

The Beginning and the End



Naguib Mahfouz, 1950

The Beginning and the End, like most of the other novels that Naguib Mahfouz wrote in the late 1940s, is carefully dated. Like the other novels, the dating is mainly done by reference to political events.

There are allusions to student demonstrations. *“God be merciful to the martyrs of the faculties of Arts, Agriculture, and Dar el-Uhm!”* [9.] There were student demonstrations in 1934. I have not been able to determine the significance of Dar el-Uhm.

It appears that Hussein and Hassanein, the brothers at the heart of *The Beginning and the End*, have participated in the demonstrations. They are teenagers. *“Let’s revolt against fate... and shout, ‘Down with Fate’, just as we shouted ‘Down with Hor’.”* [8.] I have not been able to establish who ‘Hor’ was.

Hussein, on the way to his new post in Tanta, has a political discussion with someone he meets on the train. His fellow-traveller refers quite explicitly to current events. '*...the Effendi ...waved the folded newspaper.... "Who would ever have imagined that Sidhi would agree to meet with Nahas? The Palace and the Wafdists at the same table!"*' [48.]

There are casual references to other events, such as the Anglo-Egyptian treaty. [68.] The treaty was signed in 1936. [Goldschmidt, 2004.] Egypt was just a step away from independence.

Hassanein can only think of entering the War College because of a political decision relaxing the entry requirements. '*Your Excellency, the government's decision to enlarge the army affords me a golden opportunity this year that has never presented itself before.*' [59.]

Similarly his graduation can be dated. *Hassanein learned that... the Minister of War had decided to graduate a group of officers after only one year....* [68.]

Mahfouz also does something he hasn't done in the other novels of this period. He explicitly mentions the year in which it is set. It happens in a context in which to mention the year is perfectly natural. '*[Farid Effendi's] income had amounted to twenty-eight pounds a month, which was considered very substantial in 1933.*' [14.]

Mentioning the year is also completely redundant. It adds nothing to the meaning of the sentence. Mahfouz wants to make it very clear that the events of the novel occur during a historically important period. He does not - as he is to do in the *Cairo Trilogy* (1956-57) - integrate the historical events with the action of the novel.

Mahfouz does something else he hasn't done in the other novels of this period. He lets time pass. '*Another year passed, and life continued in its usual course. The members of the family followed their normal routines of everyday life.*' [43.]

Time does not pass in melodrama. Time in melodrama is consumed in urgent action. The characters in melodrama do not follow normal routines. There is too much need to maintain the excitement.

Mahfouz has not embraced realism yet. He is however moving away, by very small steps, from the pure melodrama of some of his earlier novels.

The Beginning and the End (1950) - like *Cairo Modern* (1945), *Khan al-Khalili* (1945), *Midaq Alley* (1947) and, for some chapters, *The Mirage* (1948) - is about poverty. Poverty is a preoccupation to which Mahfouz will constantly return.

In the first chapter, Hussein and Hassanein, the second and third sons of the Kamel family, are informed by the headmaster of the family tragedy. "*Your elder brother has informed me that your father is dead.*" [*The Beginning and the End*, 1.]

Hussein is nineteen years old. Hassanein is two years younger. It would not have been unusual for a young man of nineteen, in Egypt at that date, to be still in secondary school.

Mahfouz did not personally experience bereavement and destitution in his youth. It is possibly significant that the opening chapter of the novel is set in secondary school. It may be that school friends of Mahfouz were affected in this way.

This is of course pure speculation. If my intuition is correct, the experience affected Mahfouz deeply.

Kamel Effendi Ali, Hussein and Hassanein's father, was an employee in the Ministry of Education. '*...since he had worked for the government for about thirty years at a salary of seventeen pounds a month, his heirs would receive a pension of five pounds per month.*' [7.]

Hassanein's salary, when he starts his new job in the eighth grade, is less than his father's. *"How much of a salary do you expect?" "Seven pounds."* [46.]

Kamel Effendi Ali is doing better than that. He isn't doing that much better.

Kamel Effendi was respectable. He wasn't rich. His family have always been poor. Now they are plunged into something not far from destitution.

Kamel Effendi hasn't been able to save. *'In the dead man's wallet [Samira, Kamel Effendi's widow] had found only two pounds and seventy piasters, and that was all the money she had until matters could be straightened out.'* [5.]

Hassan, the eldest son, is a ne'er-do-well. *'He never left home, nor did he search seriously for a job.'* [6.]

Nefisa, Samira's daughter, is *'...a girl of twenty-three, without beauty, money, or father.'* [5] Mahfouz does not have to explain to his Egyptian readers that Nefisa is unmarriageable, or that - as an uneducated girl from a respectable family - she really has no legitimate options other than marriage.

Poverty brings shame in its wake. Samira has to sell the furniture. *"I will not pay one millieme more than three pounds," said the furniture dealer....'* [12.]

The two younger boys need to stay at school and pass the baccalaureate to have a chance of employment in the government service, and to achieve the same social status as their father. If they leave school now, the sacrifice involved in keeping them in school has been wasted.

Later in the novel Hassan, their elder brother, has an acid comment on the value of formal

education. *"I've come to tell you that I've been appointed a clerk at the secondary school in Tanta, and I'll be starting my work on the first of October," [Hussein] said. "Will you travel to Tanta? ...What use, then, will it be to Mother if you live in Tanta? ...This is really bad luck. This is the result of school education."* [46.]

Samira is in a tough position. The dominant fact of the novel is the family's poverty. The action is dominated by their attempts to cope with it.

Poverty dominates in some of the other novels of the late 1940s. In *Cairo Modern*, '[Mahgub Abd al-Daim's] father was a clerk in a Greek-owned creamery in al-Qanatir. He had worked there for twenty-five years and earned eight pounds.' [Cairo Modern, 6.] He is poorer than Kamel Effendi Ali, and as a commercial employee has lower status.

That is difficult enough. Mahgub Abd al-Daim is poorer than his friends. *'...unlike his two friends he did not own a special outfit for Thursday night.'* [Cairo Modern, 5.] Mahgub Abd al-Daim's father *'...allocated three pounds to him every month during the academic year. This sum covered necessities like housing, food, and clothing, and the young man was grudgingly satisfied....'* [Cairo Modern, 6.]

It soon gets worse. *'We are sad to inform you that your dear father is ill and bedridden.'* [Cairo Modern, 6.]

Mahgub Abd al-Daim's father has had a stroke. It is too severe for him to return to work. *'His father knew that his settlement would last them ...five or six months.... "Could you live on one pound a month?"'* [Cairo Modern, 8.]

