

# **Palace Walk Study Guide**

## **Palace Walk by Naguib Mahfouz**

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# Plot Summary

The first volume in Mahfouz Naguib's Cairo Trilogy, *Palace Walk* examines middle-class life just after World War I, following the joys, sorrows, and sorrows of the Abd al-Ahmad family during the revolutionary years 1917-19.

Ahmad Abd al-Jawad is a domestic tyrant, demanding instant and absolute obedience to a household standard that few Muslims follow. Pious wife Amina prides herself on being submissive and supportive. She prays constantly for her family's welfare. She alone knows of his other side: nightly rounds of drinking and sex. Outsiders see Ahmad as the life of any party, musical and generous. A religious man, Ahmad depends on God's mercy.

The family has a daily rhythm. Sons Yasin, Fahmy, and Kamal eat breakfast with their father, and proudly follow him to work or school. Unbeknown to each other, Ahmad and Yasin enjoys the same debauchery. Fahmy is a serious and pious law student. Clever Kamal is still in grade school. Daughters Khadija and Aisha, polar opposites in appearance and temperament, breakfast with Amina afterward and then do housework under Amina's strict eye. Ahmad comes home from his shop for lunch and a siesta, and then returns to work before going out on the town. The other family members gather towards dusk for "coffee hour," a cherished time of sharing.

Yasin stumbles upon his father's other side while visiting a call girl and is impressed that they are so much alike. When Yasin attempts to rape the family servant, Umm Hanafi, he is married off to calm his passions, but the bride is too liberated for the marriage to succeed. Fahmy wants to marry the next door neighbor but is forbidden until he graduates. He becomes involved in the dangerous revolutionary movement and conflicts with Ahmad, finally disobeying a direct order to cease and desist. The two never fully reconcile. The sisters are married to affluent brothers and move into the husband's home, which is less strict and tiring.

To quell nationalistic demonstrations, British garrisons are established, one across the street from the Abd al-Jawad home. Kamal befriends the soldiers while Fahmy in particular grows to hate them. Ahmad leaves a late-night debauch to be arrested and forced to help repair damage caused by terrorists. The nationalists gain their goals and a great, joyful celebration is sanctioned. Idealistic Fahmy is one of those gunned down by renegade British troops.



# Chapters 1-8

## Chapters 1-8 Summary

Every midnight for twenty-five years, Amina awaits the drunken return of her husband, Ahmad, whose activities, as a male, may not be questioned. She sees her vigils as a sign of dedication. Arriving, Ahmad talks cheerfully with his friends, but changes inside the house. Chapter 2 sees Amina helping Ahmad change clothes and wash and asking God to forgive his drinking, but happy that it renders him gentle. Chapter 3 sees Amina up at dawn preparing breakfast while servant Umm Hanafi kneads dough. The noise wakes the rest: Ahmad with a hangover; sons Fahmy, dreaming of Maryam and Yasin also hung-over; and in the next room: Khadija trying to anger her more beautiful sister Aisha. In Chapter 4, Ahmad finds everything laid out for his toilette. He washes, prays, and awaits breakfast with his sons. After wolfing that down, Ahmad finishes dressing, applies cologne, and struts out with his sons.

Chapter 5 finds Aisha, as she has for months, staying alone at the window, to watch and yearn for a young police officer walking by. As Aisha sings, her sister calls her to breakfast and upbraids her for not sharing the chores. Amina tries to keep peace. Khadija shares a dream about being pushed off a roof. This leads to uncomfortable talk about bridegrooms and Aisha's better prospects of marrying, being the prettier. Ahmad insists that Khadija wed first. Chapter 6 shows Amina assigning household duties to her bickering daughters before going up on the roof to enjoy her chicken and pigeon coops and the unique garden she has planted over the years. She looks out over the city, so filled with the unknown and asks God to bless all people.

Chapter 7 takes place in Ahmad's store. His long-time assistant, Jamil al-Hamzawi, stands at the door, awaiting the blind shaykh to come and recite the Qur'an. People enjoy visiting Ahmad, whose persona outside the home is witty and charming. Shaykh Mutawalli rebukes Ahmad for adultery and drunkenness, but Ahmad excuses his behavior as innocent fun, compensated for by his love, devotion, obedience, and generosity.

Chapter 8 follows Kamal after school, avoiding fights whenever possible, naively picking up the older boys' bad language, and discussing his daily suras with his mother. Kamal stops to look at a provocative cigarette poster and at the Shrine of al-Husayn. He avoids his father's store and terrible temper. Ahmad had been a tender father until Kamal's circumcision, but then turned severe. Kamal still admires and almost worships his father. Seeing a bus heading for Palace Walk, Kamal performs a stunt he has seen a boy do.



## Chapters 1-8 Analysis

Chapter 1 introduces the nightly and daily ritual of life in the household of Ahmad Abd al-Jawad. Wife Amina keeps vigil for his drunken return from carousing. She has learned to accept it and does not consider her lonely or monotonous, although she is cloistered in an old house that she believes is haunted by jinns. Amina's superstition and pious adherence to the rituals of Islam are effectively established. She enjoys her vigils behind the latticed window, watching the street, as a sign of her dedication. Ahmad is pictured being dropped off by friends. He is in boisterous good mood, which swiftly changes as he enters the house. Ahmad's Jekyll and Hyde character is gradually deepened throughout the first half of the novel

Chapter 2 describes how Amina meekly ministers to Ahmad and is granted a few minutes of non-hostile companionship. Note how she struggles with his drinking. Islam proscribes alcohol, so Amina must pray that God will forgive Ahmad, but alcohol also renders him temporarily gentle, for which she is thankful. Ahmad's love of music is emphasized, along with his anger that garrisoned Australian troops cut him off from his favorite night spots. He tells his wife about the enthroning of a new sultan, who takes the throne after the late sultan's son refuses it while foreign troops are present. This presages a political theme that runs throughout the novel. Amina appreciates news from the outside world, which she shares with her cloistered daughters.

Chapter 3 introduces more characters: Umm Hanafi ("Umm" meaning mother; Hanafi being her firstborn son; Arab women generally take on such a name when they become mothers), the family servant begins kneading bread, which serves as an alarm clock. Ahmad arises hungover and grouchy, but carries out his morning rituals to be at work before 8 AM. Amina has prepared everything for him. Note how sincerely he performs his prayers and asks God to watch over his household. The characters of the older sons, Fahmy and Yasin, are deftly painted by showing how they get out of bed. Likewise, the sisters, Khadija and Aisha, are shown as opposites, physically and emotionally. Khadija is like her mother. Amina is Fahmy's stepmother, but they relate to one another as though the bond were biological. The brothers and sisters heckle one another. Young Kamal is allowed to sleep in until breakfast, which is brought upstairs to the father's bedside table. Note that Fahmy wakes up dreaming of a certain Maryam.

Chapter 4 describes breakfast, the only time when Ahmad and his boys are all together, as an exercise in near-military discipline, complete with paternal inspection and intimidation. Until Ahmad has rapidly eaten his massive fill, they boys hold back and dare not look him in the eyes. Little Kamal is most afraid of his father. When Ahmad departs, they boys fall on the leftovers like animals. In Ahmad's room, Amina gives him raw eggs and milk to safeguard his health. It is one of many tonics doctors have prescribed, including hashish, which Ahmad has tried but dislikes its effects. He needs to be fully alert to enjoy his evenings. A related aside reveals that Ahmad fears losing virility, so he buys and uses an "expensive narcotic." The boys imitate the final morning ritual, applying special formula cologne before leaving the house. Amina finds this amusing, but represses her feelings. Through the holes in a wooden grill on their



balcony, the females watch the males saunter down the street, happy, but needing to recite a Qur'anic verse that they be kept safe from the envious.

Chapter 5 is devoted to relations among the al-Jawad females. It opens with Aisha pining for a policeman as he walks his beat below her window. This scene has repeated itself for months, and Aisha is torn between the excitement of romance and the guilt engendered by her upbringing. She feels daring to pry the widow open far enough so he will know that she is watching. Custom prevents him from looking directly at the window. Khadija, already shown to be sharp with her sister, turns her sarcasm on her about not sharing in household chores but wanting to be a diva like Munira al-Mahdiya. When their mother tries to keep peace, Khadija even dares to criticize her parenting skills. Khadija's sarcasm, particularly directed at neighbors and Umm Hanafi, is described at length.

As Chapter 4 gathers the males for breakfast and describes how each eats, so Chapter 5 describes the females turn at the table: more deliberate and painstaking, but also to the point of feeling bloated. Unlike the males, who disband immediately after finishing breakfast, the females linger to air secrets that would be embarrassing in front of the males. Khadija tells of a nightmare of falling from a roof and landing on a horse. She also suggests that, having inherited her father's nose, she is unmarriageable. Amina assures her that she is an extraordinary girl and that marriage is always up to the will of God. When Aisha hopes that they will soon celebrate Khadija's wedding, Khadija reflects on Aisha's motives: their father will not allow the younger to marry first (Aisha's hand has already been asked for); this paternal dictum becomes a major source of conflict later in the novel.

Chapter 6 describes the females' morning routing, with Amina dividing the housework between the girls and herself supervising ever detail. Khadija again misses no chance to criticize her sister and Amina's inability to discipline by any method other than "entreaty, humor, and tenderness" is seen to be ineffective. She is used to the bickering and it does not lessen her admiration for or satisfaction in her girls at all. The chapter reveals that Amina's delight is the roof, where she keeps chickens and pigeons, which she is loath to slaughter for food. It also holds an extensive garden, which she begins long ago, planting in the collected bird droppings, and is now a vast and pleasant enterprise. The roof affords her a free vantage point to look out at the city. She marvels at all the minarets, near and far, and at all the world's unknown mysteries. She does not find her seclusion troublesome, even seeing all that lies outside. Instead, she is inspired to pray for everyone—even the English—just as she prays for the birds destined for the family table.

