

Khan al-Khalili, Naguib Mahfouz, 1945



Khan al-Khalili is about failure and disappointment. It is about professional failure, and it is about failure in love.

Khan al-Khalili involves poverty. Unlike *Cairo Modern* (1945), Mahfouz's preceding novel, *Khan al-Khalili* does not depict absolute poverty.

Ahmad Akif, the protagonist of *Khan al-Khalili*, certainly does not earn much money. Akif has been in the lowest grade of the civil service for twenty years. His father was compulsorily retired at forty, and has only a small pension.

Akif is often worried about small sums. Yet he usually manages to save a small amount each month. This is a form of poverty, but it is relative. It is not destitution.

Khan al-Khalili is even more precisely dated than *Cairo Modern*. The action of *Cairo Modern* takes place in over a few months in 1932 and 1933. *Khan al-Khalili* begins during the Second World War, in September 1941. It ends in 1942, just as the Axis forces under Rommel have reached the westernmost point of their advance into Egypt: '...when the invasion reached as far as al-Alamein, general panic reached its height.' (Chapter 50).

This is ironic. The reader knows, though the characters do not, that the Germans and their allies are about to be forced back.

While the war affects the inhabitants of Cairo - particularly, in *Khan al-Khalili*, in the form of air raids - it is not their war. Many of them support the Germans. There are rather wild rumours circulating about the favourable treatment that Hitler is planning for the Muslims when Germany wins. "' [Hitler] is going to restore Islam to its former glory. He will unite the Muslim peoples.'" (8).

The disruption caused by German air raids is also important in *Sugar Street* (1957), the last part of *The Cairo Trilogy*, and in *Midaq Alley* (1947). In *Sugar Street* the patriarch, Al-Sayyid Ahmad 'Abd al-Jawad, who is already bedridden, dies after leaving his house to take shelter in an air-raid. In *Midaq Alley*, the importance of the war is the economic

opportunities, both legitimate and illegitimate, presented – particularly for the ordinary inhabitants of Cairo – by the presence there of British forces and their headquarters and depots.

Khan al-Khalili blends, as every good novel should do, several stories. There is a story about Ahmad Akif, a civil servant who after twenty years is still in the lowest grade of the service. The date, Akif's social status and his alienation are all made clear right at the beginning of the novel. *'It was half-past two in the afternoon on a September day in 1941, the exact time when civil servants left their government offices.... Their minds had long since become preoccupied with a combination of hunger and sheer boredom....'* (1). Mahfouz was himself a lifelong civil servant. He writes about the civil service often. Sometimes he writes about the civil service quite bitterly.

There is another story about Ahmad's immediate family – himself and his parents – leaving the district of al-Sakakini, where they have lived for a long time, in a panic over an air raid, and moving to the popular quarter of Khan al-Khalili.

The air raid, the first of the war, was unexpected and distressing. *'Maybe tonight would turn out to be the first time he managed to get any sleep since that terrible night, the one that had given the people of Cairo such a terrible shock.'* (1).

The air raid is not however described in detail for another couple of chapters. There was *'... an incredibly bright light in the sky. It was followed by a horrible screeching sound and a loud explosion that reverberated across the city of Cairo.... the ground shook and the house kept on rattling.'* (3).

It is not the air war between the European powers that is important. It is the disruption of family life.

The move is not particularly rational. *“Don’t you realise, Papa, that the airmen flying over Cairo aren’t going to distinguish between al-Sakakini and Khan al-Khalili?”* (1). Ahmad’s father tries to rationalise the move on religious grounds. *“The Germans are too intelligent to bomb the heart of Islam [the mosque of al-Husain] when they are trying to win us over.”* (1).

The mosque of al-Husain is an important Cairo monument. Husain ibn Ali was the grandson of Muhammad. Husain was a Shia imam and a martyr. Husain’s head was believed to be buried in the al-Husain mosque. The mosque was a shrine. Visiting shrines, such as tombs of the saints, is an important part of a popular tradition in Islam which is sometimes identified with Sufism.

Khan al-Khalili is a quarter that was *‘...of lower status in both prestige and educational level.’* (1). It is, as we shall see, a socially conservative quarter. Khan al-Khalili is also one of the old quarters of Cairo. It gives *‘...to the viewer an impression of the Cairo of al-Mu’izzi’s time.’* (1).

Al-Mu’izzi was apparently the most powerful of the Fatimid caliphs, whose armies conquered [Egypt](#) and who made the newly founded [Al-Qahirah](#), or Cairo, his capital in 972-973. (Britannica). The idea of the connection of Cairo with a remote past is something that Mahfouz explores again in *Children of the Alley* (1959).

The description of the quarter in the novel is fairly limited: a neighbour family, the walk their teenage daughter takes to school past the Cairo necropolis, a café that Ahmad takes to frequenting, a visit - just one - to the neighbourhood brothel which doubles as a hashish den, and the air raid shelter - several times. This is however the first time that Mahfouz has described a quarter of modern Cairo in one of his novels. It is something he often does later, and clearly loves doing.