It is the experience of truly wretched poverty that makes Mahgub Abd al-Daim especially susceptible to being corrupted. Corruption is one of the major themes of *Cairo Modern*.

In exchange for a job in the civil service, Mahgub Abd al-Daim becomes a pimp. All he has to do is provide a veneer of respectability to the illicit affair of a dignitary by marrying the dignitary's mistress. "*Let me tell you about your wife.... His Excellency himself [Qasim Bey Fahmi] is her friend.*" [Cairo Modern, 6.] Mahgub Abd al-Daim has lost any claim he might have had to self-respect.

The portrayal of poverty in *Khan al-Khalili* is very similar to the portrayal in *The Beginning and the End*. Both families lose parental income. In both families, one of the sons - the more responsible one - has to abandon the hope of higher education and accept a low-paid government job.

The father of the family in *Khan al-Khalili*, Akif Effendi Ahmad, was a low-level bureaucrat. He '*...had been pensioned off before he had even reached the age of forty. As a result of sheer negligence he had failed to perform his administrative obligations adequately; what made it worse was that he then adopted a supercilious attitude towards the civil service investigators who were examining his case.*' [Khan al-Khalili, 2.]

Ahmad Akif, the protagonist '*...had been forced to abandon his studies and take a minor administrative post in order to provide for his shattered family and support his two younger brothers.*' [Khan al-Khalili, 2.]

The father in *Khan al-Khalili* has been forced into early retirement. He is not dead, like Kamel Effendi. The situation is, initially at least, less tragic. Economically, also, Ahmad Akif's family is better off. As well as Akif Effendi Ahmad's small pension, they have Ahmad Akif's salary. Ahmad Akif, unlike Hussein in *The Beginning and the End*, works in Cairo and lives at home. Ahmad Akif does not have to maintain a separate establishment. He is able to contribute more to the expenses of the family.

The parallels nevertheless are striking. Petty-bourgeois respectability is precarious. Events -

the death, the early retirement, or, as in *Cairo Modern*, the illness of the father of the family - can threaten destitution and force sacrifices.

The poverty of Ahmed Akif's family is not absolute. It is relative. Ahmed even manages to save small sums. He is however worried about the impact of any special demands on his financial position. *'He was sure that during Ramadan they would spend what little he usually saved each month. He might even have to withdraw an additional amount from his savings account.'* [Khan al-Khalili, 9.] The relative poverty of respectable people is a major concern in four out of five of Mahfouz's novels from the second half of the 1940s. The exception is *Midaq Alley*.

Poverty in *Midaq Alley* is well-nigh universal. In some cases - Sheikh Darwish, the ex-teacher and former functionary, Umm Hamida, the bath attendant and marriage broker, and Zaita, the repulsive cripple-maker - the poverty is absolute or nearly so. *Midaq Alley* is a poor quarter.

A handful of the characters are not poor. The businessman, Salim Alwan, is rich. He has educated his sons for the professions. His sons find their father embarrassing. *'His son... the judge, had suggested that he liquidate his company....'* [*Midaq Alley*, 8.]

The café owner, Kirsha, is better off than some of the other inhabitants of the alley. Whether this is because of his café business or his narcotics trade is not clear.

The rentier landlords, Mrs Saniya Afify and Radwan Hussainy, are also better off. Neither of them has to work.

Mrs Afify is greedy and mean. *'She kept her new banknotes in a small ivory casket hidden in the depths of her clothes closet and arranged them in packages of fives and tens, delighting herself by looking at them, counting and rearranging them.... She had always inclined*

towards avarice and was one of the earliest contributors to the savings bank.' [Midaq Alley, 2.] This is a caricature.

Hamida and Hussein Kirsha, the café owner's son, are desperate to escape poverty. Hussein works for the British army. Hamida becomes a prostitute.

Between them they destroy Abbas, the barber. Abbas is Hussein's friend and Hamida's fiancé. Hussein persuades Abbas to work for the army. Abbas returns to the alley and discovers Hamida is a prostitute. He loses control and attacks her. He is kicked to death by British soldiers.

Mahfouz portrays some people as flourishing in the midst of poverty: the landlords, the drug dealers, the tooth-puller Dr Booshy. They make money off people poorer than themselves. This I think is realistic.

Poverty also occurs in *The Mirage*. It is however temporary.

Kamil's grandfather dies. "*May God grant you length of days. Your grandfather has died, son.*" [The Mirage, 24.] The former colonel's pension has been the family's main income.

Kamil and his mother have to retrench. "*Maybe we can find a small flat in the neighbourhood for just a hundred fifty piasters.... We'd have to let the servants go.*" [The Mirage, 25.]

Kamil is grossly inhibited about women. Poverty makes it even more difficult for him to ask for the hand of his beloved. '*What was standing between my beloved and me? Poverty.*' [The Mirage, 27.]

Kamil is a petty bureaucrat by occupation. Kamil's family are from the decaying aristocracy.

They do not rely entirely on earning salaries.

Kamil is rescued by another death, that of his father. “*Our father has died. Come to Hilmiya.*” [*The Mirage*, 32.]

Kamil receives an inheritance. This completely changes his situation. In a real way, it changes his identity. ‘*I was no longer the indigent, destitute person I had been....*’ [*The Mirage*, 33.]

Kamil’s ability to marry the woman he wants is determined by poverty. The impact of poverty on the search for partners and for sexual satisfaction is a major theme of the novels of this period.

Mahfouz is very conscious of the precariousness of his social class of origin, the petty bourgeoisie. A family tragedy can easily plunge them into what they fear most, the destitution of the urban masses. In that miserable condition, they lose not only their social status but their respectability.

Mahgub Abd al-Daim in *Cairo Modern*, Hamida in *Midaq Alley*, and Hassan and Nefisa in *The Beginning and the End* will resort to any shift to survive. Mahgub Abd al-Daim becomes a pimp. Hassan becomes a thug and a drug pedlar, and lives in part at least from immoral earnings. Hamida and Nefisa become prostitutes. In Mahfouz’s world, that is the only way out for women.

In Mahfouz’s novels of the 1940s, the urban masses are described from the point of view of the urban lower-middle class. The masses are the fate that the petty-bourgeois fear.

The poverty of the masses and, as Mahfouz sees it, their immorality, are the consequence of lack of status. It is only in the later, allegorical novels – *Children of the Alley* (1959) and *The*

Harafish (1977) - that the portrayal of the urban poor is more sympathetic.

Mahfouz sometimes alludes to the rural poverty of the majority of the Egyptian people. He never really portrays it.

Unlike the other novels of the late 1940s, there is a great deal of emphasis in *The Beginning and the End* on the impact of poverty on social status. Social status, as a fictional theme, is new.