Chapter 7 shows Ahmad's engaging personality outside the home and when sober. The visit of Shaykh Mutawalli allows Ahmad's views on religion as part of life to be systematically developed. Ahmad is not by nature introspective, so it takes such a confrontation to make him examine the balance between profound piety and profligacy. Both sides will be shown repeatedly in the novel, and his eldest son, Yasin, will be seen to be a carbon copy of his father's fallen side. Shaykh is an honorific in Arabic with many applications for elderly men; Mutawalli appears to be a middling religious scholar.



Chapter 8 focuses on Kamal, following him home from school and considering a few incidents that show him as a combination of naïve and naughty. It allows for more of the extended neighborhood to be seen, along with glimpses of Egyptian education in the early twentieth century. It shows Kamal studiously avoiding walking by his father's storefront, fearing his temper. Ahmad punishes by inflicting severe foot beatings. The circumstances of several are described to provide context.

Kamal then shows the psychological scarring left by his circumcision at age ten. The physical pain had been bad enough, but the event also served as a watershed in his relations with his father. He is treated kindly up to the horrible event, is comforted with a lapful of chocolates on the fateful day, and then begins being treated with paternal severity, just like other family members. Worst of all, Ahmad holds over the naïve boy the fear of losing even "what he has left."

Circumcision in early twentieth-century Islam is generally performed between ages seven and ten, with no fixed ritual, but is usually attended by much festivity as a ritual of adulthood. Given how Ahmad forbids music and dance at his daughters' weddings later in the novel, it is certain that Kamal gets no party to help soothe his pain. In that context, even the candy seems extravagant.

Kamal is also beaten for making his father arrange with the fathers of bullies not to beat him after school and for endangering himself by climbing on the roof. As a result, Amina generally covers up Kamal's adventures. Ahmad wants Kamal to sit with his hands folded, being serious, and sees no reason for youthful frivolity—which greatly contrasts with his attitude towards his own life outside the home. The final scene in the chapter is used later to show how family members discount anything young Kamal has to say.



# Chapters 9-16

## Chapters 9-16 Summary

Except for Ahmad, the whole family gathers toward sunset for "coffee hour." Yasin shares items from his current reading, but story-hungry Kamal pushes for more. Kamal hates waiting for "tomorrow" and being ignored when he tells exaggerated stories. He and Yasin enjoy picking on Khadija's large nose, but Fahmy and Amina try to stick to topics at hand. When rebuked for swearing to the truth of his bus story, Kamal worries about such a sin. Fahmy talks about the state of the European War. Yasin cares less about politics. As the conversation drags, Yasin goes out. Kamal envies Yasin's freedom.

In Chapter 10 Fahmy and Kamal sit at dusk on the roof, reviewing Kamal's lessons while allowing Fahmy to watch neighbor Maryam at chores. Fahmy knows better than to mention Maryam because of his father's harsh code. Chapter 11 sees Kamal bored studying but happy to know more than his sisters. At bedtime, Kamal reviews his daily sura with Amina and keeps her near as long as possible. He longs once more to sleep in her bed.

Chapter 12 follows Yasin's nocturnal prowling for women, a fact kept secret from Ahmad. He settles in Ali's Coffee Shop, watching for Zanuba, foster daughter of the singer Zubayda. When her troupe goes to a wedding, Yasin goes to Costaki's Bar, where he is shocked to see an old man from his youth. In Chapter 13 he recalls this fruit merchant ruining a happy childhood by wooing his mother, who uses Yasin to extend invitations. Removed to his father's house at age nine, Yasin tries to forget his mother. Now, drunk, Yasin curses his fate, worries about his inheritance and pines for Zanuba.

Chapter 14 finds Ahmad at his desk, relishing having been missed at a party. A matchmaker, Umm Ali, hints that the widowed Mme. Nafusa wants to become his second wife, but recalling his father's multiple marriages, Ahmad declines. Still, he is flattered and considers how at age 45 he retains his vigor and charm. He combines modesty and vanity, loves praise but does not brag, and is inspired by a thirst for love. He is ever the life of the party and is often called on to resolve disputes. Hard on Umm Ali's heels arrives the haughty, flirtatious Mme. Zubayda, whom Ahmad would like to make his lover. He accepts no payment for the goods she orders. In Chapter 15 Ahmad visits Zubayda, ostensibly to hire her as a singer. He is seductive; she is coy, remarking on his outward piety and inward debauchery—just as people say. She taunts him with his one-time lover, her rival the singer Jalila, and sends him into the night frustrated and confused.

In Chapter 16 Ahmad hires Zubayda's "recital chamber" for a party with his friends, and as "bridegroom of the party" sits beside her with her troupe arranged to both sides and his friends before them. Lust is the only part of love to which Ahmad responds, but he prides himself on not being beastly. Ahmad joins in the music, playing an expert





tambourine, allowing him better to ogle her. When the intense song ends, the friends know it is time to leave, but first enact a mock wedding procession.

## Chapters 9-16 Analysis

Chapter 9 introduces the late-afternoon family coffee hour from which only Ahmad is absent. Amina and the older boys drink coffee, but everyone contributes to the free-wheeling conversations. Yasin, fully-grown, likes to be entertained by good stories and poems. He can be tempted into talking about politics, but not with the fervency of Fahmy, a law student. Khadija is sarcastic and, when all else fails, those she attacks comment on her nose. It is soon seen that she is obsessed with this genetic present from her father and is convinced that it will prevent her marrying. Amina will comfort her, even as he earlier assures Kamal that his big head is a sign of intelligence. The Prophet Muhammad had a large head. When the hour is up, Yasin heads out for his night on the town. Amina has to calm Kamal's impatience about becoming that free. Fahmy suggests that Yasin should have completed his education. Coffee hours become a regular fixture of the novel.

Chapter 10 shows Fahmy falling in love with next door neighbor Maryam, a friend of his sisters, whom he has watched during visits while he pretends to be reading. She has a carefree laugh that lights up the house. Fahmy now watches her gathering dried laundry from the roof. He knows that she knows he is watching and he wonders why modesty does not make her flee. On the other hand, he enjoys watching her. He dares not talk to her and dares not mention it to his father. When finally through his mother he asks to marry Maryam, Ahmad wants to know if he has seen her to know that he wants her. The same problem destroys Aisha's chances with the policeman at whom she gazes. Ahmad insists on the complete cloistering of females.

Chapter 11 continues the education theme. Fahmy is Kamal's official tutor but, because he does well in school, allows him some freedom in where he studies. Kamal likes studying near his mother and sisters. At one point he, amazingly, claims to admire their freedom to be uneducated. At bedtime, he goes over his Qur'an lessons with his mother, who memorizes the daily sura if she does not already know it. She has trouble with Sura 72, "The Jinn," because of her general superstitions. Kamal helps her understand that the verses cannot be harmful. Amina dislikes some of the ideas he brings home, when the conflict with what her learned grandfather and father have taught her. She prefers pious lives of saints. The chapter also shows that Kamal has only recently been forced to sleep in his own bed and resents his father for this. During the lesson, he had asked if his father is afraid of God.

Chapter 12 begins a two-chapter look at Yasin's nocturnal stalking of women. He apparently is unaware of his father's pattern and his father's friends, who see Yasin on the street and intuit his purpose, keep the secret from Ahmad. Yasin has grown too old to beat physically, but more than a decade of beatings has left him psychologically scarred. He feels worthless in his father's presence. This dysfunctional relationship is examined later in the novel as Yasin twice transgresses his father's honor by trying to



rape household servants. The chapter begins to paint how Yasin views women: large breasts and buttocks are required, with no reference to any other traits. His father is a bit more discerning.

Chapter 12 ends with Yasin shocked to see a figure from his childhood and worried about being recognized as an adult. Chapter 13 explains that this is the first of his mother's lovers after the divorce from Ahmad. He bitterly recalls seeing activities that as a nine-year-old he cannot assimilate and the man, a fruit vendor, trying to ingratiate himself with gifts of fruit. Yasin's mother sends Yasin to invite the man to trysts. Removed to his father's strict home, Yasin disowns his mother and now curses how fate has brought the whole sordid story back to him. More details of the mother-son relationship come out later in the novel, causing even sharper conflicts in the young man's soul. The mother's faulty genes causing her to marry and divorce several times are (falsely) used to explain Yasin's own brief marriage.

Chapter 14 examines Ahmad's character in some detail, revealing a complexity to which the Jekyll and Hyde introduction does not do justice. He is always the life of the party but does not brag or condescend. He is sought out as a counselor/mediator, particularly in cases of pending divorce (this becomes important later in the novel). He is still, as he enters middle age, as lusty as a teenager. He enjoys alcohol but does not let it affect his reasoning. He protects his reputation. Two women visiting his shop help paint his picture. The first is a matchmaker sent by a wealthy widow who wants to become his second wife. Ahmad has noticed her and intuited her intentions, but does not want to repeat his father's mistake of multiple marriages. It has, in part, reduced his own inheritance. More comes out about his late father later in the novel. The second woman is the renowned singer, Zubayda, whose house Yasin has been surveying, hoping to seduce her foster daughter. That father and son will somehow be brought conflict by these women seems obvious. Note Ahmad's preference for fat women. He orders his assistant to write off Zubayda's purchase as "goods destroyed by an act of God," because "God is beautiful and loves beauty."