Mahfouz was born and spent his early childhood in the popular quarter of Gamaliya, which he describes in the *Cairo Trilogy*, and again - with extraordinary imagination - in *Children of the Alley*. Gamaliya is near Khan al-Khalili. 'Abd al-Jawad, the patriarch, leads his sons to the al-Husain mosque every Friday for prayers. When al-Jawad stops secluding his wife Amina as strictly as he does originally, Amina likes nothing better than to visit the shrine of al-Husain.

At the end of *Khan al-Khalili*, following the death of Ahmad's younger brother Rushdi, the family leave the quarter. Ahmad's father wanted to move there. Ahmad's mother wants to leave. *"This is an unlucky quarter. Let's get out of here...!"* (48).

The family move at the beginning of the novel, and leave at the end. Their stay in Khan al-Khalili is neatly co-extensive with the novel. This gives the novel a precise formal unity.

Mahfouz's formal 'experiments', as they are often known, come later. They start with *Children of the Alley*, in which Mahfouz adapts episodes from the sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions to make a political allegory. They continue with *Mirrors* (1972), a novel in the form of character sketches. Mahfouz was to write several other explicitly 'experimental' novels. Form, however, is something at which Mahfouz was always skilful, if sometimes unostentatiously so.

In addition to the story of Ahmad, the unsuccessful civil servant, and the story of his family's unexpectedly short-lived move to Khan al-Khalili, there is a story of the pursuit of Nawal, the teenage daughter of new neighbours, by both Ahmad and his younger brother. There is also a story about Rushdi, the younger brother, and his sickness and death from tuberculosis. It is through the integration of the stories of love and death that both the deeper meaning of the novel, and also its connection with later - and, it must be said, better - work is revealed.

Mahfouz's description of Ahmad Akif, the protagonist of *Khan al-Khalili*, is almost as

contemptuous as that of Ma'mun Radwan in *Cairo Modern*. Ma'mun Radwan is immoral; Ahmad Akif is inadequate.

Ahmad resents the fact he was unable to continue his education and take a university degree. He thinks this has held him back: '*...he had been compelled to abandon his studies after his high-school graduation.... The major reason for the decision was that his father had been pensioned off before he had even reached the age of forty.... Ahmad had been forced to terminate his studies and take a minor administrative post in order to provide for his shattered family and support his two younger brothers.*' (2).

Ahmad spends many years and much effort trying to compensate for this sense of loss. He feels he is a victim: '*...he kept searching for ways to rid himself of his chains and beat a path to freedom, glory and authority.*' (2).

Ahmad studies privately for the law. '*He failed in two subjects.... He was scared to try the exam again....*' (2).

Ahmad spends a year reading science texts, with no better result. He rationalises his lack of success. '*The intellectual atmosphere in Egypt in general was not yet ready for science.*' (2).

Ahmad decides to try literature. '*When [the piece] was finished, he sent it by mail to a journal....*' (2). His efforts are ignored. Ahmad rationalises his failure. '*It was all a question of malice and evil intent....*' (2).

Finally Ahmad resorts to magic. He borrows '*... some ancient tomes dealing with magic and the invocation of demons....*' (2). Ahmad has at least the sense to get out before he gets too far in. '*His health deteriorated rapidly and he felt the approach of insanity and death.*' (2).

Despite the failure of his academic and literary efforts, Ahmad remains bookish: '*...his*

beloved books, all of them in Arabic.... were his entire life.' (2). His reading is however superficial: *'...there was no specialisation or depth involved.'* (2).

Ahmad's repeated failures turn him against the world. *"The whole world consists of lies and vanities; in such a context the quest for glory is the acme of lies and vanities."* (2).

Mahfouz does not like his protagonist. He did not like Ma'mun Radwan in *Cairo Modern* either.

There is I think a problem with unsympathetic protagonists in novels. If readers cannot empathise with the central figure, it is quite difficult to care about the world of the novel.

In addition to being a failure, Ahmad is unattractive. He is *'...approaching his forties.'* (1). He has a *'...shining, elongated face....'* (1). He has *'...teeth yellowed by smoking.'* (1).

He does not look after himself: *'...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.'* (1). Despite this, he has a *'...secret craving for sex...'* which *'...gnawed at him....'* (1). Ahmad's unattractiveness and his interest in sex, in a novel which deals in large part with delusions of love, are important traits.

Ahmad never accepts his failure. He never accepts his humble position in life.

Ahmad's father is also a failure. He withdraws.

In the new flat Akif Effendi Ahmad is *'...huddled in his room as usual.'* (1). Akif Ahmad reads the Qur'an and attends the mosque. *'After he had been pensioned off in the very midst of his working life... he had imposed a severe isolation on himself. He seemed to be spending his entire life on devotions and Qur'an recitation.'* (4).

Ahmad not only takes over the financial responsibility for the family. He takes many of the decisions which would normally be the responsibility of the head of the household, and has a parental relationship with his younger brother. '*...Ahmad followed the instructions of the doctor... and immediately started making arrangements to have Rushdi admitted to the sanatorium.*' (39).