The concern with status becomes obvious very early in the novel. Samira's status is different from her sister's. '*Hassan... saw a man and a woman approaching in peasant clothes. The brothers recognised them as their aunt and her husband, Amm Farag Soliman.*' [3.]

Being a peasant, in this context, is not about culture. It is made very clear that it is about social status, and that the determinant of status is occupation: '*...his aunt's husband, not much more than a labourer....*' [3.]

Samira's sister is very conscious of the difference in status. She is envious. She '*...frequently enjoyed comparing their lives... [Samira] had married a government employee, whereas her own husband was just a labourer working in a ginning factory; ...her sister lived in Cairo, whereas she was doomed to the confinement of the country; ...her sister's sons were schoolboys, whereas her own sons were destined for labourers' lives; ...her sister's larder was always full, whereas she had plenty in hers only in feast times.*' [5.]

Only the comment about the fullness or otherwise of the larders refers to consumption. All the rest is about status. The determinants, in this context, are very clear. Being a white-collar worker, working for the government, residing in the capital and having education all have status. Manual work and living in the provinces do not.

Of all the family, it is Hassanein who feels status issues most acutely. This is not explained. It is part of his character, like his ambition and his selfishness. Even his ambition is status-driven. *“Not only do I loathe poverty but I hate the mere mention of it.”* [57.]

Hassanein's status needs lead him to enrol at the War College, which leads in turn to the novel's final catastrophe. Catastrophe following so quickly on apparent triumph is typical of melodrama.

Hassanein's anxieties about status show clearly at his father's funeral, which in one of the very early chapters. He is concerned about the status of the guests, and how this reflects on his father's status, and hence that of the family. *‘[Hassanein] wished that all the people there could see the great inspector.’* [4.]

Mahfouz emphasises that the level of Hassanein's concern is, to say the least, unusual. *‘...to Hassanein a degrading funeral seemed as much of a catastrophe as death itself.’* [4.]

Hassanein's anxiety focuses in particular on his family's lack of a tomb. *‘[Hassanein] did not want anyone to see the family's humble burial place.’* [4.]

In Hassanein's eyes, the unadorned plot betrays the family's status. *‘...Kamel Effendi was buried in something not much more than a pauper's grave....’* [4.]

This is surely about shame. The word itself is not used. Perhaps it does not have to be. The translator's use of the term 'degrading', however, is surely significant.

One of the sources of shame, for Hassanein, is poverty. It implies the loss of the petty-bourgeois status in which the family's self-respect is based.

Other family members try to reassure Hassanein: *“...your father left Damietta with his*

grandmother for Cairo when he was your age.” [5.] In other words, Hassanein’s father was a provincial, like his aunt’s husband. Like Hassanein is now, his father was an orphan at the same age.

Hassanein is not consoled. *‘The obscure grave in the open would always remain a symbol of his family’s being shamefully lost in the big city’*. [5.]

It is Hassanein who is particularly concerned about Nefisa having to work outside the family. *‘[Nefisa] ... had been a respectable girl but now she had become a dressmaker.’* [13.]

The employment of women outside the family is a threat to petty-bourgeois respectability. This is the intersection of occupational and sexual status.

Hassanein is not content to settle for the cautious respectability and the oppressive, relative poverty for which his brother Hussein has sacrificed his chance of higher education. *‘Most of all, [Hassanein] feared that his life would be as confined as that of his brother Hussein, and that, lacking any flowery prospect, he would spend the rest of his life striving for menial promotions from the eighth to the sixth grade.’* [59.]

Hassanein sets his eyes on a higher goal than that. *“I have come to the conclusion that I should choose either the Police College or the War College.”* [57.]

Once the subject of a military career has been raised, Mahfouz writes as if that had always been Hassanein’s ambition. It is described as: *‘...his life’s dream, to join the War College or perish.’* [59.]

There has been no previous mention of any such ambition. Mahfouz is fairly clearly making things up as he goes along.

It would not have taken much of an effort to go back and insert a sentence or two in an earlier chapter. Mahfouz did not bother. The novels of the late 1940s were not written to the same standard as some of the later work.

Entry to the War College does not allay Hassanein's status anxieties in quite the naive way he thought. In fact, it creates an entirely new set of concerns.

Hassanein is cruelly teased when his comrades at the college see him with his fiancée Bahia. *"Yesterday this hero was seen with a girl on his arm." "The homely type." "She had blue eyes ...but she had a crudely native look." "Too short and too plump." "I hope she's not your fiancée."* [65.]

Hassanein still desires Bahia. He has however become ashamed of her. *'Blood boiled in his veins and a reckless desire surged up in his chest. But how could he possibly disregard the appalling fact that he must avoid appearing with her in public?'* [66.]

Hassanein is drawn to a family that represents what he aspires to. He is insecure: *'...it was impossible that [Ahmad Bey Yousri and his wife and daughter] were unaware of his true social status.'* [67.]

As well as poverty, *The Beginning and the End* is about sexual awakening. It deals with the effect of poverty and social status, in particular, on the young people's search for sexual partners and sexual satisfaction.

Hassanein strongly desires Bahia. *'His heart beat violently and he rose like a man obsessed.'* [17.]

Hassanein, by the standards prevailing in respectable, conservative families, is over-familiar with Bahia. *'He pressed her fingers in a manner that could not be mistaken. Resentfully she*

withdrew her hand, and a frown darkened her face.' [17.]

Bahia is a neighbour in the same building. Her family have long been friends of Samira's family. Farid Effendi Mohammed is '*...their good friend and neighbour.'* [4.]

Hassanein becomes engaged to Bahia. It is not clear that becoming engaged is what Hassanein originally intended to do.

"I shall keep chasing her until... Until she falls in love with me as I have with her." "Then?"
The young man replied, perplexed, "That's enough." [18.]

Bahia does not allow Hassanein any familiarity. *"Don't touch me," she said with serious finality.* [24.]

Hassanein responds by declaring his love. *"I love you, truly and honestly."* [24.]

Bahia interprets that as meaning that Hassanein wants to marry her. Her response is that of a modest girl from a conservative, Muslim family. *"But this is not for me to decide."* [24.]

Hassanein understands exactly what she means. Hassanein's family needs to speak to her father. It is typical of Hassanein's egocentricity that he takes it on himself. *"I shall speak to Farid Effendi."* [24.]

Hassanein is still a schoolboy. Hassanein's family has still not managed to stabilise after his father's death. The announcement of the engagement has to be postponed. *"[Samira] ...requested [Farid Effendi] to wait until our stumbling family could get back on its feet."* [25.]