Chapter 15 continues the story of Ahmad and Zubayda, as he shows up at her doorstep claiming to want to hire her for a singing engagement. He leaves it up to her what kind of event—wedding or circumcision—and flirts outrageously. At one point he asks God to forgive him for swearing on the Qur'an to a clear lie. He finds himself often in such a predicament. In the course of the witty and barbed verbal back-and-forth, Zubayda mentions Ahmad's one-time lover, the singer Jalila, her bitter rival, cursing her viciously. Ahmad remarks that this is a bit uncharitable but also claims to have forgotten Jalila in the face of Zubayda's beauty. Jalila will return to Ahmad's life, most inconveniently, at his daughter Aisha's wedding. In the meantime, Zubayda puts Ahmad off, resisting his request that she beat him, and puts him out the door while reciting haunting verses. He is sure there is a hidden meaning.

Chapter 16 is set in Mme. Zubayda's "recital chamber" located at the center of the house so that outer rooms muffle the sounds that reach the street and adjacent buildings. Ahmad arranges the party, but invited friends have clearly attended events here previously. Zubayda continues playing hard-to-get. Mahfouz describes the typically



Egyptian room and the musical troupe well enough for the reader to get a feel for both. The chapter is complicated by an excursus on the quality of the music—Ahmad being an aficionado of the finest musicians and worrying that Zubayda might bite off more than she can chew and embarrass them both. His friends reveal that he is an expert tambourine player and the invitation to play allows him to ogle Zubayda's ample leg and bosom. The friends, well aware of Ahmad's sexual adventures, banter lightly. A lengthy aside clarifies that Ahmad lusts without love but is too refined to act like "a wild bull." This theme will be revived later when his eldest son's lust is precisely that bestial. It is more common for the author to describe these themes within a character's train of thought. Here it is pure description. The chapter ends with a mock marriage procession. The gathering of pilgrims bound for Mecca, following a ceremonial camel litter, is so often mentioned in the novel that the reader grasps that it has great religious and cultural meaning for the people without knowing how or why.



# Chapters 17-26

## Chapters 17-26 Summary

Yasin visits his father's store to announce painfully that his mother, Haniya, is marrying again, a baker, Ya'qub Zaynhum, ten years younger. Ahmad recalls brief months of happiness before divorcing her. Humiliated, Yasin can no longer pretend that she does not exist. Ahmad tries to calm him, but Yasin rails at the fiancé's greed. It would be humiliating to beg or threaten the man to break it off, but Ahmed gets Yasin to visit her. Chapter 18 brings Yasin to his unchanged boyhood neighborhood. Passing the corner fruit store brings painful recollections. He knocks on the familiar door and is admitted, unsure how to greet his mother before she falls on him with joyful tears. They soon fall to rebuking one another and defending themselves. He rejects Haniya's justification of an unlucky life. She begs for his love, but hears that she may gain it only by dropping her wedding plans. Yasin leaves angry, calling her a criminal, while she, distraught, asks God to forgive him.

In Chapter 19 Fahmy delights Amina by asking her to arrange an engagement to Maryam, with the marriage waiting until he graduates and has a job. The hard part is approaching rigid Ahmad. Kamal overhears and tells his sisters. Jealous, Khadija points out Maryam's faults but leaves it to God's hands in heaven and Daddy's on earth. Chapter 20 finds the sisters listening outside their parents' door in the morning. Ahmad angrily dismisses the idea and demands to know if Fahmy has been sneaking looks at Maryam that the subject should come up. He rails about household corruption. As Amina retreats, Ahmad remains agitated to enforce good order until afternoon prayers. Back at work, he sees Fahmy as taking after his old man. In Chapter 21, a shaken Fahmy sends Kamal on a nighttime mission to Maryam. Kamal enters the familiar Ridwan house, bypasses the parents, and finds Maryam in her room. She chides his unusual shyness before he manages to deliver the message verbatim: Fahmy intends to hasten his studies so that his father will reconsider allowing their engagement. She passes word to Fahmy that she does not know how she will respond to a suitor while she waits.

Chapter 22 shifts attention to Aisha, whose beautiful blond hair and blue eyes are admired by all—and by herself more than anyone. Khadija finds Aisha's early-morning doting on her appearance excessive and figures out the reason when she catches Aisha watching the street. As they bicker, Khadija suggests that she may tell their father, which, given his reaction to Fahmy's request, will be disastrous. Khadija demands a confession of wrong and a promise never to watch the policeman again. It is for the family's honor. Chapter 23 brings three unknown ladies to visit Amina, presumably to evaluate Khadija for marriage. Kamal borrows make-up from Maryam for Aisha to beautify her self-conscious sister. Chapter 24 gathers the family days later for coffee hour and Fahmy represents police officer Hasan Ibrahim in asking for Aisha's hand. Uneasy, Amina wonders if this is connected to the three visitors. Khadija believes it is. Fahmy knows it is and believes that the officer is worthy of Aisha, but does not want to



hurt Khadija's feelings. They consider how Amina should approach Ahmad's inevitable question: how does the man know to prefer the younger? Amina decides that Khadija must marry first, but Fahmy suggests allowing the engagement in the meantime. Khadija insists altruistically that Aisha's good luck should not be clouded by her own bad luck. Knowing her father's views, Khadija puts it in his hands. Chapter 25 shows Amina apprehensively putting the question before Ahmad. Astonished, he reiterates his policy: the elder marries first. When she admits the connection to the three women, Ahmad angrily demands why the man specifies Aisha. He rejects the notion of neighborhood hearsay. Amina feels "a bottomless pit" opening as she pleads not to hurt either daughter. She insists that no strangers has ever seen either daughter's face, which Ahmad spins into a source of evil rumors if Aisha is allowed to marry.

Chapter 26 shows family members' reaction to Ahmad's decree: sorrow at the lost opportunity (Fahmy), discomfort and embarrassment (Khadija), fatalism and indignation (Yasin), and resignation (Aisha). At coffee hour Aisha is like a chicken with its head cut off. Father cannot be challenged, but she feels resentful, regretful, alienated, abandoned, banished, and disowned. In bed, Khadija does not pounce on Aisha's misery but is sorry for a second time to have gotten in her way. She hopes that Hasan is destined to wait for Aisha. Kamal barges in, wanting to know if they will leave home when they marry, praying that they never marry for he cannot bear to lose them.

## Chapters 17-26 Analysis

Chapter 17 fills out the character of Haniya, Yasin's estranged mother. Yasin comes to his father's office, distraught over learning that she will marry again, scandalously to a young man who surely wants only to control her fortune. The circumstances of Ahmad's brief marriage to Haniya is detailed, showing that his self-image as lord of the house had brought about the divorce and convinced him never to marry again. There are many similarities when Yasin marries and is quickly divorced. He understands his son's turmoil but tries to calm him by noting that marriage is always legal in Islam. They cannot intimidate the would-be fiancé, but Yasin can appeal to his mother. Ahmad is surprised at how boldly Yasin talks with him but excuses it as emotional overload. This benevolent attitude is absent later in the novel when father-and-son, so like one another, clash again.

Chapter 18 shows the reunion after eleven years, following Yasin's steps into the old neighborhood filled with both happy and terrible memories. He is going primarily because his father sees this as the best solution; he is not himself certain what to expect or what might be achieved. He is determined to restrain his temper. The house is a mixture of old things he remembers and new things introduced in the course of several marriages. His mother is emotionally overwrought, claiming never to have hoped this reunion would occur. He notices primarily that she now wears make-up, which cheapens her beauty. They fall to rebuking one another and defending their own behavior and Yasin's anger overflows. He cannot remember why he has come (to discuss his inheritance). He refrains from bringing up the fruit-seller only to spare himself mental pain.



Chapter 19 introduces the subject of Fahmy becoming engaged to Maryam. Engagement in Islam allows the couple no benefits to see one another in private; it merely formalizes the intention to marry. Fahmy observes that his father is married by his age and he fully intends to finish law school and get a job first. Ahmad's temper dictates that Amina broach the subject, albeit filled with trepidation. She is overjoyed for her son. Fahmy thinks that he is talking with his mother in private, having waited for her to conclude the bedtime rituals with Kamal. The boy, however, sneaks back in, ostensibly to retrieve his English book (his study of English later becomes significant in the novel) and overhears. He rushes to his drowsy sisters' room to tell them. They begin talking excitedly and Khadija, characteristically, begins finding faults with Maryam. She is sure that Fahmy is destined to be a judge and will need a wife far more fitting his stature. The family's high hopes for this middle son begins to be laid out, preparatory for the final tragedy.

Chapter 20 rapidly concludes the romance. The sisters listen through the door as Amina meekly describes the merits of Maryam and her family and tells of their son's desires. Ahmad's response is loud and violent, putting his foot down and accusing his wife of pampering the children, thus allowing corruption in his household. He asks dramatically if he must stay home all day to supervise. The author describes how Ahmad allows his temper to flair as a tool for control. He softens when he gets to work and considers Fahmy—wrongly—a chip off the old block. Yasin fits this description far more closely. Ahmad intuits that Fahmy has somehow managed to see Maryam and become enamored, which is a violation of his strict interpretation of Islam.

Chapter 21 shows Kamal on a mission to share with Maryam Fahmy's distress over his father's decision. At ten years old, Kamal still has free access to the women's sequestered quarters, as is seen later during his sisters' weddings. Fahmy's normal calm composure is described and contrasted with his present angst. Kamal is shown as a frequent visitor to the neighbors' house. He has asked his mother what "paralyzed" means, vis-a-vis Maryam's father but is put off—Amina's normal reaction to troubling questions—and is infatuated by the beautiful mother. Kamal finds Maryam in her room munching seeds. He is not his normal, carefree self and she cannot tickle him into lightening up. He delivers Fahmy's message most seriously and asks for a response, which he memorizes. Maryam declares that she does not know how she will respond if a suitor asks for her hand. This is not passive-aggressive but the reality of parent-arranged marriages. If her father gives her away, she has no recourse, as will presently be seen as Kamal's sisters are married off.