Mahfouz does not however allow this consciousness of responsibility to enhance Ahmad's self-esteem. That would be inconsistent with the emphasis on Ahmad's failure.

Father and son are both failures. They are both passive. Akif Effendi Ahmad does not object to Ahmad taking over his role. There is thus no conflict - as there is very strongly in *The Mirage* (1948), *The Cairo Trilogy* and *Children of the Alley* - between father and son.

Akif Effendi Ahmad is not a patriarch. Ahmad Akif does not have to struggle for his freedom. The focus of the novel, therefore, is not the struggle between generations and within families that is so important in Mahfouz's later work. We will need to identify later what the focus in fact is.

The main action of the novel concerns the romantic interest of both the brothers in Nawal, the teenage daughter of their neighbour Kamal Khalil Effendi. Ahmad sees her first.

Rushdi is mentioned, if indirectly, right at the beginning of the book, '*... the second [of the two rooms off the hallway] was to be put aside for [Ahmad's] brother and kept empty for him.*'(1). He does not appear until much later; a third of the way through the book. This is when Rushdi receives an order '*...transferring him from Asyut [where he works in a branch of Bank Misr] to the headquarters in Cairo.*' (15).

Since the dramatic climax of the book is Rushdi's death from tuberculosis, this delay in introducing him is rather curious. Important characters all ideally need to be introduced in

the first two or three chapters. This is a consequence of the over-riding rule of story, that the end of a story is always contained in the beginning.

Ahmad first meets Nawal on the stairs of the building. It is an unexpected encounter.

Ahmad is shy. *'Looking round he saw a young girl wearing a blue school-jumper with a satchel of books under her arm. For a fleeting second their eyes met, then he looked away feeling all confused, something that always happened when he looked at a female.'* (4).

Ahmad is anxious and inexperienced: *'...his love for women was the forbidden love of a middle-aged man that made him as afraid of them as a shy novice.'* (4). The phrase 'forbidden love' suggests an element of guilt.

Ahmad is inhibited and withdraws in the face of difficulties. We are offered an explanation of this behaviour in terms of parental relationships. *'His early childhood had had a profound effect on his peculiar instincts in this matter: he had been exposed to a father who dealt with him strictly and a mother who doted on him.'* (4).

Ahmad has never been successful with women. The parallel with his professional and academic failures is explicitly drawn. *'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.'* (4). We are told that Ahmad has recourse to prostitutes. In the novel, this is not described.

A number of Mahfouz's important protagonists, like Ahmad Akif in *Khan al-Khalili*, are sexually conflicted. These include Kamil Ru'ba in *The Mirage* (1948), Kamal al-Jawad in *The Cairo Trilogy*, and Saber Omran in *The Search* (1964).

The explanation in these other novels is more sophisticated, and more specific to Egyptian culture. In *The Mirage* and *The Cairo Trilogy* the mother is secluded, initially at least, and

invests too much emotionally in a favourite or only son. The father is patriarchal. In *The Search* the mysterious, patriarchal father is largely absent, and he is given explicitly Pharaonic traits.

Ahmad is not looking for love. He has noticed how pretty Nawal is, but he has not been thinking of ways of seeing her. When he sees her again, it is by coincidence. It happens during the holy month of Ramadan. Setting some of the action during Ramadan gives Mahfouz the opportunity to show that his characters are conservative, though – with the exception, perhaps, of Akif Effendi, Ahmad's father – not particularly religious. The holy month doesn't stop people flirting.

Ahmad is spending time alone in his room before sundown, when he can break his fast. *'The last hour before people broke their fast was known to be by far the toughest to live through... he decided that the best way of killing time was to open the window and look outside.... He left the window, went over to the other one that looked out on the old part of Khan al-Khalili, opened it, and leaned on the sill.... A young girl was sitting [on his neighbour's balcony] embroidering a shawl.'* (10). It is noteworthy that Nawal, although she goes to school, is seen engaged in embroidery. Embroidery is a traditional feminine occupation.

Ahmad Rashid, Ahmad's friend in from the Zahra Café, tutors Nawal and her brother privately. (12.) Nawal thinks Ahmad Rashid mocks her, and dislikes him. *"Haven't you thought about what you want to do at university yet?" ...this young man was trying to mould her into the kind of woman that he wanted her to be....'* (21). Education, for women at that date, is modern and progressive. Nawal, beyond a certain point, is not interested.

Ahmad's inhibitions leave him anxious, ambivalent and uncertain how to act. *'At that fleeting moment, when their eyes met, his emotions overcame him and he blushed deep red in sheer embarrassment. He did not know how to behave or what was the best way to get*

out of his predicament.' (10).

Things do not get easier for Ahmad during the following days. *'Would it not be better, he wondered, to leave the window shut and forget about the implications involved in opening it?'* (12).

Ahmad is unable, however, to avoid the temptation of going to the window for a glimpse of the girl. *'For a fleeting second their eyes met, but then she stood up straight, turned around, and went inside again.'* (12).