Bahia has had a conservative upbringing. *'At the age of twelve, [Bahia] had disappeared*

from the yard and for some time stopped going to school....' [15.]

Bahia's ideas on the relations between young people before marriage are thoroughly traditional. *'Clearly hesitating, she proceeded to speak with candour and naiveté. "Don't you read what Al Sabah magazine publishes about girls who are deserted because of their recklessness?"'* [28.]

Bahia believes that any familiarity between the sexes before marriage is the equivalent of prostitution. *"My mother told me that any girl who imitates lovers in films is a hopeless prostitute."* [28.]

This is a view that permeates the novel. There are good girls, like Bahia and Ahmad Bey Yousri's daughter, with whom Hassanein also becomes infatuated. There are prostitutes, like Nefisa and Sana'a. There is nothing in between. There is no middle way.

Nothing changes between Hassanein and Bahia until, towards the end of the novel, Hassanein breaks off the engagement. Their relationship is about Hassanein demanding physical intimacy and Bahia refusing.

Hassanein continues to declare his passion. *"I have a burning desire to press a kiss upon your lips and embrace you to my breast."* [38.] The detail, here, makes it clear that even Hassanein - with a respectable fiancée - does not expect sexual intercourse.

Bahia denies Hassanein the smallest degree of physical intimacy. *"Be a decent boy and stop all this nonsense. Real love knows no such frivolity."* [38.]

Hassanein accuses Bahia of coldness. *"Bahia... you speak with the cruelty of a person whose breast has never throbbed with love."* [38.]

Bahia does not listen. *"...I do not approve of the kind of love you want...."* [38.]

Hassanein becomes frustrated. *'He felt he was wasting his days in hopeless monotony. ...he was overcome by a vindictive impulse, a desire to injure, if only by words.'* [38.]

Hassanein begins to doubt his feelings. *'On the third morning after his visit to Hassan, he wondered, baffled, if he had stopped loving Bahia.... She was no longer his ideal girl.'* [72.]

When Hassanein has decided that he no longer wishes to marry Bahia, he forces himself on her. All he wants is a kiss. The language used suggests a rape. *'Her hands resisted, but he embraced her, took her to his breast with brutal violence, and pressed a kiss on her lips.'* [72.]

Bahia responds strongly. *"I'll never forgive you," she said.* [72.]

We might expect Bahia to break off the engagement. In fact, she behaves in a way that is more forward than anything she has done so far. *'As she shook hands with him, the girl slipped a folded paper into his hand.... "Meet me on the roof," it said.'* [76.]

Until this point Hassanein has always been keen to spend time alone with Bahia. This time he doesn't go. *'...he would never sacrifice his career and happiness for the sake of an old, infantile passion or promise.'* [76.]

Hassanein's family are shocked. *"What a scandal!" "...What a terrible offence to this most good-hearted family!"* [79.] Hussein, driven by ambition and the fear of shame, has behaved dishonourably.

Hassanein's behaviour towards Bahia is consistently aggressive. He is restrained only by her respectability. He treats Bahia in ways she does not want. Until he loses interest in

marrying her, he does not push her beyond a certain point. He is not cynical.

While Mahfouz condemns Hassanein's aggression and his defiance of convention, he sees a justification in terms of Hassanein's strong feelings. Hassanein is of course a man.

'[Hassanein's] beloved was no less stubbornly adamant than his mother. She forced him to be content with an ascetic, platonic relationship that was unsuitable to his passionate nature.' [43.]

Nefisa's paramours are thoroughly cynical. They set out to take advantage. The difference between Nefisa's situation and Bahia's is that Bahia has a father, who is prosperous. The difference between their personalities is that Bahia is cold. It represents, I think, a somewhat fatalistic approach to sexual relations. Chastity is a luxury that only the bourgeoisie can afford.

Hussein, by contrast, is the good brother. It is Hussein who warns Hassanein about his behaviour towards Bahia. *"Take care. Don't be insolent. This is a respectable house."* [16.]

It is also Hussein who is prepared to make sacrifices for the rest of the family. *'Hussein, her meek son, had accepted the sacrifice of his career and the suffering of loneliness for the sake of his family, and for Hassanein in particular.'* [47.]

Samira is aware that Hussein is marriageable. Mahfouz doesn't need to spell this out. The point would be obvious to an Egyptian reader. Samira is also aware that if Hussein marries it will be a disaster for the family. *'...Samira wished to put Hussein on his guard against the snares of marriage.'* [47.]

In Tanta, Hussein is lonely. He is bored. *'[Hussein] was certain that his life, lonely as it was, would be devoid of entertainment, too.'* [49.]

In that situation, Hussein is very susceptible. *'His heart seemed to be waiting to admit the first girl who would knock at its door.'* [52.]

His superior at work tries to marry him off to his daughter. Almost the first thing Hassan Effendi wants to know when they meet is whether Hussein is available. *"'Are you married, Hussein Effendi?'"* [50.]

Hassan Effendi makes a series of attractive offers. He knows of better accommodation. *"'There's a two-room flat on the roof of the house where I live,"* [Hassan Effendi] *added. "The rent won't be more than a pound."* [50.]

Hassan Effendi also offers his company. *"'You seem to dislike coffeehouses, so you can use this balcony as a nightclub.'" [51.]*

Hussein knows what is going on. *'From the very beginning, he was clearly aware of how critical his situation was.'* [52.]

Samira intuits what is happening. She intervenes. *"'Mother, in Tanta! I can hardly believe my eyes!'"* [53.]

Samira, despite her embarrassment, now asks Hussein directly to make a sacrifice. *"'If I suggested that you postpone any thoughts of marriage, wouldn't you consider it unfair?'"* [54.]

Samira advises Hussein to remove himself from what has become a compromising situation. *"'I advise you to leave this flat and go back to your room at the hotel.'" [54.]*

The Beginning and the End reprises, in some ways, the central relationship between the two brothers in *Khan al-Khalili*. Ahmad Akif, the older of the brothers in *Khan al-Khalili*, is a

character that Mahfouz does not like. The portrait of Hussein in *The Beginning and the End*, by contrast - despite the similarity in their situations - is sympathetic. Mahfouz in a way is redeeming the cruelty of the portrayal in the earlier novel.

Ahmad Akif has to give up his hopes of higher education to support the other members of his family. Ahmad takes it hard. *'The decision to abandon his studies had been a severe blow to his hopes. At first it sent him reeling, and he was overwhelmed by a violent, almost insane fury that completely destroyed his personality and filled him with a bitter sense of remorse.'* [Khan al-Khalili, 2.]