Chapter 22 sees Khadija catch Aisha looking down at the street through slightly-parted shutters to see the policeman of her dreams. Jealousy, anger, sympathy, and affection mix in the big sister's reaction. At the highest level, she defends the family's code of honor; if the policeman can see Aisha in the window, so can neighbors, who will gossip about her breaking the notorious Abd al-Jawad discipline. Less nobly, Khadija relishes the trouble she can get Aisha into. Earlier it has been seen that Khadija resents doing the lion's share of the household chores. Father has suspected that Fahmy must have seen Maryam in order to be so moved to marry her, so he will not shrink from believing that Aisha is parading herself to the world. The sibling rivalry is heating.



Chapter 23 shows Aisha happily helping beautify her sister when a delegation of women arrives whose mission, Amina assumes, is to inspect her eldest daughter as a candidate for marriage. Khadija is concerned about her nose, but Aisha diverts her to her pleasantly plump body and applies make-up borrowed from Maryam. Cosmetics are evidently banned in the Abd al-Jawad household. Aisha reminds her nervous sister that if all goes well, Khadija will have plenty of opportunities to turn her sarcasm loose on the females who are about to judge her.

Chapter 24 resolves the question of the three visitors in an unexpected way. Fahmy is commissioned by the police officer whom Aisha has been watching to ask for her hand. He alone knows that the three women had been sent by Hasan's relatives. This poses two problems: 1) can the younger sister be married first? and 2) how would Hasan know to choose the younger if he has not seen the sisters and known that Aisha is far more beautiful? The parallel with Fahmy and Maryam is too fresh not to raise questions. Khadija plays the noble, luckless sufferer and wants to maneuver to where she can lash out, but never gets the chance. Amina wants to find the best way to approach her husband. Kamal is played for comedy, asking naïve questions that eventually cannot be ignored with a straight face. In the end, all know that Ahmad will decide without reference to anything anyone might say. Khadija hopes that his long-held insistence on her being first wed will carry the day. The saying, "Marriage is the fate of every living creature. Anyone not getting married today will marry tomorrow" becomes a regular refrain throughout the coming chapters.

Chapter 25 shows Amina cowering before her husband as he rants about the situation, certain that this police officer must somehow have seen Aisha to know to ask for her hand and pointing out that neighborhood gossip will also assume that she has been on display. When she apologizes for mentioning it only because it is her duty to keep him abreast of all household matters, Ahmad declares that she is "just a woman, and no woman has a fully developed mind." The question of marriage makes women lose their minds. He goes so far as to declare that a bridegroom's "primary motive" must be to be related to him before he will be accepted. Finally, he declares that his sons are no better than daughters.

Chapter 26 concludes the saga of forbidden engagements as the Abd al-Jawad family gathers at coffee hour. Each reacts to events individually, helping to round out and deepen their characters. Yasan is the most fatalistic. Aisha wants not to look overly bitter but the pain continues sinking deeper and growing. How can the father she loves by a single word destroy her happiness? She cannot characterize it as unjust; it simply is. She holds slim hopes that the police officer she has long watched will wait for her, as Fahmy clings to hopes of marrying Maryam. All is in the hands of destiny. Aisha lies in bed hoping that Khadija will provoke a fight so she can release her emotions, but Khadija is kind. Kamal again appears as comic relief, although his serious question about brides moving to the bridegroom's family home becomes a major concern of him and source of conflict for all the families soon to be intertwined by marriage.



# Chapters 27-33

## Chapters 27-33 Summary

The family feels free when Ahmad takes a business trip. Supported by the girls, who want to visit Maryam, Yasin convinces Amina to visit al-Husayn's shrine. Kamal goes along as guide. Amina is like a child with a new toy, but also panics, stepping out. Kamal chooses empty alleys and provides running commentary. The mosque is not as grand as she has imagined, but Amina feels transformed into pure spirit as they enter and are carried along in the tide of women spiraling towards the tomb, praying, touching the walls, and savoring. Guards keep anyone from lingering. Amina exits regretfully. Kamal suggests taking the long way home and sees her fall, grazed by a passing car. A crowd rings her and a policeman wants to take her to the station. She imagines Ahmad threatening her. Claiming to be unhurt, she walks until pain begins coursing through her shoulder. Chapter 28 gathers the family to hear the story and Yasin fetches a doctor, who diagnoses and painfully sets the broken collarbone. He orders bed rest and daily check-ups. All share Amina's fear over how to explain this to Ahmad. Yasin suggests confessing her guilt to build good will; defending herself will only bring wrath. Khadija suggests blaming in on a fall down the stairs. Chapter 29 opens with the girls hovering between hope and fear that the story will work. When Ahmad arrives, he appears concerned, but as he asks the circumstances, his "consuming" eyes compel Amina to blurt out a confession and call on God's compassion. Graciously, Ahmad tells her to "stay in bed till God heals you."

Chapter 30 explores the girls' reaction to Amina telling the truth. They are sure that al-Husayn has blessed her. Khadija, as "second-in-command" in the household, is sent to help Ahmad. She brings him coffee and awaits further orders in terror as he naps. After lunch, he summons Yasin and Fahmy, who like Amina, fear they will catch his fury over not preventing her going out. All wonder if Ahmad will forsake his night out. Yasin, himself wanting to step out, declares that men and women sorrow in different ways. Amina hopes that Ahmad considers her already sufficiently punished. Amina's pain passes and she grows bored supervising the household from bed. She wonders if Ahmad will see a decline and appreciate all she normally does.

Chapter 31 shows family joy when Amina resumes her chores. She has kept Kamal's guilt a secret and he feels relief. She is fearful as she serves the males breakfast and brings Ahmad his coffee. He begins a tongue-lashing that ends in her eviction. She freezes, dumbfounded. He is relieved after three weeks of considering her attack on his dignity, which outweighs his affection for her. Chapter 32 shows Amina in collapse, wanting to get out fast but not wanting to upset the boys. She still considers Ahmad gallant during her recovery and cannot believe he will tear her from her children. When Ahmad leaves the house, she finds Khadija and Aisha quarreling and announces her exile. They insist that she take only a few clothes and hide the rest until she is allowed back. His anger cannot be challenged. She leaves amidst tears.





In Chapter 33 Amina, a "chastised wife," returns to her girlhood home. She finds her blind mother fingering prayer beads and wondering where Ahmad is. Amina explains, omitting the accident and her mother defends the right of virtuous women to visit the shrine. Mother commends them all—particularly Amina's children—to God's care, sure that Ahmad intends only to discipline her. Evil cannot befall her because of her saintly grandfather and father. She reminds Amina of how she alone survives a childhood epidemic and becomes their treasure. Amina remains melancholy and worried about the household running without her. As she imagines her sons rushing to her, they arrive. Kamal vows never to leave, while Fahmy and Yasin feel guilty about suggesting the excursion. Grandmother teases them about being men and working on their stubborn father. All are gloomy until Grandmother says it is just spending a few nights with her mother.

## Chapters 27-33 Analysis

Chapter 27 sees Ahmad go to Port Said on the Mediterranean Sea, at least a full day's travel from Cairo. His children look forward to a day of pleasure, free from his rules, but Amina hesitates to take responsibility for changing the routine. They convince her that she should visit the nearby Shrine of al-Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who is assassinated in CE 680. His "immaculate" head is enshrined in the local mosque. The Abd al-Jawads show the devout reverence for his memory that characterizes Shiite Muslims, while the more numerous Sunnis consider him a heretic. While arguing that Amina carry out her long-held but denied wish, Yasin curiously mentions a leading Sunni scholar, al-Bukhari. Amina is convinced, dressed for the street—humorously, Umm Hanafi must adjust the vast black cloth so it clings properly and show Amina how to hold its edge correctly—and is led to the shrine by Kamal, who has been shown to pass it daily with great reverence. Amina is a study in nervous tension on the roads and spiritual ecstasy inside the mosque. Kamal daydreams about al-Husayn living here as a normal house at night and talking with him face-to-face. Kamal would request unlimited play time, his sisters never to move out, his father's temper to be changed, and his mother's life to last forever. He also wants them to afford Paradise without judgment. The visit is quick because guards hurry the mass of women past the tomb and out again. The scene captures the tactile nature of Middle Easterners.

After the visit, wistful Amina follows Kamal on the long way home, only to be struck by an automobile. She is horrified to be surrounded by onlookers and threatened by a trip to the police station (where Aisha's would-be husband works). She anticipates the terrible judgment that will fall on her from Ahmad, so she tries to get home and forget it all. She convinces the policeman that she is unhurt, but the pain soon falls on her. The horror keeps building.

Chapter 28 continues examining what becomes known in family myth as the "ill-omened excursion." Yasin plays a central part, because he suggests it. He fetches a doctor, who adds a complicating factor to covering up the incident; having set Amina's fracture, he insists on daily examinations. Amina has never before been examined by a doctor and her various reactions, largely based on superstition but also on shame at being seen by



a non-relative, are reviewed. Later midwives will deliver Alisha's baby, but a doctor will be summoned to examine their conditions. Ever-sarcastic Khadija is ready to attack Yasin in his moment of vulnerability, but his well-meaning and insightful speech about confronting guilt head-on softens her, and she comes up with a plausible explanation that does not require Amina to have broken Ahmad's rules about going out in public. They all agree to say that she falls on the staircase. Everyone is relieved. The background theme, asking how God can allow Amina to be injured while on a pious mission, suggests that things cannot end that simply and peacefully.