When Ahmad meets the girl and her mother in a more or less normal social situation, he cannot deal with it. *'When he opened [the door], he found himself facing Sitt Tawhida and her daughter Nawal.'* (12).

Ahmad is so bashful that Sitt Tawhida notices: *'...she could not understand why a man of his age could be so awkward and act so bashfully simply because he had met two women.'* (12).

Despite the fact that Ahmad is unattractive and middle aged, Nawal shows interest. *'He no longer doubted for a single moment that the girl was well aware that her new neighbour was deliberately appearing at the window every afternoon and directing that bashful, timid glance at her.'* (13).

Ahmad finds himself unable to deal with the situation he has created. *'Was he actually capable of launching himself into life again...?'* (13).

His response, which Mahfouz has already given us to understand is typical for him, is to feel sorry for himself. *'Why did God create people like him who could not handle life?'* (13).

The climax of Ahmad's interest in Nawal comes on the Night of Power, towards the end of

Ramadan. The Night of Power, in Islamic belief, is the night when the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed to the prophet Muhammad. On this night the blessings and mercy of Allah are thought to be abundant.

In a banal contrast, it is on the Night of Power that the air-raid sirens sound again. Ahmad's family and Nawal's both take refuge in the neighbourhood shelter. When the all-clear sounds and the families leave, Nawal makes eye-contact: '*...when she reached [the shelter door], she turned and gave him a very meaningful look.*' (14). Ahmad's blessings are abundant indeed.

The day after Ahmad experiences a happiness that is quite untypical of the personality that Mahfouz has described for him, and which does not occur again in the book. '*That morning his emotions were pure, completely unclogged by feelings of hatred and rancour.*' (15).

Almost immediately Ahmad's hopes are dashed. The timing of Ahmad's disappointment, just after his hopes reach their height, and the completeness of Ahmad's frustration, are pure melodrama.

Rushdi spots the girl in exactly the same way as his brother did. He sees her by accident from the window of his room. '*...he could see the face of a young girl, an exceptionally beautiful face....*' (17).

This is another moment of irony. We know who the girl is. Rushdi doesn't.

In the same situation, the brothers react differently. '*Their eyes met. Her look was one of disapproval, but his was that of a hunter who'd just spotted his prey.*' (17).

Nawal's disapproving look gives a clear hint that she knows she has already encouraged Ahmad, and that she knows what that means in a conservative culture. Rushdi's look reveals

he is a playboy. *'Where love was concerned, he had limitless self-confidence, based on one success after another.'* (17).

We are explicitly reminded that Rushdi does not know of Ahmad's prior interest, and it is strongly suggested that if he did know he would behave differently: *'...he had no way of knowing the kind of blow he was about to aim at the happiness of his elder brother whom he both loved and revered.'* (17).

Somehow it is important to the novel that the brothers are not conscious rivals. In real life, we might feel it was highly likely that Rushdi would find out something. That is not however the kind of tension that Mahfouz wants.

Rushdi is very different from Ahmad. In some ways he is like his mother. *'She was a beautiful woman.... she was known everywhere for her sense of humour.... She had lots of friends.'* (3). Rushdi is like his brother in some ways. *'They were of roughly the same height and had the same thin build.'* (16). Rushdi is however more attractive: *'...his eyes had a glow to them that suggested a sharp mind, a propensity for fun, and a willingness to take risks.'* (16).

Rushdi has been deprived of parental guidance: *'...neither of those two dear people [his mother and his elder brother] had the necessary resolution to provide him with guidance and restraint.'* (15).

At university he falls in with bad company. *'He found himself drawn toward a certain group of young men who indulged in heavy drinking, betting on card games, and in general living a dissolute life.'* (15). Rushdi becomes a habitu  of the Ghamra casino.

Rushdi's response, from the start, is in complete contrast to Ahmad's. This is surely deliberate. Mahfouz is making the two brothers into opposites. Rushdi acts, and he does so

immediately. Rushdi waits outside the apartment building and follows Nawal on her way to school. He does so quite blatantly. *'Now he was sure that she realised he was deliberately following her.'* (20).

Rushdi is taking advantage of a degree of freedom Nawal has because she attends school. Mahfouz's first readers would be aware that allowing a girl of Nawal's age to leave home on her own was, in conservative social circles, a fairly recent social development.

Nawal however is traditional. Despite her youth she is open to approaches from men. *'For her, life was entirely focused on a single goal: heart, home and marriage.'* (21).

As an adolescent, Nawal's movements are somewhat restricted. *'Now she could no longer play with the younger girls in the street, the roof had become her favourite spot.'* (21). Rushdi takes advantage of this also. He stalks her there. *'She was amazed to find him standing there, his tall frame filling up the doorway.'* (21).

Ahmad meanwhile is oblivious of Rushdi's interest in Nawal. His own relationship with Nawal seems to be progressing. *'He... plucked up the courage to give her a smile....'* (19).

Ahmad still does not know what to do. The contrast with Rushdi's self-confidence could not be greater. *'What comes next after a smile?'* (19).