When Hussein has to refuse the offer of Hassan Effendi's daughter Ihsan in marriage, thereby severing relations with Hassan Effendi, he too becomes angry and bitter. *'At this moment he hated not only himself but humanity at large.'* [56.]

It doesn't last. Unlike Ahmad Akif, Hussein has a very strong sense of duty. *'His sense of duty outweighed all his other emotions.'* [56.]

Ahmad Akif becomes embittered. He turns against women. *'If his complete failure to achieve anything turned him into an enemy of the entire world, then his failure with women made him their enemy too.'* [Khan al-Khalili, 4.]

Ahmad is an unattractive personality. *'However, a combination of despair and thriftiness, followed by a peculiar adaptation to look like an intellectual, had robbed him of any concern about either his person or his manner of dress.'* His *'...teeth [are] yellowed by smoking.'* Ahmad is unattractive morally as well as physically. *'His secret craving for sex gnawed at him....'* [Khan al-Khalili, 1.]

His brother Rushdi is the opposite. *'Where love was concerned, he had limitless self-confidence, based on one success after another.'* [Khan al-Khalili, 17.]

One of the most extraordinary parallels between the two novels is that both Hassanein, in *The Beginning and the End*, and Rushdi, in *Khan al-Khalili*, accost their beloved on the roof. This probably reflects the reality of courtship in conservative communities, and life in Cairo apartment blocks.

Hassanein is alert to the slightest sign of femininity. '[Hassanein] *raised his head to follow the rustle of a dress. He saw the hem as the wearer climbed the last flight of stairs leading to the roof of the house. Who was it?*' [21.]

Bahia has a legitimate reason for being there. '*Then [Hassanein] heard a voice clucking to the chickens.*' [21.]

Hassanein accosts Bahia. Bahia responds with proper modesty. "*Let me pass, please,*" she said.' [21.]

Hassanein insists on a declaration of love. "*Say just one word! If you can't, only give a nod.*" [21.]

The meeting on the roof in *Khan al-Khalili* is very similar. '*Now she could no longer play with the younger girls in the street, the roof had become her favourite spot.*' [Khan al-Khalili, 21.] Nawal's family are conservative. Once she reaches puberty she is secluded.

Rushdi follows Nawal. '*She was amazed to find him standing there, his tall frame filling up the doorway.*' [Khan al-Khalili, 21.]

Like Bahia, Nawal responds very properly. "*Don't start dragging me into the conversation. Now stop blocking my way.*" [Khan al-Khalili, 22.]

The courtship in each novel evolves in a broadly similar way. After a proper display of

modesty, the suitor is accepted. The portrayal in *The Beginning and the End* is somewhat more subtle.

In *Khan al-Khalili*, Ahmad is a failure. He craves women but is unsuccessful in love. Rushdi is reckless. His reluctance to face the truth about his tuberculosis leads to suffering for everybody. When Nawal's family find out, they forbid her to visit him. "... from today you cannot visit our dear sick neighbour any more." [*Khan al-Khalili*, 44.]

Nawal does not understand. She is a teenage girl. She is in love. "How can you be so unkind?" [*Khan al-Khalili*, 44.]

In *The Beginning and the End*, Hussein sacrifices his own interests for the sake of his family. Hassanein's ambition leads him to behave dishonourably, and break off his engagement to Bahia. There is a deliberate opposition in each novel. The contrast between altruism and selfishness seems to me somewhat more interesting than the contrast between failure and recklessness.

If *The Beginning and the End* is a reworking of *Khan al-Khalili* - which in some ways it quite clearly is - then Hassan and Nefisa are in a sense 'additional' characters. They show different responses to poverty, and different ways of finding sexual satisfaction. What Hassan and Nefisa show are the disreputable variants.

The outcomes for Nefisa- in circumstances identical that are identical to those of Hassanein - are very different. Hassanein becomes an officer. Nefisa becomes a prostitute.

Hassanein's progress towards his commission is sketched in fairly lightly. Mahfouz is not really interested in the army. What is important is Hassanein's relationship with his sponsor, Ahmed Bey Yousri.

Nefisa's progress - if that is the right word - towards prostitution is by contrast described rather carefully. Mahfouz is concerned to be as realistic as possible.

Mahfouz describes three relationships that Nefisa has. These three relationships represent the course of what I can only describe as her career.

Hamida in *Midaq Alley* also has a career, and her career too unrolls over the course of three relationships. Hamida first becomes engaged to Abbas, the barber. He is poor but at least he is handsome. Hamida throws Abbas over for the rich merchant, Salim Alwan. This demonstrates that she is mercenary.

Salim Alwan then has to be disposed of so that Hamida can form a relationship with her pimp, Ibrahim Faraj. This will demonstrate that she is not only mercenary but immoral. Accordingly - since the plot will not wait for anything less dramatic - Mahfouz has Salim Alwan have a heart attack.

Nefisa's first relationship is with the grocer's son, Soliman Gaber Soliman. Nefisa is convinced that she and Soliman are going to get married. '[Nefisa] *believed that he was her first and last lover. Hope and despair made her cling to him passionately...*' [26.]

Soliman reassures her of this. *Soliman Gaber Soliman spoke. "Don't have any doubts about it. We shall marry as I have told you. I make this promise before God."* [26.]

When Nefisa learns he has been lying to her she is desperately disappointed. '*A deceiver, an impostor, and a liar. What would she do?...Only one hour before she had considered him her man, and herself his wife.*' [33.] Nefisa's only offence, so far, against tradition and morality has been to anticipate her nuptials.

Nefisa puts herself in the wrong by assaulting Soliman. '*...with all her might, [Nefisa] struck*

him twice in the face with her fist. She saw blood streaming from his nose.' [33.]

Soliman seduces Nefisa by degrees. Nefisa finds his attentions flattering. *'That he was interested in her made her think very highly of him.... Perhaps she was not as ugly as she thought.'* [23.]

Soliman asks Nefisa out. *"The shop is usually closed on Friday in the afternoon. Meet me then. We could go to Rod el-Farag."* [23.] Rod el-Farag was known at that time for its nightclubs. [Wikipedia.]

This is not something that a respectable unmarried young woman from a conservative family would do. Nefisa initially resists. *"Go together? I don't like the idea. I'm not one of those girls."* [23.]

Soliman persists. *"Shall we meet then, next Friday?"* He persuades her. *'She hesitated a bit, then murmured, "By God's will."* [23.]

Soliman has a powerful psychological hold. *'He was the first man to restore her self-confidence.'* [26.]

Nefisa also initially resists when Soliman invites her home. *"Please, come in." "Let's go back." "...You must honour our home."* [27.]

In the darkness Soliman seduces her. Mahfouz is discreet about details. *'The surrounding darkness became thicker than ever.'* [27.]