Chapter 29 brings Ahmad home and showing concern over Amina's injury. When he asks the circumstances, she cannot tell a lie. Her full confession is couched in sincere piety and repentance. Later in the novel, the menfolk will be shown unwilling to repent of sins, for this means forswearing repetition. That they will consider only at the point of death, when there is nothing to lose. Visiting the shrine is all that Amina has wanted outside the house. Ahmad is uncharacteristically mild, giving her hope, which she continues to hold for several chapters. That he is seething inside eventually becomes evident.

Chapter 30 looks at the children's reactions to the confession and at how Khadija does as "second-in-command." She relishes the dignity and power but as always whines about Aisha getting off easy. For her part, Aisha cannot refrain from taunting her big sister. The decline in household maintenance in her absence convinces Amina that she will be appreciated once she has recovered. Ahmad again rebukes his boys as being girl-like during the crisis: they should, in his place, have forbidden Amina's foolish and rebellious excursion. Ahmad goes out for his nightly entertainment, rather to Amina's displeasure; she thinks it ill-fitting the circumstances. Yasin defends his father's rights, although he mentions (rather boldly) that Ahmad's friends are not as strict with their women. He jokes away the suggestion that he should say that to his father's face. He household tensions are rising steadily.

Chapter 31 finds Amina back in charge of the household. The children are overjoyed, particularly Kamal, who has always feared that he will be blamed for taking his mother on the roundabout way home. Amina is fearful of resuming her ministrations to her husband, but nothing seems amiss until she offers him his coffee. He uses silence as a cudgel before lashing out at the stupidity of her actions. The author examines how three weeks of building up the case against Amina has led to a far more desperate reaction than would have occurred had she not been injured and he had not had to hold in his temper. As with his rejection of his children's engagements, Ahmad makes this all about himself: his besmirched honor and dignity. He cannot show mercy even though he has gotten used to Amina over twenty-five years and is fond of her. She must leave the house by noon. It is a fearsome study of how anger takes control of the person. Amina can only babel pious phrases, which slide like water off Ahmad's back. Recall that he had done the same with first wife Haniya, expecting that temporary divorce would bring her back to her senses. That fails. He has not yet spoken to Amina of divorce.

Chapter 32 finds Amina letting her sons leave for school and work unconcerned by her tragedy and then facing her daughters. Her exile cannot be avoided. Ahmad's anger



cannot be challenged. She hopes that he intends only to make her experience a few days' pain of separation from her children. His concern during her recuperation suggests to her that he is compassionate and even chivalrous. As always, she entrusts herself to God's will. The girls convince her to clear out her armoire as their Father doubtless will expect, but to take only a few items to tide her over and hide the rest. They cry like babies.

Chapter 33 brings Amina back to her mother's door. It tells highlights of Amina's childhood, including the loss of siblings to an epidemic, and establishes the sanctity of her father and grandfather whom, it has been seen, she venerates. She has continued her mother's storytelling with her own children. The mother is known in the neighborhood as "the blessed shaykha." As Amina trudges into the neighborhood, she passes an abandoned Sufi mosque and recalls the mystics swaying in prayer long ago, further complicating the religious picture of the novel. The chapter shows mother and daughter, who look so much alike, contrasting in personality. The mother criticizes Ahmad's absolutism as uncalled for under Islam; her learned and pious father and husband allow her pilgrimages. She states boldly that males have many faults that blind them and inspire them to find fault with others. As a balance to the analysis of the previous chapter, she predicts that Ahmad does not hold off judgments, so this temporary banishment is as bad as the punishment will get. He has in the past tried to talk her into moving in with them but she resists and keeps her independence. She is a wry old woman, who enjoys sparring with her live-in maid. It is curious that Amina withholds the car accident from her mother and has to keep the boys from mentioning it when they arrive. The grandmother chides them about confronting their father's stubbornness, but all know they cannot stand up to him. The more this is repeated the more likely it becomes that at least one of them will have to stand up to him at some point in the novel. They will.



# Chapters 34-41

## Chapters 34-41 Summary

Having to serve Ahmad soon become intolerable, particularly for Khadija, on whom the main burden falls. She resolves that they must convince him to bring Amina home and first tells Yasin that it is his duty. Yasin is afraid his own temper will flare in confrontation—and sulks when the others laugh. Intellectual, controlled Fahmy thinks that male meddling could make things worse and suggests Khadija, who passes to pampered Aisha, who cannot. They decide to ask Maryam's mother for help. This is awkward for Fahmy, so Yasin nominates Kamal. Walking home next day, Kamal takes it serious, drops by his father's office, takes courage, finding him laughing with a customer, but then grows tongue-tied. Told to get lost, Kamal blurts out that he wants his mother brought back, and runs.

Chapter 35 shows Umm Maryam visiting Ahmad. He is sure that his daughters are meddling but he has often fantasized about sex with her, but is restrained by neighborly considerations. He wonders whether she is interceding for Amina or flirting like Zubayda. Ahmad does not judge friends who take wives and daughters on outings, but as an ultraconservative, he cannot forgive Amina's transgression. After an exchange of pleasantries, she praises his virtues and his wife's. He cuts her short, saying that God will remedy the situation. He returns to his store still feeling the squeeze of her hand. Chapter 36 brings the rich Widow Shawkat to visit next day, subjecting Ahmad to a verbal pounding about Amina's absence. She claims to have dropped by with good news: her son Khalil wants to marry Aisha, and she demands an immediate answer. Khadija is an excellent woman and will marry in God's time. He must think of Aisha. As she leaves, Widow Shawkat reiterates all of her points. Khalil is twenty-five, well-off, unemployed, but pleasant.

In Chapter 37, Amina is bored in her exile, unable to enjoy it as a restful holiday. She hears about the two mediators and relaxes, and the boys visit constantly. One evening they bring her pardon. Her mother says to go but sniffs that Ahmad should have come himself. For the first time the boys walk with the mother on the street. Umm Hanafi welcomes her home and the girls cling. Coffee hour has its full complement. They talk about chores and Ahmad dressing without help. She is glad not to have been replaced. With Amina home, all resume brooding about their own sorrows. Amina wonders about meeting Ahmad when he returns. He lets her help him undress, asks about her mother, and tells her of Widow Shawkat's proposal. She is astonished, even before he says he has put the matter in God's hands.

Chapter 38 shows Aisha's joy as all obey the "higher will" of God and her father. She wonders privately at the policy change and Hasan's destiny, and tries to look modest. Her sympathy for Khadija is openly resented. She hates Aisha and life itself. Only when she is tasked with sewing the wedding gown does her "latent good nature" return. She



sets aside malice, consigns all to fate, and only in prayer expresses grief. Concerned, Amina has Khadija's fortune read, and it points to more glad tidings.

Chapter 39 shifts to Ali's Coffee Shop, where Yasin watching Zubayda's house, ranting inwardly about his fate. He has arranged to rendezvous some time with Zanuba, but the wait has become endless. When the signal comes, he rushes to her, wondering out loud if she is allowed to see men here. Without knowing Yasin's identity, Zanuba talks about a well-known man being entertained upstairs: Ahmad Abd al-Jawad. Surprised at Yasin's shock, Zanuba allows him to peek. Yasin sees his father in a whole new light, enjoying the same forbidden pleasures under the same roof. He admires him.

Chapter 40 describes Aisha's festive marriage celebration at the Shawkat residence. Kamal is upset, seeing Aisha take her husband's arm. Ahmad shuts himself away from the "masses" in a reception room with a few friends, refusing to lapse from "stern dignity," and thus annoying Widow Shawkat, who throws a gala party. Needing a drink, Yasin is happy that Khalil has prepared a private table for him. Fahmy is sad about losing Aisha and pines for beautiful Maryam. Muhammad Iffat Ahmad bemoans the burden of raising daughters. Breaking his oath, Yasin drinks heavily. The singer Jalila also gets drunk and introduces herself to Amina and her daughters with hints of past intimacy with Ahmad. She draws the women's laughter by describing overcoming her strict upbringing and then causes a stir by joining the men's party. She confronts Ahmad, commenting on Zubayda, and asking how he can pretend to be pious. Ahmad is furious at being disgraced, but consoles himself with the knowledge that his power over his family has nothing to do with setting an example. To ease Fahmy's shock, Yasin discloses what he sees at Zubayda's house and tells of Muslim caliphs who have done the same. In the women's quarters, those who know Ahmad are hardly surprised by the stories, but Amina is ashamed. She can no longer ignore such tangible evidence. Seeing their mother's suppressed pain, the daughters grow angry, but the wedding procession sweeps away everyone's personal concerns. As the family walks home after dark. Kamal reveals that he has seen her and Khalil kissing. Amina silences him.

Chapter 41 examines Yasin and Fahmy talking alone at home. Fahmy is sorry to have lost his ideal picture of "prudence and piety." Drunk, Yasin objects, saying that loving women is part of Muslim life. Despite the late hour, Yasin sets out to see Zanuba but in the courtyard sees Umm Hanafi asleep. She is an ugly, unharmonious woman, but lust and convenience overcome Yasin. When he climbs on top of her she screams, awakening Ahmad, who sends the "criminal" and "son of a bitch" indoors. Yasin obeys in terror.