Ahmad discovers what is going on by accident. It is by accident that both he and Rushdi realise they have a pretty girl as their neighbour. Ahmad realises that Ahmad is interested in Nawal because he spots her from the window. Both he and Rushdi first become interested in Nawal when they see her from the window. *'From the middle of [Rushdi's] room [Ahmad] managed to spot Nawal's head - no-one else's - which proceeded to withdraw at lightning speed! ...Ahmad was totally shocked by what he had seen....'* (23).

Khan al-Khalili is realistic in style and technique. The unobtrusive formalism, however, makes the structure strong.

The effect on Ahmad is devastating. He responds by completely changing his opinion of Nawal: '*...the girl had been deliberately deceitful, and that meant an end to all his futile hopes.*' (24.) This is the process that Freud has taught us to think of as 'splitting'.

More interestingly, perhaps - because it is more unusual - Ahmad refuses to compete: '*...it was out of the question for him to lower himself so far as to engage in any rivalry with another human being.... It was also out of the question to let his younger brother know about his secret love.*' (24). This is surely an expression of his low self-esteem, and an expectation of failure that has been conditioned by the past.

Ahmad, nevertheless, is angry. '*It was his younger brother who had forced him - twenty years ago now - to sacrifice his own future in order to devote himself to his brother's education. Now here was Rushdi plucking the fruits of the happiness that should have been his and trampling all over his hopes....*' (26).

Ahmad responds by self-criticism. '*How could he possibly be so abjectly incapable of finding any kind of happiness in life?*' (26).

Ahmad is also taken over by nihilism. '*A strange and terrifying idea occurred to him: how would it be if the world could be devoid of human beings.*' (27). This nihilism, though it shocks him, links him with Ma'mun Radwan in *Cairo Modern* and with Said Maran in *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961).

Rushdi is as oblivious of Ahmad's devastation as Ahmad was of Rushdi's interest in Nawal. This reinforces the parallelism.

Rushdi continues his pursuit. *'When [Rushdi] reached the New Road, he spotted the girl just in front of him....'* (27).

Rushdi is remarkably confident. *'From the outset he had had no doubts concerning his eventual triumph, nor for that matter had she.'* (27).

Rushdi not only engages her in conversation. He talks to Nawal about love. *"Don't you believe in love at first sight? ...God willing, we will never be parted."* (27).

There now occurs a highly significant symbolic incident. The route that Nawal takes to walk to school leads her and Rushdi past the Cairo Necropolis: *'...the City of the Dead was looming ahead to their left, shrouded in its eternal gloom and all-pervasive silence.'* (27).

The City of the Dead is a large area of tombs and mausoleums near the Mokattam Hills, which are a significant location in *Children of the Alley*. What Mahfouz does not mention is that many people live among the tombs. It is not relevant here.

"That's our family tomb," [Rushdi] said... "Then let's recite the Fatiha," [Nawal] said.' (27). The Fatiha, known as the Opener, is the first sura of the Qu'ran. It has an important role in Islamic prayer.

Nawal's suggestion that they should pray underlines her traditional upbringing. The family tomb however has a significance that will be clear to many readers. It is not made explicit until much later.

Rushdi, on account of his health, has given up his walks with Nawal. Nawal is keen that the walks should resume. *'... [Nawal] encouraged him to resume their walk together since she was keen for them to be alone together.'* (37).

Rushdi is bitter. *'Would fate soon decree that this girl of his would be walking past the tomb and reciting the Fatiha over his departed spirit?'* (37).

By the time that Rushdi and Nawal first walk past the family tomb, the alert reader will already have noticed that Rushdi is ill. The alert reader may also have realised, because of the emphasis on weight loss and pallor, that Rushdi's illness is tuberculosis.

Rushdi's dissolute way of life has affected his health. *'He grew thinner and downright skinny...'* (15). This is the first hint of tuberculosis. Rushdi's mother also notices his weight. *'...Rushdi had not gained a single pound while he was away.'* (17). This serves to further underline the point for the reader.

When he walks past the tomb with Nawal the first time, Rushdi is not aware that he is ill. This is another instance of the irony that, with the formalism, is so important to the structure of the novel.

The young people are fairly clearly in love. *'He took her hand and held it tenderly. "Good-bye until tomorrow morning," he said.... If only dreams could come true, [Nawal] told herself.'* (27).

Rushdi experiences elation, just as Ahmad did when he thought Nawal was interested in him. Ahmad attains peace. Rushdi, in keeping with his lifestyle, feels intoxicated. *'That Saturday afternoon Rushdi seemed drunk with happiness....'* (28).

Rushdi makes friends with Nawal's father. This is a conservative society. If he wants to woo the daughter, Rushdi has to woo the family. *'Kamal invited Rushdi to the Zahra Café....'* (29). Rushdi is on the same footing as Ahmad.

Rushdi soon does better than Ahmad. He reaches position of intimacy with Nawal's family

that Ahmad had never dreamed of. *'Soon afterwards Kamal Khalil invited him [Rushdi] to visit his home.'* (29).