Nefisa discovers that Soliman has abandoned her to marry another woman. Nefisa is so angry that she stages a confrontation with the bride. She loses a customer. *"How criminal! How insolent! Go away before I call the servants to throw you out of the house!"* [35.]

Soliman does not pay Nefisa for sex. Nefisa nevertheless has sexual relations with Soliman without being married. By the conventional standards of the time – standards which her brother's fiancée, Bahia, clearly shares – Nefisa has defined herself as a prostitute.

Nefisa does not see her second relationship, with Mohammed al-Ful, as leading potentially to marriage. She sees it more as an affair.

Mohammed is exciting. He is not respectable. '[Mohammed] *seemed to her strong and daring, but at the same time dishonourable and untrustworthy.*' [41.]

Mohammed, like a lover, persuades Nefisa to go for a drive with him. "*Look to my left and you will find a car owned by my humble person. Old though it is, it can carry us to any place you like.*" [41.]

When they arrive, Mohammed is rough with Nefisa. '*Stretching out his arm, he suddenly encircled her waist, pulling her toward him with unexpected violence.*' [41.]

Nefisa is worried about her family. Nefisa does not want to have sex a second time. Mohammed treats her with open contempt. "*Damn you! This trip wasn't even worth the gasoline it took to get her!*" [41.]

Nefisa is as shocked that Mohammed pays her as she is by the trivial sum. '*But she saw him stretching out his hand, offering her a ten piaster piece. "This is enough for one time," he said....*' [41.]

The payment is mean. The manner of the payment is openly contemptuous. '*...he threw the silver coin at her feet and drove off....*' [41.]

Nefisa is shamed. '*She was overwhelmed with a profound feeling of sorrow and*

degradation....' [41.]

Nefisa's need for money, and her family's need for money, prompts her - or so we are allowed to assume - to accept what Mohammed so contemptuously offers. '*Seeing no reason to leave [the coin] there, she picked it up.*' [41.]

The third relationship is the one in which Nefisa behaves as a prostitute in the narrow sense. The man is not particularly attractive. He seems respectable. '*He was sixty, age lending to his body a sagging but dignified appearance.... he wore a woollen suit; he carried an elegant fly whisk with an ivory handle....'* [60.]

Nefisa's motives in this case are purely financial. '*...this time, out of pure greed, and feeling no desire at all, she surrendered to a passerby.*' [60.]

The gentleman, despite his social status, treats her with the same contempt as Mohammed al-Ful. "*...a twenty-piaster piece is too much for a person like you.*" [60.]

The fourth relationship, the one that is her undoing, is not described at all. It is important only because of its impact on her brother Hassanein. The first we know of it is when it becomes a police matter. "*Master, a policeman wants to speak to you!*" [88.]

The description of how Nefisa becomes a prostitute is more realistic than the account of the way Hamida finds her vocation in *Midaq Alley*. In *The Beginning and the End*, there is nothing like the nonsense of the school for prostitution. "*Your lover is the headmaster of a school, and you will learn everything when the time comes.*" [*Midaq Alley*, 24.]

Nefisa's chances of marriage, the only really acceptable outcome for a woman of her class, are very slight. For a start, Nefisa is not conventionally attractive. '*Nefisa, [Samira's] daughter ...had the same thin oval face, short, coarse nose and pointed chin. She was pale,*

and a little hunchbacked'. [5.]

(I suspect that 'hunchbacked', here, is a mistranslation and that 'round-shouldered' would have been better. There are no other suggestions that Nefisa is disabled.)

Nefisa is of course an orphan. She does not have a male protector. Since her father's death, in addition, she is even more poor.

Nefisa's poverty results in a loss of respectability. "*Nefisa is good at sewing.... ..she often makes dresses for our neighbours. I see no harm in her asking for some compensation.*" [6.]

Nefisa's brothers don't like it. *'The word "dressmaker" was very painful to [Hussein]....'* [8.] There is nothing they can do. The family needs the money.

Mahfouz is sympathetic about Nefisa's poverty. Mahfouz is also sympathetic about her desperate need for marriage and love. This is what prompts her relationship with Soliman. *'A burning desire for love overcame [Nefisa].'* [20.]

Despite the social and economic rationality of her choices, Nefisa is presented as driven to despair. *'How complete was her degradation! And how dreadful her end!'* [60.]

There is no specific suggestion that these feelings are religious in origin. That is reasonable, since the prevailing attitudes to female sexuality are as much social as religious. What is important, I think, is that Nefisa internalises these judgements. She sees herself as others would do, if they knew what she was doing.

Nefisa's feelings about her situation are extreme. *'What hope did life hold out for her? She was doomed to self-destruction.'* [47.] This is melodramatic.

What is more problematic is the treatment of Nefisa's sexual feelings. *'However, in addition to the feeling of despair, an intense desire boiled in veins, clamouring for gratification; she felt helpless before it.'* [41.]

Sexual feelings in women are discreditable. Sexual feelings in men, as in the case of Nefisa's brother Hassanein, are an explanation.

Something similar is true of the feminine pleasure that Nefisa takes, despite not being conventionally good-looking, in attention from men. *'How delicious flirtation was, even if it was false!'* [41.] This is clearly being presented as a weakness.

The depths of despair to which Nefisa sinks anticipate her suicide. This happens, for example, when she learns of Soliman's betrayal. *"The new bride is the daughter of Amm Gobran el-Tui, the grocer." "...Who's the bridegroom?" "...It is Soliman, the son of Amm Gaber Soliman, the grocer."* [32.]

It is the end of Nefisa's dream. *'...an overpowering feeling of death quickly overtook her.'* [32.] This is not the inevitability of tragedy. It is rather the fatalism of melodrama.

Mahfouz's portrait of Nefisa is unsympathetic. She is ugly. She is a prostitute. She has strong sexual feelings. She has to work for her money.

This portrayal of a woman is thoroughly in keeping with the *mores* of the time and the place. That does not make it all right.

Mahfouz, in later novels, is to show himself a highly intelligent and remarkably insightful novelist. It is a shame he could not have portrayed Nefisa more as an individual. In doing so he would have challenged to some extent the notions about women and sexuality that were prevalent at the time.

There are some deliberate parallels between Nefisa's sexual progress and Hassanein's. These are not the coincidences which in earlier novels of this period drove the plot. They are coincidences in time, which underline formal parallels.

Hassanein's mother agrees to his engagement to Bahia. *'Mother told him she considered his approval of your proposal a great honour.'* [25.]

In the very next chapter, Soliman and Nefisa discuss the possibility of getting engaged, and the obstacles to it. *"It would be natural for me to tell my father and then we would go together to your mother to ask for your hand."* [26.] This is deliberate.