## Chapters 34-41 Analysis

Chapter 34 shows the Abd al-Ahmad children gathered to decide who should talk to their father about bringing their mother home. The older boys, on whom the lot falls first, both claim that male interference may backfire. All laugh at Yasin's claim that his own temper might flare, which is what precisely happens later in the novel. They build Fahmy up as a future lawyer to no avail. Ahmad has never been as ruthless punishing



his daughters; Khadija admits that and tries to defer to the beautiful Aisha, who has been treated the most kindly of all. When all have declined, asking the neighbor to intervene is considered, and then, laughingly, they say it is up to Kamal. Only as he is walking home from school does he take the mission seriously and divert from his usual path. He is shocked to see how amiable his father is outside the home—none of them has yet experienced it—but cannot speak when grilled over what he wants. The Jekyll and Hyde transformation is instantaneous. Kamal finally blurts out his demand as he runs away and, as will be seen, this challenge to Ahmad's sole authority is brutally punished. The siblings had been wise to steer clear.

Chapter 35 is rather dense. On the surface, the neighbor, Umm Maryam comes to intercede for Amina and Ahmad rather quickly indicates that God will arrange everything as all seem to want. He suspects his children's meddling. A complicating factor is that Ahmad has felt sexually attracted to Umm Maryam, particularly since her husband has been paralyzed. He makes a point of respecting other men's rights, even in the case of former lovers whom friends have cast aside. How Ahmad juggles piety and debauchery is described. Ahmad is also said to subscribe to the premise, "You've got your religion and I've got mine." This seems a bit out of character in someone so rigid. It is said in the context of friends taking wives and daughters on outings, which Ahmad strictly forbids in his household. It is noted that Ahmad's religion has a "Hanbali bias." Hanbali is the smallest of the four schools of religious law within Sunni Islam and generally found in what is now Saudi Arabia. Shiites, which the other family members seem to be, reject these teachings. The chat between Ahmad and Umm Maryam is charming and grows nuanced with passion. Late in the novel, they will become late-night lovers, leading to Ahmad's conflict with the occupying troops.

Chapter 36 shows Ahmad in an unfamiliar light, caught in an "unbearable state," thanks to a blessing from God. The wealthy Widow Shawkat also comes to intercede for Amina. Having arranged Ahmad and Amina's betrothal twenty-five years earlier, she comes with a mother's certainty of being heard. The two families go back generations. She claims not to have heard about the problem, but to have brought good news to a fellow mother. Having learned of the dispute, she gives Ahmad a tongue lashing that he cannot interrupt. She calls him unnecessarily harsh to a woman who deserves no punishment, and demands that he do the right thing immediately. When allowed to speak, Ahmad defends his right to rule his family as he sees fit but promises that things will soon turn out for the best.

The Widow then discloses her news, which becomes the novel's next great turning point: she wants Aisha to marry her son Khalil. She anticipates Ahmad's objection about Khadija and rejects it. He must decide immediately. She reminds him that this is too good an offer to turn down. The Shawkats belong to the highest strata of Egyptian society. Ahmad is confused and embarrassed, able only to murmur about the "great honor." Finally, she tells him to trust in God. On the way out, she reiterates her entire argument on both Amina and Aisha. Ahmad is left wondering what to do. He is never indecisive like this. He cannot turn to his friends for advice without losing face. By blessing him, God has perplexed him.



Chapter 37 compares Amina's stay with her mother to an emigré pining in a foreign land. It is as light an exile as possible, but still trying. One day the boys are ordered to bring her home and everyone goes back to worrying about their own problems, particularly Fahmy and Aisha about their blocked romances. Ahmad has held the news about Aisha's new engagement secret until he relents over Amina. She is the first to hear and is amazed that the unbreakable family rule has been laid aside. One can only wonder whose argument influences this decision and how far-reaching the change of heart might be.

Chapter 38 deals largely with fate. Why in three short months is the inflexible policy suddenly overthrown? What is her old lover's fate to be? Who is this new one? She has no right to know more than generalities about him until the wedding. Khadija wonders bitterly why could Fahmy as intermediary not have steered Hasan her way? The air of celebration brings Khadija low, particularly Aisha's concern for her well-being and the injustice of it all. The author emphasizes that Khadija is a unique blend of her parents: Ahmad's looks and temper, and Amina's spirituality. She prays regularly and deeply, not like Aisha, who cannot perform her religious duties more than two days in a row. It is reiterated that Khadija takes Ramadan fasting seriously, dawn until dusk, while Aisha secretly snacks all day. When called upon to make Aisha's wedding dress, however, Khadija rallies and finds contentment.

Chapter 39 presents another dramatic pivot point in the novel: Yasin discovers that he differs from his distant father in one thing only: age. It opens with a rambling, profane rant against fate, confusing because Mahfouz places both dialog and internal thought processes in quotation marks. The thinker is angry at some flirtatious "bitch," at the Australians who keep him from Ezbekiya, and at Kaiser Wilhelm for starting a war. It is clarified that the thinker is Yasin, watching Zubayda's house. He has arranged a tryst with Zanuba and she has kept him waiting. Their meeting is heavy with sexual double entendre, reminiscent of his father's conversations with Zubayda and Umm Maryam.

Finally Yasin's chance comes. Zanuba is amused at how naïve this big ox is, while he imagines himself sophisticated. His naiveté is made manifest when she identifies the loud party-goer upstairs as a prominent man from Yasin's own district. Trying to remain incognito, he blunders about, talking about why a prominent man would do such things, and she pushing the question, why not? Yasin admires this "new" father, stripped of arbitrary strictness and clothed in joyful humanity—particularly the joy of singing, which is a heretofore unexplained family trait.

Chapter 40 takes a long and richly detailed look at Aisha's wedding reception, which takes place at the Shawkats' home. Ahmad insists on business-as-usual on Palace Walk, before heading over. Later, when Yasin marries, his wedding dinner lacks music and joy. Ahmad segregates himself from the party in funereal isolation with a few friend as he is sure his dignity demands. The party is, of course, segregated by sex. There are male and female singers. The groom has set aside a room where alcohol is served to those who want or need it—Yasin among the first. Kamal, who is still young enough to be allowed into both parties, is confused and saddened about losing his beloved sister



to some strange man. The carefree atmosphere of the party deepens Fahmy's sorrow at perhaps losing Maryam forever.

Fahmy's youthful idealism, which is about to become an important story thread through the end of the novel, is further rocked when Yasin tells him what he has seen at Zubayda's house. It makes Yasin proud of the old man, but leaves Fahmy incredulous. It is hard to deny the possibility after an ex-lover tells her tales and breaks taboo to chat with Ahmad. Amina finally has to give up repressing the probable truth, given such tangible proof. None of her women friends seem surprised. Ahmad is himself torn. On the one hand, this gives his image a boost among his carousing friends, but the timing at a family gathering is unfortunate. The important conclusion is that it makes no difference, as his authority rests not on setting an example, but on the divine order of things. Brief Chapter 41 puts the cap on the elder brothers' discussion of their "new" father and shows Yasin in a drunken state needing sex and trying to rape Umm Hanafi. This begins bending him to a new fate.





# Chapters 42-50

## Chapters 42-50 Summary

Amina defends Umm Hanafi's morals, Ahmad curses himself for fathering children, Fahmy pretends to know nothing, and Khadija notes that Yasin fails to join his father for breakfast. Yasin's absence from coffee hour proves that something is going on. After much thought, Ahmad summons Yasin, who has thought through his possible responses. After opening sarcasm, Ahmad announces that Yasin will marry Iffat's daughter and join the household.

Chapter 43 shows Amina, Khadija, and Kamal allowed to visit Aisha, who dresses elegantly to match her new surroundings and, as her mother-in-law reminds her, because she is no longer under Ahmad's strict rules. The menfolk have visited her, but she had so longed to see the rest that she entreats her father. Aisha talks about the house and neighborhood peculiarities. She has no chores. Kamal still cannot believe that Aisha will never come home. Khalil enters and reiterates that that is custom. Kamal resents him but accepts sweets from him. They are introduced to Ibrahim, leaving Amina anxious about being unveiled. Khadija amuses herself watching the two portly, languid brothers. She feels self-conscious when he looks at her. Kamal takes Aisha aside to question her about marriage.

Chapter 44 describes Yasin's austere wedding reception in his stern father's home. Yasin is filled with happiness and dread. Ahmad has again sequestered himself with friends. A black maid steps from the lead car and invites Yasin to see his bride for the first time. The women raise the forbidden trills as Zaynab proceeds to the women's quarters on her husband's arm. Yasin complains to Fahmy about the lack of musicians. Kamal reports on the unveiled bride: not as pretty as Aisha but prettier than Khadija. Yasin is encouraged and falls to thinking about how his character is a combination of his two sensual parents'. He feels sorry about not inviting his disgraceful mother, but is sure that the decision is right. As Khadija had recommended, Yasin plays the commanding host. He recalls Zanuba's curses on him for breaking off their affair and resolves never to stray.

Chapter 45 shows Yasin and Zaynab's early married life. Zaynab is slow to join in household chores, sharpening Khadija's tongue, and brags about her Turkish origins and the freedom she enjoys under her father, alarming Amina. Fahmy in particular foresees trouble. The Widow Shawkat and Aisha then visit to arrange the marriage of Ibrahim and Khadija, who is happy but confused by the timing. Kamal again feels abandoned. When Ahmad returns after midnight, Amina informs him and shrinks from his anger over Ibrahim at the wedding having seen Khadija's face exposed. The anger is pro forma.