Rushdi then proceeds to establish a relationship of trust which allows him a degree of licensed intimacy with Nawal. *'[Rushdi] now managed to portray himself as a serious thinker and put on a display of solid conservatism. As a result he found himself taking over Professor Ahmed Rushdi's position as tutor to Nawal and Muhammad.'* (29).

The rapid progress of Rushdi's suit indicates an element of romance in this particular subplot. As we already know, however, that this is a melodrama, we can assume with confidence that Rushdi's world is about to come tumbling down.

And it does. Rushdi falls sick. *'Rushdi Akif got influenza.... His health collapsed incredibly quickly, and he lost a lot of weight....'* (30.)

The reaction of the family to Rushdi's illness that Mahfouz describes is realistic. It is proportionate and empathetic. *'[Ahmad] found Rushdi in bed moaning and his mother beside him rubbing his back.... They all stayed by his bed until dawn.'* (30.)

This is the climax of the novel. The emphasis is no longer on Ahmad's inhibited and indecisive interest in Nawal, or Rushdi's active pursuit of her. The emphasis is on the steady deterioration in Rushdi's health, and the inevitable end.

Rushdi's illness is now obvious to his family. *'[Rushdi] was still very skinny, and his complexion was turning paler and paler....'* (31).

Initially this does not prompt Rushdi to look after himself any better. He cannot restrain his impulses. *'...Rushdi continued his reckless ways....'* (33).

This affects Rushdi obviously. *'He began to cough violently and lost his appetite.'* (33).

Rushdi eventually suspends his dissipated habits. *'He stopped going to the Ghamra Casino....'* (33).

It is however too late. Rushdi's symptoms become worse. At Eid al-Adha Rushdi coughs blood. Eid al-Adha is the Feast of Sacrifice. It commemorates the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son. It is one of the two most important festivals of Islam. The other is Eid al-Fitr, at the end of Ramadan.

It seems extraordinary that Mahfouz would use something as holy as Eid al-Adha to create an irony, but that is clearly what he does. It is on the Feast of Sacrifice that we learn beyond a doubt that Rushdi's family are going to lose a son.

Mahfouz is taking a chance. Secular literature, at that date in Egypt, was not by any means immune from the attentions of the clergy.

Rushdi now does something the reader will assume he should have done several chapters earlier, or indeed before he even appeared in the novel. *"Finally I went to see the doctor.... He told me I had incipient tuberculosis in my left lung."* (33). If Rushdi had consulted the doctor in time, there would have been no melodrama and no novel.

Rushdi is fatalistic. *"People say... that there's no cure for tuberculosis."* (34). The doctor pooh-poohs this. *'The doctor gave him a disapproving look. "Don't let the word 'tuberculosis' alarm you," he said.'* (35).

The reader may well feel that Rushdi is dramatising his situation. Rushdi's self-pity will however also confirm that reader's intuition that Rushdi is going to die.

Rushdi is still not willing to take responsibility. Rather than being afraid of death, he fears he will lose his job and his girl. (34).

Ahmad does not understand. *“But people with this disease normally go to the sanatorium,” Ahmad said. Once again Rushdi lied to his brother. “The doctor doesn’t think it’s necessary.”* (35.)

Rushdi becomes very obviously ill. *‘Rushdi’s health went from bad to worse, and he became even thinner and paler.... “Are you trying to commit suicide?” Ahmad would rail at him.’* (38).

This is the beginning of a process that Rushdi dreads: *‘...he shared with his mother his fears that the true nature of his illness might become public knowledge....’* (39.)

This is partly I think a fear of the stigma surrounding a contagious and potentially fatal disease. It is also Rushdi’s inability or unwillingness to take responsibility.

First his colleagues notice. *‘His fellow workers in the bank noticed how badly he was coughing and became suspicious.’* (38).

Rushdi becomes so ill that he can no longer hide it. *‘Rushdi retired to his bed.’* (38).

The doctor puts his foot down. *“The sanatorium now!”* (38).

Word that Rushdi is ill gets out. The brothers are still able to conceal the true nature of Rushdi’s illness. *‘Kamal Khalil Effendi came to visit and assured Rushdi that fluid in the lungs was nothing to worry about. Sitt Tawhida and her daughter, Nawal, also called in.... the mother told [Rushdi] that his insistence on staying so thin was what had made him so ill....’* (39).

Both families visit. *'The family had to wait impatiently until Friday, which was visiting day at the sanatorium. Kamal Khalil decided that he and his family would go with them.'* (40.) The reader will now be pretty sure that Kamal Khalil has been thinking of Rushdi as a suitable husband for his daughter.

They find, to their surprise, that Rushdi's is more ill, not less. *'... [Rushdi's] condition had actually worsened....'* (40).

Ahmad receives a letter. *"That's strange.... It's Rushdi's handwriting."* (41). Rushdi knows he is dying. He wants to die at home.

It is now Ahmad's turn to see the family tomb as a symbol of Rushdi's imminent death. *'He could envisage the family tomb far away....'* (41).