Hassanein asks Ahmed Bey Yousri to help him with his ambition of entering the War College. It is a key step in Hassanein's career. *'That afternoon, Hassanein paid a visit to Ahmed Bey Yousri's villa in Taher Street.'* [59.]

In the very next chapter, Nefisa encounters the gentleman with the fly-whisk. That is a key step in Nefisa's career. *'At the same hour, Nefisa was in Station Square.... She observed a man standing a few arm's lengths away, looking curiously at her.'* [60.]

Sexual relations and occupation are closely related. They are both, potentially, sources of honour. They both carry the risk of shame. Something similar is true of family.

While Nefisa keeps her sexual activity - her prostitution - secret, the shame is hers alone. If the secret gets out, it will involve her whole family. It will particularly involve Hassanein. His ambition has driven him to choose a profession in which the code of honour is paramount.

Nefisa is by no means the first prostitute in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz. She will not be the last. Prostitution occurs in the strict sense in *Khan al-Khalili* and *Midaq Alley*, and in the

wider, derogatory sense in *Cairo Modern*.

In *Khan al-Khalili* Ahmad makes one visit to the local hash den. It proves to be too much for him. The hash den is also where the neighbourhood prostitute works. '[The woman] *started staring hard at Ahmad with her flashing eyes, and he realised at once that she must be Aliyat al-Faiza, whom they all called "husband lover"*.' [Khan al-Khalili, 32.]

In *Midaq Alley*, the protagonist, Hamida - it is very rare, incidentally, for a novel of Naguib Mahfouz to have a female protagonist - becomes a career prostitute. '*The truth was that without realising it she had chosen her path.... She asked herself what people would be saying about her on the street the next day.... "A whore!"*' [Midaq Alley, 24.]

In *Cairo Modern*, Ihsan Shihata becomes - with the same becoming hesitation that Hamida and Nefisa display - the mistress of a rich and influential man. '*She tossed and turned all night, brooding. The afternoon of the following day, at the usual time, the automobile approached and its door opened. She hesitated a little. Then she climbed in.*' [Cairo Modern, 25.]

Ihsan's situation is not unlike Hamida's. '*Ihsan Shihata was supremely conscious of two things: her beauty and her poverty.*' [Cairo Modern, 4.]

Ihsan does not have sex for cash with casual strangers. Nevertheless, according to the prevailing norms, she - a sexually active, unmarried woman - is a whore.

Prostitution is an important theme in the *Cairo Trilogy*. Nur, in *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961), is a prostitute. She is the most important female character.

Prostitution, in the prevailing culture, is shameful. It is incompatible with honour. *The Beginning and the End* is, very centrally, about honour and shame.

The family are shamed by their poverty. They are shamed by Nefisa becoming a dressmaker. Hassanein is particularly vulnerable to shame when he becomes an officer. *"I wasn't an officer then," Hassanein protested. "But now that I've become one, my reputation is in jeopardy."* [68.]

Nefisa's small earnings were essential to the family economy. Now the shame of Nefisa working for her living has become acute. *"Mother, Nefisa must stop her shameful work at once. It doesn't become an officer's sister to work as a dressmaker."* [68.] Hassanein has no idea that Nefisa is also a prostitute.

Hassan's money was the only way the brothers could start their careers. Hassan being a thug, a pimp and a drug dealer is now a threat.

Hassanein visits Hassan. He tries to persuade him to adopt a more respectable lifestyle. Hassan is offended. He counters by pointing out that Hassanein came to him for the money he needed to enrol at the War College. *"So you're indebted for your uniform to narcotics and this prostitute."* [71.]

Hassan's occupation may be disreputable. It is however a career and has some of the characteristics of a career. In particular, like his respectable brothers, Hassan needs a sponsor.

Hassanein and Hussein apply to Ahmed Bey Yousri, supposedly their father's friend. Hassan relies on Ali Sabri, a conceited and unsuccessful musician. *"The band will be working in this coffeeshouse," [Ali Sabri] said....'* [37.]

Ali Sabri needs Hassan. *"On every corner there is a thug.... And who is the right person to deal with them? You. There is also the important trade in narcotics.... And who's the right person to deal with it? You again," Ali Sabri said.'* [37.] Hassan was a failure as a wedding

singer. He has now found his vocation.

The ups and downs of Hassan's precarious existence have a direct effect on the family. When Hassan goes on the run, a search party arrives at the flat.

'...the two young men encountered an officer, two policemen, and another man, apparently an informer.... The officer produced a search warrant.... "We're searching ...for a man by the name of Hassan Kamel, commonly known as Mr Head."' [75.]

The family are humiliated. *"The whole neighbourhood is witnessing our scandal. We've been exposed, and now we're finished!" [75.]*

They move to another quarter. *"We'll go to Heliopolis." [76.]*

They cannot escape their past. Hassan turns up at their new address, badly wounded. *'In the open doorway he saw two strangers supporting a third man, whose neck reclined on one of their shoulders.... ...its pale white complexion was tinged with a blueness that suggested death.'* [86.]

Hassan's fear of the police makes his family complicit. *"...don't call the police or take him to the hospital.... a doctor will inform the police." [86.]*

Hassanein's status obsessions lead him to jilt Bahia. *"I want a wife from a higher class, cultured and reasonably wealthy." [79.]* Jilting Bahia is dishonourable.

Hussein rescues Bahia's honour and the reputation of the family. *"...I hope one day you'll bless my honest desire to ask for your daughter Bahia's hand." [80.]*

This is a powerful echo of *Khan el-Khalili*. In *Khan el-Khalili*, both brothers were interested

in the same girl. Now the same pattern is being repeated in *The Beginning and the End*.

To make this more plausible, we are told that Hussein had been interested in Bahía.
'Formerly, [Hussein] had been in love with Bahía.' [81.]

This is the first we have heard of it. It is as careless as the assertion that Hassanein had always been interested in the War College.

Hassanein overreaches himself. He proposes for the daughter of Ahmed Bey Yousri. His brother officers find out the results of the enquiries that the family makes.

"I understood, from his conversation ...that the family did not approve.... He said many things about one of your brothers.... He said [your sister] worked to earn her living.... I believe ...you made a mistake in proposing to the daughter of such a fault-finding family."
[84.]

The fact that Nefisa is a prostitute is concealed from her family until the melodramatic denouement. This is an example of the fondness for irony that Mahfouz indulges in the novels of this period.

In the finale of the novel, the careers of Hassanein and Nefisa once again intersect. Hassanein is summoned to the police station. He does not know why.

