaddads

Kamal learns belatedly that Shaddad Bey, bankrupted during the depression, had killed himself. His widow now lives in a flat with Budur, existing on a small pension. Through Isma'il Latif, the only one of his adolescent friends with whom Kamal remains in contact, Kamal learns that Aida had a son of fourteen and a daughter of ten and had accompanied her husband to Iran. Hasan Salim had fallen in love with another woman; one month after arriving in Iran Aida separated from Hasan Salim and returned alone to Cairo. She became the second wife of a fifty-year-old chief inspector of English-language instruction (one of Kamal's superiors) and had almost immediately died of pneumonia. (Kamal had unknowingly been present at the funeral.) Kamal receives the news of his former idol with stoicism (SS 290).

In 1944, Kamal meets Husayn Shaddad, now an overworked businessman. When Kamal declares that he writes essays, "Husayn smiled despondently and remarked, 'You're lucky. You've seen your youthful dreams come true. I haven't'" (SS 287).

### Conclusions

The Cairo Trilogy owes much to the nineteenth-century realist tradition. (Mahfouz has spoken of his admiration for Stendhal, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Galsworthy, and Proust.) In its *roman fleuve* chronicle of the fortunes of a single family over several generations and with its un-faceted characters, the Cairo Trilogy is closer to the *Forsythe Saga* of John Galsworthy (also a Nobel-Prize winner) than to Galsworthy's more illustrious French precursors. Like Zola, al-Sayyid's family believe their traits to be determined by heredity: their joy in singing (al-Sayyid, Kamal, Na'ima), their exceeding sensitivity to love, whether in the form of lust (al-Sayyid, Yasin) or self-destructive pursuit of phantoms (Fahmy, Kamal, al-Sayyid with Zanuba). As in a nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*, national history —the struggle for in-

dependence, the later divisions and corruption of Egyptian politics—impacts on the lives of novelistic characters; Mahfouz also depicts the notable evolution of Egyptian society during the thirty-year span of the Trilogy. Furthermore, the elegiac nature of the *Bildungsroman*—one thinks, for example, of Armando Palacio Valdés's *Riverita* and *Maximina*—appears not only in the aging and deaths of al Sayyid and Amina and in the decline of the Shaddad family fortunes but also most notably in the wasted lives of characters apparently favored in their youth: Kamal (defect of the will) and Aisha (the malevolence of fate). Mahfouz combines elements of nineteenth- and twentieth-century techniques: a partially omniscient author (who enters the minds only of members of al-Sayyid's family), the interplay of external behavior and inner life, the dialogues (whether with self or others) over the nature of existence and love, the constant Proustian self-interrogation and analysis (Kamal). Traces of contemporary French existentialism are evident in Kamal's despair and sense of the meaninglessness of life and in the decisive political commitment of Ahmad and Abd al-Muni'm Shawkat.

A great variety of women are portrayed in the Trilogy: family-oriented (al-Sayyid's wife and daughters); submissive (Amina, Aisha); strong (Khadija, Maryam, and her mother); lustful and brazen (Maryam's mother, Maryam, Yasin's mother); victims (the part-time prostitutes frequented by Kamal, decent women forced by material misfortune to sell their bodies); manipulators (Aïda Shaddad, Maryam, Zanuba); a snob (Alawiya Sabri). Woman's fate is not always fixed by circumstance; Zanuba achieves a social respectability seemingly impossible for one of her origins. The goal of Mahfouz's women, whether middle-class and almost illiterate (al-Sayyid's daughters) or upper class and well-educated (Aïda, Alawiya Sabri), is marriage. Sawsan Hammad, on the other hand, hard-working, intelligent, and independent, represents a new type of Egyptian woman, the equal of men.

Mahfouz's male characters are portrayed with greater psychological penetration, although only Kamal is explored in depth. The reader is at first alienated by al-Sayyid (the tyrannical husband) and by Yasin (the lusty animal). Later, however, although our initial repugnance is not totally overcome, the two appear in a slightly more favorable light: al-Sayyid becomes more tender with age; Yasin finally achieves a stable marriage and presents an intelligent argument for accepting women as they are, rather than as the idealized angels conceived by the bookish Kamal.

The Cairo Trilogy is structured on love. A striking feature of the Trilogy is the obvious love with which Mahfouz depicts his characters, whether the ox-like Yasin or the sensitive Kamal (who is in many

aspects a thinly-disguised portrait of Mahfouz himself). Amina, Aisha, and Khadija unselfishly love and serve their families. The sons Yasin, Fahmy, and Kamal have a deep love for al-Sayyid. The *bon vivant* al-Sayyid loves his friends and, despite his brutal manners, his family. Another type of love is sensual desire; Yasin is animal-like in his uncontrolled lusts; al-Sayyid, with greater refinement, also relishes women's bodies; his grandson Abd al-Muni'm channels his "sinful" lusts in Islamic marriage; Maryam's and Yasin's mothers are dominated by sexual passion.

Sexual desire, whether conscious or unconscious, can also blind men. The aging Al-Sayyid becomes obsessed with the manipulative Zanuba. Kamal's case is more complicated. The deeply sensitive Kamal has a gift for loving friendships; his happiest moments are spent in the company of Husayn Shaddad and Riyad Qaldas. Kamal refuses to associate sexual desire, which he sates with prostitutes, with the possibility of marriage with a loved one.<sup>3</sup> In one of the most powerful portrayals of inner torment in literature, Mahfouz portrays Kamal's totally devastating passion for Aida Shaddad. (Mahfouz's "corrects" Kamal's almost insane projections by offering others' more realistic perceptions of Aida.) Kamal's refusal to abandon his infatuation, his perpetual self-doubts and questioning of the meaning of existence, his flight from all involvement, are a "Romantic" sickness of the soul. Kamal's wasted life reminds us, indeed, of that of Frédéric Moreau, the protagonist of Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale*. Mahfouz does offer Kamal a second chance, in the person of Budur; Kamal's sickly flight from Budur only irritates the reader. An alternative possibility is presented by Ahmad Shawkat, who does recover from a Romantic obsession and finds happiness with another woman.

The "more practical" characters of the novel—the women, al-Sayyid, Yasin, Ahmad and al-Muni'm Shawkat, Isma'il Latif, the artistic Riqad Qaldas—accept marriage, despite its imperfections, as an essential, and even joyful, part of life. The homosexual Ridwan, like the over-intellectual Kamal, has condemned himself to loneliness. Kamal, with his lucidity, sensitivity, and massive capacity for self-inflicted pain, is nonetheless the outstanding character of the Cairo Trilogy. Nearly at the close of *al-Sukkariyya*, Mahfouz, in an act of

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<sup>3</sup>Hasan M. El-Shamy, in his "cognitive behavioristic analysis" of the Trilogy, claims that "the basic motivating force to which Kamal (i.e. Mahfouz himself) is responding is a powerful affectionate tie to his sister "Aishah"" (El-Shamy 52). Although well-argued, especially with regard to Kamal's traumatic response to Aisha's wedding, El-Shamy's reductionist analysis trivializes Kamal's anguish and too easily denies the influence of Romantic attitudes (see El-Shamy 65).

tenderness toward a character who has greatly suffered, has Riyad Qaldas justify Kamal's life:

[Kamal] asked, "Do you think I've done my duty to life by sincerely pursuing my vocation as a teacher and by writing my philosophical essays?"

Riyad answered affectionately, "There's no doubt that you have" (SS 305).

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