This is another irony. The reader knows, though Ahmad does not, that Rushdi has already seen the tomb in this symbolic way.

It is now clear to all the family that Rushdi is really ill. *'When Rushdi finally appeared, everyone was completely shocked, and no one made any effort to hide their feelings.'* (42).

The inevitable consequence is what Rushdi most fears. *'Now came the really dreadful days.... with April came a change. Nawal no longer came to visit him.'* (43).

Rushdi feels betrayed. *"The worst thing in life," Rushdi went on... "...is for a friend to shun you for no good reason...."*

Ahmad has of course felt betrayed in a very similar way. *'With that he turned toward the window - Nawal's window - that was now firmly locked. "Closed forever," he said angrily, "closed forever!"'* (24).

Kamal Khalil fairly clearly feels he cannot approach Rushdi's family directly. This makes it clear that tuberculosis is a taboo subject. Kamal Khalil is however, unlike either of the brothers, a resourceful and responsible adult. '*Kamal Khalil... went to visit a friend of his in Bank Misr and inquired about Rushdi's illness.*' (44.) Mahfouz treats this demarche quite sympathetically.

Kamal Khalil takes steps to protect his daughter: "*... from today you cannot visit our dear sick neighbour any more.*" (44.)

Nawal reacts, as we would expect her to, like a teenager in love. "*How can you be so unkind?*" (44.)

Mahfouz makes clear that Nawal is not only affectionate. She is innocent. '*The only thing she knew about death was the word itself.*' (44.)

Rushdi has lost the girl. Now he loses his job as well. The company doctor makes a home visit. "*...you'll have to be fired by the bank as of May 31.*" This is May 1942. (45.)

Mahfouz allows Rushdi a touch of dignity. '*Rushdi asked if he could borrow the Qur'an.*' (46.) Someone as irreligious as Rushdi is only going to borrow the Qur'an when know he is dying.

However Rushdi then spoils the impression of dignity and acceptance that borrowing the Qur'an gives. When Sitt Tawhida and Nawal visit, Rushdi is angry. He tells them he has tuberculosis. (46.)

Acknowledging tuberculosis in this way, for Rushdi, is very nearly the end. He decides to go back to the sanatorium. '*[Ahmad] was delighted that his brother had decided to go back to the sanatorium in Helwan.*' (47.)

Rushdi does not think he will last long. *"I'm sharing a truth before parting. You may not see me any more after today."* (47.)

He lasts even less long than he thinks. That same evening: *'Their mother emerged, holding her hands above her head as though begging for help. Then she lowered them and started slapping her cheeks violently, crazily....'* (47.)

Once again Ahmad has to take the paternal role. He has to buy the shroud and register the death. The deliberately ugly image of a putrefying dead dog in the street reminds him of the physical realities of death. *'Good heavens, that foul smell was still there, the terrifying stench of death! ...On the sidewalk he could see a dead dog....'* (48.)

The use of the sanatorium in *Khan al-Khalili* is peculiar. If we understand it correctly, it will tell us something about the essential nature of this novel.

The sanatorium can be used in fiction in a number of ways. It can be the locus of suffering, or the site of death or cure. It can be the stage for altruism and sacrifice, or for solidarity between the afflicted. With a more decadent writer like Thomas Mann, it can become a symbol of the pathology of art and indeed of civilisation.

With Mahfouz, it is none of these things.

Rushdi goes to the sanatorium when the doctor loses patience and gives him a direct instruction. He returns almost immediately. The first visit to the sanatorium has no practical effect. It simply communicates to the reader and, importantly, to the other characters, that Rushdi is seriously ill.

When Rushdi decides to return to the sanatorium, he is about to die. He does not even get there. His decision has now practical effect whatsoever. What Rushdi's decision

communicates to the reader and to the other characters is that Rushdi is at the point of death.

What is being done here? What is said?

There is a social message, a message about the stigma and the fear surrounding tuberculosis at that date in Egypt, and the realistic basis for that fear. There was a third brother who died, and tuberculosis is still not well understood.

Something is communicated by making Rushdi's doctor - somewhat implausibly perhaps - speak on the radio. *'The doctor talked about the way the microbe responsible for the illness had been discovered....'* (45). The doctor believes the government should establish *'...a kind of isolation facility.'* (45). Mahfouz is making the point that the scientific understanding of tuberculosis is at a very early stage, and that effective treatment is almost non-existent.

Something about the kind of novel we are reading is expressed, if not perhaps communicated, by the inevitability of Rushdi's death.

The inevitability of death has a distinguished pedigree in literature. It is one of the signs - to us, if not in quite the same way to the Greeks - of tragedy.

Tragedy however requires heroes. Rushdi is not a hero. He is ordinary to the point of banality. When the inevitability of death is banal, it is not tragedy. It is melodrama.

The way the novel ends is also interesting.

The family moves. *'At the end of August Ahmad Akif found an empty apartment in the al-Zaytun neighbourhood.'* It is Ahmad who takes responsibility and acts on his mother's wishes.