Chapter 46 watches Yasin swiftly grow bored with marriage. Is the institution flawed or he himself? Zaynab seems to be getting all the enjoyment. He begins remembering



Zanuba and longs to be liberated. The family is amazed when Yasin and Zaynab together go out to see a bawdy vaudeville. Khadija is certain Zaynab is behind it and Amina for the first time voices disapproval of her daughter-in-law. Zaynab must be punished or there is no justice in life. Ahmad comes home first and is primed to catch the couple red-handed. He lectures Zaynab about obeying his rules and not enticing weak Yasin. Indignant but speechless, Zaynab goes to her room as Ahmad, not realizing that Yasin is too drunk to pay attention, demands that, as Zaynab's guardian under Islam, he control his wife or leave the house.

In Chapter 47, Aisha prepares Khadija for her wedding. The bride is sorry to be leaving home. Zaynab chafes at the drab atmosphere. Word comes suddenly that neighbor Muhammad Ridwan has died, casting a pall, but the wedding goes forward. Next comes word of Germany's surrender, provoking talk of how this will affect Egypt. Ahmad summons Khadija to receive a tender blessing, advising her to imitate her mother in everything. Overhearing this, Amina is delighted. In Chapter 48, coffee hour has no spirit without Khadija. Yasin reads to Kamal, resumes suspicious nightly visits to the "coffee house," and complains to Fahmy about the boredom of marriage; he is lucky to have been denied Maryam. Fahmy is stirred by politics. A delegation of nationalist leaders has asked the British High Commissioner to grant Egypt independence. Yasin has not heard of these leaders and cares little about public affairs, but is intrigued by such boldness. Amina listens intently, but her naïve views anger Fahmy, who longs to participate in nation-building.

Chapter 49 show Ahmad learning about the political situation from Fahmy, friends at a soirée, and customers in his shop. Shaykh Mutawalli returns, certain that there will be violence. Iffat brings the text of a petition to seek independence, to secure Ahmad and al-Hamzawi to add their signatures. Iffat gives insights into the leaders' personalities. Ahmad tries to joke away the seriousness. He finds that mirth helps "concentrate his energies." Ahmad limits his participation to financial donations; although he considers himself patriotic, his time is too precious to lose.

Chapter 50 returns to Yasin's marital troubles. Zaynab cannot bear his nightly drunken outings, which he defends as the age-old way of males. Amina disapproves of Zaynab's complaints, but Fahmy commiserates and mentions them to Yasin, who has given up on marriage as a cruel illusion and believes that religion supports his view. He wishes Zaynab were like Amina—a domestic animal—but he also needs variety in his women.

## Chapters 42-50 Analysis

Chapter 42 examines the aftermath, as no one wants to admit that anything has happened. Fahmy in particular is loath to judge his beloved and respected older brother. Ahmad has again put off disciplining until he thinks things through; he is predictably and rightfully furious. Yasin is prepared (he believes) to bring up what he has learned about his father if it can keep him from being evicted. He is not prepared to hear that his engagement is arranged, in order to let marriage help control his lust. That the institution cannot serve that purpose adequately is soon made clear. Yasin has failed to



save any of his salary as he promises when he begins work, in order to pay the bride price and reception costs. Ahmad will provide these. When the decision is announced, Kamal again wonders about who invents the crazy rules of marriage: Yasin's wife will move in with them. Ahmad talks with Iffat, who has agreed to the marriage even before Yasin's latest indiscretion, about how a grown son becomes one's brother. This gives some inkling of Ahmad's relationship with his own philandering father. Note how Fahmy's disappointment over Maryam deepens.

In Chapter 43, Amina and Aisha both show a certain boldness in requesting that Amina, Khadija, and Kamal be allowed to visit Aisha. Ahmad feels obliged to make them grovel and asserts that this will not become a regular occurrence. The Widow Shawkat, now Aisha's mother, mocks his attitudes and encourages Aisha to live happily. The household is ruled by docile comfort. Khalil is described at length and is said to be little distinguishable from his older, widowed brother Ibrahim. Ibrahim and Khadija look into one another's eyes. It is not a clear hint that they are destined for one another, for Khadija is studying the Shawkats trying to figure out catty nicknames for each. The Widow is "machine gun" because she sprays saliva whenever she speaks. Kamal is still struggling with the institutions of marriage.

Chapter 44 describes Yasin's drab wedding reception, forbidden music by Ahmad, much to the groom's chagrin. The women refuse to restrain their trills of joy and Umm Hanafi encourages the Abd al-Jawad women to join in; let the tyrant disapprove. Kamal again has the run of male and female quarters and provides Yasin a first eye-witness account of his bride's appearance unveiled. Note Yasin's resolve to be a faithful husband. By the sensual nature he has inherited from both parents, this is bound to fail.

Chapter 45 describes Zhadija's fast-growing resentment of the pampered Turkish woman who joins the household without trying to fit in. The clash is symbolized by Zaynab preparing an exotic Circassian meal. Circassia lies on the Black Sea north of the Caucasus Mountains. Only early in the nineteenth century does it leave Russian control to fall under the Ottoman Turks. The breakup of domestic tranquility in the Abd al-Jawad household is interrupted by the surprise proposal by Widow Shawkat to marry Khadija and Ibrahim. It is pointed out that bringing the two sisters together will smooth the usual tensions brought by a bride's transplantation into a new family, but young Kamal foresees trouble. Although he favors this development, Ahmad feels obliged to find fault: the would-be groom has already seen his daughter's face.

Chapter 46 listens in on Yasin's analysis of how he quickly grows bored with married life. He still desires his wife after the honeymoon, but no longer lusts for her and cannot keep from his head memories of past lovers. He wonders how a whole life of this could play out. Marriage is like a candy whose center, as an April Fool's Day joke is a clove of garlic. A month into the marriage, Yasin and Zaynab go out for the night, telling no one. Her maid reveals that they are going to see al-Rihani's popular vaudeville performance, "Kishkish Bey." Khadija is livid. Kamal is confused, because he and his friends at play sing jolly songs about Kishkish, whose figuring is, as it were, "spun off" from the show. His observation, breaking in "like a Western theme incorporated into a purely Eastern piece of music," is ignored. Amina, still smarting about being severely punished for



piously visiting al-Husayn's shrine, is bitter. God must be just towards this woman whose Turkish conceit she has managed to swallow. Hoping that Ahmad will return from his revelings in time to catch the couple, Amina fearfully summarizes what has happened—and immediately castigates herself for not covering up as she usually does. Ahmad lays down the law: submit to his rules or get out. Zaynab is speechless, but considers how many unaccustomed restrictions on her freedom she has already endured. Yasin is ordered to control his wife as Islam demands. He is too drunk to follow the speeches, but relieved not to have been banished from the house. The storm is clearly only gathering.

Chapter 47 shifts to Khadija's wedding, but makes clear that Zaynab holds grudges against Ahmad's rules. Mahfouz shows only the dressing of the bride before she leaves her home. As she is marrying a Shawkat, it can be assumed that the celebration will be lavish. Kamal is assured that he can visit his sisters, but has seen Aisha change so radically that he has little desire. Khadija wants her brothers to have a final good-natured sibling war of words, but all—except Zaynab—are sorry to see her leave. The chapter ends with a surprisingly touching moment as Ahmad blesses his daughter and praises his wife. Khadija's wedding day coincides with Armistice Day, ending World War I, 11 Nov. 1918 and with the death of Umm Maryam's paralyzed husband. The latter will free Ahmad to pursue an affair according to his rules of honor, while the former will plunge the family into the bloody furor of the nationalist uprising.

Chapter 48 begins describing the revolutionary fervor gripping Egypt, setting it within the Abd al-Jawad family's coffee hour, which, deprived of Khadija's sarcasm, is as bland as unsalted food. Mahfouz deftly delivers a history lesson, summarizing the leaders, Sa'd Zaghlul, Abd al-Aziz Fahmy, and Ali Sha'rawi, who have boldly asked for an end to the British Protectorate and permission to go to London to present their case. Muhammad Farid, already enduring exile for years, is also mentioned, as is "Our Exiled Effendi," the Khedive Abbas II. Zaghlul becomes symbolic of the entire nationalist movement in the chapters ahead, but the other names crop up at times. Yasin is interested but uncommitted, Fahmy is catching fire and frustrated that others are not, and Amina shows the kind of interest that she does in Kamal's suras. She has heard about Queen Victoria and is sure that her mother's heart will not allow violence. Losing patience, Fahmy points out that Victoria is long deceased. Chapter 49 completes the picture of where family members stand on independence. Since his youth, Ahmad has considered himself a patriot and gives generous monetary support to patriotic movements. He signs a petition supporting the current nationalist leaders, but is not willing to waste precious time on political rallies. Politics is an interesting topic during his nightly round of parties.

Chapter 50 has Yasin and Fahmy discussing marriage. Yasin has had to abandon Ali's Coffee Shop after breaking up with Zanuba and frequents the same one that Fahmy and his fellow students use. It is built underground and seems perfect for clandestine political talks. Yasin's entire premise is that one cannot understand marriage without experiencing it from inside. Fahmy thus has no grounds to criticize, although his brother's views and lifestyle anger him. He wants not to have their father's lifestyle dragged into the discussion. Yasin appeals to the Qur'an for having multiple wives, still has qualms about adultery being worse than fornication, and refers to their oft-married

grandfather. The bottom line is that Yasin craves sexual variety and is determined to have it.



# Chapters 51-57

## Chapters 51-57 Summary

Umm Maryam visits Ahmad at his store, as he has anticipated. She is flirtatious but reminds him of his past coolness. Ahmad thinks about having spared Fahmy a wanton wife like Umm Maryam, who must have been finding satisfaction during her husband's paralysis. That would be hereditary—fine for a "skirt-chaser" but not for a husband. Ahmad loses respect for her as his lust grows. Knowing that Umm Maryam is conquered, Ahmad thinks about how to break off peacefully with Zubayda.