"This... has to do with your sister.... She was arrested in a certain house in Al Sakakini."
[89.] Since we already know that Nefisa is a prostitute, we can guess what kind of house this is. Mahfouz does not specify whether it is a *maison de rendezvous* or a brothel. The details of Nefisa's final fall are not apparently important.

The officer then appears to invite Hassanein to carry out an 'honour killing.' *"I hope you'll*

help me do my duty without making me regret the measures I've taken to protect your reputation." [89.] I found this shocking. I imagine many Western readers – and many progressive, liberal readers in the Middle East and Egypt – will react in the same way.

The theme of murder has been anticipated. Hussein uses the idea of murder to illustrate an argument about means justifying ends.

"We had to defend ourselves," [Hussein] *said sharply. "And even murder is justified in self-defence."* [73.]

Hussein is talking about accepting money from Hassan, even though Hassan's occupation is shameful. The idea of murder is not relevant. Mahfouz has taken the opportunity to introduce the concept into a discussion of shame for formal reasons.

When the police arrive at the flat with a search Hassan is shown as reacting with murderous rage to his feelings of shame. *"I feel like murdering somebody... Nothing less than murder would get this out of my system!"* [75.]

The idea of honour killing, when it is introduced at the end of the novel, is not an accident. It has been planned.

It becomes absolutely clear, when Nefisa and Hassan leave the police station together, that it is in fact honour killing that is in question. *'What to do with her was the main thing. He had thought of doing something as soon as they came out of the police station.... Should he strangle her, he wondered suddenly, or smash her head with his shoe?'* [90.]

Mahfouz does not challenge the dominant influence of masculine honour on female lives. He is however unwilling to endorse honour killing unequivocally.

Mahfouz makes Nefisa offer to commit suicide. *“Let me do the job myself so that no harm will come to you and nobody will know anything about it....”* [90.]

Hassanein shows no compassion. *“Drown yourself in the Nile,” he said bluntly.* [90.]

Mahfouz has anticipated Nefisa's suicidal feelings. This is not careless. *'Life was worthless; death would rescue her from its painful humiliation.... Now in her resignation, the death she hurried to meet became a soothing drug.'* [91.]

In the moment between leaving Nefisa and her death, Hassanein begins to question what he is doing. *'He left her alone in front of the bridge and walked toward the pavement extending to the right along the bank of the Nile.... There might have been another solution, he thought.'* [91.]

Mahfouz does not leave Hassanein alone with his guilt. He also commits suicide. *'Hassanein reached the same place on the bridge. He climbed the rail, looking down into the turbulent waters.'* [92.]

The double suicide with which the novel ends is melodramatic. It leaves Samira's situation and Hussein's relationship with Bahia both unresolved. In a realistic novel that would not happen.

The arrival of the police at the flat in Shubra Street is melodramatic, as is Hassan's turning up wounded at the new flat in Heliopolis. Nefisa being arrested in a brothel is melodramatic. The timing of these events - just after Hassanein's apparent success in being commissioned into the cavalry - is pure melodrama.

There are other elements of melodrama. Nefisa's extreme feelings about becoming a prostitute are typical of melodrama. Hassan's abortive attempt to work as a musician is

fairly realistic. His becoming a thug is pure melodrama. It is nothing that Mahfouz has experienced or observed.

Mahfouz at one point gives the game away. '*...a number of men stealthily streamed out of the room in succession.... Their features reminded [Hassanein] of the gangsters who appeared on the cinema screen.*' [58.] Mahfouz has based his description of Hassan's milieu and his activities on what he has seen in the movies.

There is also a fatalism that is rather typical of melodrama. Sometimes the fatalism is expressed in a way that is common across cultures. "*Oh, God! Surely there's some impurity in our blood!*" [79.] At others it is more specific to Egypt and the Middle East. "*What is happening to us is the mischief of an evil eye.*" [81.]

These elements of melodrama are important. They contribute to the tone of *The Beginning and the End*. It is however in the portrayal of honour and shame that the real melodrama lies. Honour and shame, in this novel, are in some way not real.

There is however greater realism. The description of family poverty and Samira's struggles is realistic. The account of Nefisa's relationships is more realistic than the portrayal of Hamida's career in *Midaq Alley*. The attempt of Hussein's superior in Tanta to entrap him into marrying his daughter comes across as realistic to a degree.

There is also more interest in politics. In Mahfouz's later novels, in particular the *Cairo Trilogy* (1956-7), politics are very important. In *The Beginning and the End*, there is more discussion of politics, and more awareness of social and national issues, than in any of Mahfouz's other novels of the late 1940s.

The boys have been involved in nationalist demonstrations. Hussein, as Mahfouz several times reminds us, has a strong faith. '*Hussein's strong faith ...left him with no doubts about*

the hereafter.' [3.]

Yet even Hussein's faith does not quite enable him to remain stoical in the face of suffering. *'It is true that God is the resort of all people. Yet how numerous on earth are the hungry and distressed!'* [8.]

On the train journey to take up his new post in Tanta, Hussein's reflections about his own circumstances lead him to think about others. *'There is no doubt about it. In our country fortune and respectable professions are hereditary in certain families. I am not spiteful, but sad; sad for myself and for millions of others like myself.'* [48.]

Hussein falls into a political conversation with a fellow-passenger. Hussein and his companion of the route both support the Wafd - the main nationalist party - as Mahfouz did when he was young. *"Nahas will remain in office forever," the man said jubilantly. "The time for coups is over now. Are you a Wafdist?"* [48.]

Alone in Tanta, Hussein muses about the condition of society. *'Lonely and bored, [Hussein] found pleasure, he said, in dreams of social reform, imagining the emergence of a better society than the present one and improvement in living conditions.'* [73.]

Unlike the characters in the *Cairo Trilogy*, however - several of whom become involved and take action - Hussein's reflections goes no further than that. There is a degree of recognition in *The Beginning and the End* that politics is important. Political beliefs do not affect the action.

The concern with social status in *The Beginning and the End* is new. The topic of honour and shame - which is related - is also new. An element of a traditional system, honour, is being portrayed in the context of a modernising urban environment. This contrast - or indeed conflict - between the traditional values and the modern world is a strong theme in

the novels of Mahfouz. In *The Beginning and the End*, the melodramatic nature of the novel limits the portrayal. In later novels it will become more sophisticated.

The Beginning and the End, in itself, is a fairly limited novel. It is interesting because of its themes: poverty, social conditions, politics, sexual conflict, the tension between modernity and tradition. These are among the most important themes of the later novels.

It is also interesting because of its milieu. The petty bourgeoisie and the old districts of Cairo are Mahfouz's spiritual home.

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