Unexpectedly and untypically things start looking good for Ahmad. There is a possibility, though it is quite general, that his position at work will improve. *'People started talking about fair treatment for workers who had been overlooked for a long time.'* (51).

In the new apartment there appears to be a prospect of marriage with someone more suitable than a teenage schoolgirl. *'... [the owner's sister] was a cultured and attractive widow of fifty-three.'* (51).

Ahmad, it would appear, has grounds for optimism. *'Tomorrow he would be living in a new home, in a different quarter, turning his back on the past... a past with all its hopes and dashed aspirations.'* (51).

This is quite ambiguous. Ahmad has no reason to assume that a discussion of fairness will lead to action, or that action, if it takes place, will affect him. However he is hopeful. Ahmad also has no reason to assume that the 'cultivated and attractive widow' will be interested in him. The reader, knowing Ahmad's history of romantic disappointment, may well assume it will probably come to nothing. Yet Ahmad is clearly encouraged.

Finally, of course, there is no reason to suppose that a new home in a different quarter will enable Ahmad to leave the past behind. The new home in Khan al-Khalili brought the death of Ahmad's surviving brother, and another in a series of romantic disappointments.

Ambiguity, in *Khan al-Khalili*, is unusual. There is irony, but no ambiguity. What is going on?

The melodramatic disaster - and a disaster is required in all melodramas - is the death of Rushdi. Rushdi comes home just as Ahmad's romantic hopes are at their height. Rushdi, in a sense, takes over the courtship. Rushdi's romantic disappointment is bound up with his death from tuberculosis.

The outcome for Ahmad is some encouragement and some hope. There are other possible outcomes. One is acceptance of his position in life, and the maturity that comes with it. The other would be, in effect, the opposite; a continuing denial of reality.

In either case - and I think this is the point - the emphasis would shift back from Rushdi to Ahmad. Mahfouz, clearly, does not want that.

Ahmad, initially, appears to be the protagonist. When Rushdi arrives, he in effect takes over the courtship of Nawal from Ahmad. Rushdi does not, however, take over the narration.

Ahmad's self-involvement makes him a better narrator than Rushdi's unselfconscious hedonism would do. The point of view remains Ahmad's. The disaster, however, is Rushdi's death and Rushdi's loss of love. Ahmad is left curiously free.

I mentioned earlier that Kamil Ru'ba in *The Mirage*, Kamal al-Jawad in *The Cairo Trilogy*, and Saber Omran in *The Search* are all sexually inhibited, like Ahmad Akif. That is however not the whole story. They are inhibited or even impotent with refined, attractive women. They are not always inhibited or impotent.

Kamil Ru'ba cannot make love with his wife. He has no difficulty with a vulgar and forward woman who flirts with him. Kamal al-Jawad gives himself up, possibly quite mistakenly, to a lifetime of unrequited longing. He visits the same prostitute every weekend, and has to get mildly drunk before he has sex with her. In the case of Saber Omran, the conflict is so violent it leads to homicide. Omran ends the novel in the death cell, waiting to be hung.

This is splitting; the simultaneous idealisation and devaluation of - in this case - women. In *Khan al-Khalili*, it is splitting - not poverty, and not intergenerational conflict - that is the focus of the novel.

The reason that Rushdi arrives late in the novel, and the reason Ahmad is left free at the end, is that Rushdi and Ahmad are the same person. There is only room for one narrator, Ahmad. There is only room for one protagonist. When Rushdi takes over, Ahmad must retreat. And only one person can experience a disastrous denouement. There is not room for two.

Mahfouz has described splitting, in *Khan al-Khalili* by splitting, though not completely, his central character. Ahmad and Rushdi remain conjoined.

In *The Mirage* Mahfouz employs a more sophisticated approach. In *The Cairo Trilogy*, ambiguity is at the centre of the novel.

There are a number of qualities that make *Khan al-Khalili* a melodrama. The scenes in Café Zahra do not, admittedly, tend to advance the action; other than that, *Khan al-Khalili* has the tight plotting that is typical of genre fiction. *Khan al-Khalili* also turns on the death of Rushdi. Without Rushdi's death, the novel is not very interesting. It also shows, in Ahmad's case as well as Rushdi's, the typically melodramatic trait of disaster striking at the moment of greatest happiness.

In addition, the characters in *Khan al-Khalili* are one-dimensional. Ahmad is a failure, and only a failure. Rushdi is a playboy and nothing more. This superficiality does not define melodrama. It occurs in other kinds of writing. It is, however, perfectly consistent with melodrama.

The social interest of *Khan al-Khalili*, I think, is the portrayal of courtship in a socially conservative Egyptian community. Mahfouz identifies social conservatism with the lower middle-class. The conversations in Café Zahra serve to underline this. There is also a portrayal of the stigma surrounding contagious disease. This serves, I think, to add depth to the portrayal of a conservative social group.

I do not accept the consensus view that *Khan al-Khalili* is realism. I would say, like *Cairo Modern*, that it is better described as social melodrama.

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