In Chapter 52 Fahmy is obsessed with nationalism, using political texts for Kamal's dictation and reading aloud a handbill containing a letter from the Wafd Delegation to the Sultan, asking him to be as vigorous in protesting British denial of Egypt's rights before the Versailles Peace Conference as the prominent ministers who have resigned in protest. The Nation is united in its desire for freedom, so the Sovereign must act. When Fahmy announces that he is distributing this document, illegal under martial law, Amina protests the danger. He tries to explain why foreign occupation is wrong, but she sees no interference in their religion and wants Fahmy to let high officials handle matters. Not yet an adult, Fahmy should not be tempted like this in school.

Chapter 53 sees Ahmad's circle reacting to the leaders' arrest and imposition of martial law. Only late at night do they drink to lighten their sorrow. The family coffee hour deals with the same events, as Yasin and Fahmy differ bitterly and Kamal, finding Malta on a map, pictures the exiles' steadfast behavior. The older brothers go together for Ahmad Abduh's, for different reasons. Chapter 54 shows Fahmy awakening to normal morning sounds and contemplates how life and death both serve hope. He recalls the campus uproar, the first strikes, and spontaneous mass demonstration. Fahmy's spirit soars, but as the first martyrs fall to English bullets, he hides and goes home hating himself. In the following days he is braver. Getting out of bed, Fahmy wonders how his despotic father and tender mother will take his new resolve.

Chapter 55 focuses on how the revolution changes Kamal's life. Umm Hanafi chaperons him to and from school. Only the youngest third fail to strike. Kamal daydreams about Fahmy's "heroes" and is bewildered by the issues and his family's diverse reactions. When strikers break down the schoolroom door, Kamal is dragged along until he takes refuge in Uncle Hamdan's store. Kamal listens closely to the passing waves of people. He wonders if he should tell his mother about the gunfire. When it is safe, Kamal heads home, encounters Fahmy hiding, promises not to mention this, and is terrified to see puddles of blood "in the sacred precincts of al-Husayn.

Chapter 56 finds troop encampments pitched opposite the Abd al-Jawad's doorstep and at al-Nahhasin and al-Khurunfush. Fahmy decides that they are to intimidate and stop demonstrations. Ahmad orders the house bolted for the day. Kamal is happy to stay home. Studying the soldiers out the window, he remarks that they are handsome, not



demonic. The brothers spend the morning on the roof, discussing tactics and martyrs' funerals. Yasin is surprised that Egyptians have such fighting spirit and is moved by a poem about women's demonstrations. Fahmy hopes that Zaghlul hears and draws comfort. In Chapter 57, Yasin comes down to read fiction and Fahmy to catch up on studies. Only Kamal has an appetite, the coffee hour is short and listless. Yasin wonders what he will do without his night out and realizes he is addicted. Zaynab asking why he is so inattentive makes Yasin think of other women's charms. The quarrel ends with Zaynab threatening to leave, not knowing that she is not permitted. Yasin returns to the roof, where he finds the maid Nur, grows excited, and entices her into her room. Zaynab catches them. Yasin knows that he is ruined. Nur wisely flees.

## Chapters 51-57 Analysis

Chapter 51 brings Umm Maryam to Ahmad's store to proposition him. He has known this is coming and plays along skillfully. Interestingly, he assumes that Maryam must also be driven by her passions and congratulates himself on sparing Fahmy a bad marriage. He contrasts the value of a wanton woman as lover and wife. Zubayda must go the way of Jalila and he hopes that she is satiated enough to accept his apologies. Note that Chapter 51 opens with a description of Palace Walk as looking like it always has. This is soon to change and Ahmad's tryst with his neighbor will put him in harm's way by the occupying British troops. Politics reverberates in the background as a reminder of the turn the novel is taking.

Chapter 52 present the next installment in the political scene, as the British authorities deny the Waqf Delegation ("waqf" designating from the times of the Prophet Muhammad endowments of property for the public interest, largely marginalized by the nineteenth century) from making Egypt's case before the Versailles Peace Conference, the courageous stand taken by Prime Minister Husayn Rushdi and Adli Yeken, and Sultan Ahmad Fuad's reluctance to get involved (his willingness to collaborate with the occupiers having been mentioned in passing at the opening of the novel). Fahmy is inflamed by the situation and admits to distributing handbills, an act illegal once martial law is invoked. Amina is concerned for his safety, insisting he is not yet an adult, able to make such life-and-death decisions. She is diverted when her daughter-in-law makes an attempt to side with her, which, in Amina's mind, casts aspersions on the religious establishment. Recall that her grandfather and father are religious scholars. The conflict that carries through the second half of the novel is established. The role of "despicable mosque student[s]" in the turmoil is soon played out in he family's lives.

Chapter 53 continues examining the worsening situation from two perspectives. Ahmad and his comrades at their nightly outing hear multiple accounts of Zaghlul's exile and despair that Egypt can be saved, except by God's intervention. At the family coffee hour, Fahmy grows increasingly obsessed, antagonizing his wife. The older Amina is able to put the matter in context, recalling the same events of her youth that stir in Ahmad's heart. The last revolt had resulted in exile, so the very word carries strong connotations for the older generation. Nevertheless, the male temperament is obliquely critiqued. Kamal provides comic relief, proudly finding Malta (the rebels' place of exile) on a map,



but is not able to work it into the adult conversation. In an earlier scene, he had explained to his mother where and what London is. Zaynab uses facial expressions to suggest that Yasin ought not to go carousing that night, as a sign of his patriotism, but he is yearning and leaves with his brother, whose need is to meet with fellow political zealots.

Chapter 54 hearkens back to the early chapters, when the slapping of bread dough serves as the Abd al-Jawad family alarm clock. Although everything seems normal, Egypt has been turned upside down. Fahmy mulls over the beginning of the general strike and mass demonstrations, philosophizing about how life and death both serve the purpose of hope. During the first British gunfire, Fahmy hides and later regrets his cowardice. Mahfouz captures the sights, sounds, and emotions of revolution brilliantly. Fahmy is dedicating himself to the cause of liberation. As he gets out of bed, following the meditation, Fahmy finds comfort in his mother's routines. Unwittingly, Amina has dedicated her life to preparing a revolutionary. Fahmy knows that his activities place him in danger, but decides that "faith is stronger than death, and death is nobler than ignominy." Everything is up to God.

Chapter 55 examines young Kamal's view of the revolution: the confusing slogans, days of having to go to school under Umm Hanafi's supervision but having no lessons taught, watching the older students who normally oppress him go out on strike and be hailed as heroes. Finally, university students liberate the school and Kamal is dragged into the stream of protest. He hears gunshots for the first time and sees spilled blood. He meets Fahmy but is sworn to secrecy. This comes back later in the novel.

Chapter 56 pictures the British troop encampments going up to intimidate the citizenry and respond rapidly to demonstrations. The women panic while the men generally see no danger except to militants. Ahmad for the first time takes breakfast with his family and orders no one to leave the house. He is afraid but masks it behind paternal authority. Kamal, destined to establish ties with the enemy, observes that they stack rifles in pyramid shapes and have handsome faces. This becomes a recurrent motif. Fahmy quotes a poem by Hafiz Ibrahim about beautiful Egyptian women dressed in black protesting outside Zaghlul's home. Yasin the litterateur, having taken an oblique swipe at Egyptian bravery, wishes he had memorized it; Fahmy hopes that Zaghlul hears of the uprising in Malta and does not despair.

Chapter 57 largely concentrates on Yasin enduring the pressure of enforced idleness. His enjoyment of popular literature has been mentioned before in passing, but here he is shown trying to read Jurji Zaydan's Maiden of Karbala and the medieval poetry anthology al-Hamasa. He grows easily bored while reading. He is shown also to be a meticulous letter writer, but with limited skills in Arabic. The household is pictured at lunch and coffee hour is listless. Yasin and Zaynab fight as she challenges why he must go out and carouse every night and why he cannot be content with her even when blockaded in the house. Yasin wants to be a noble husband but can never react properly. He stalks off to the roof, where for the second time he tries to rape a servant. Nur's refrain throughout the assault is "Shame on you, master," which he blithely ignores. He tries rather comically to hide in a corner when Zaynab comes looking for



Nur, is discovered, and knows his fate is sealed. Initially there is none of the drama of Umm Hanafi's screaming and Ahmad's intervention. Zaynab and Nur each simply walk away. Zaynab has mentioned leaving Yasin. Whether he can restrain her as he believes is now the vital question.



# Chapters 58-64

## Chapters 58-64 Summary

Early next morning, the district shaykh declares that Ahmad must open his store and the menfolk return to work or school. It is a relief after the terrible, scandal-ridden night of Zaynab telling the story and demanding revenge. She sleeps in the parlor and demands to leave the tyrannical house. Ahmad wants her to overlook the mistake or at least consider taking Yasin back, repentant, at a later time. Zaynab has been telling her mother everything and trying to be patient, but this is the last straw. The night before, Ahmad had stormed to the roof to confront Yasin, using silence and then insults as weapons, calling him a disgrace, a defiler of his home. Ahmad fails to recall his own actions or allow others the liberties he allows himself. In order not to admit that Yasin disobeys him, Ahmad invents excuses. Ahmad has no sympathy for Zaynab, whom he considers neither a good daughter nor wife and needs to be punished for her screaming. Ahmad congratulates himself on not wallowing in mud like Yasin and contemplates their differing temperaments and tastes. In the morning, Ahmad decides to reconcile the couple. Fahmy is left guessing what has happened, and Amina avoids the "incident." She discovers that Zaynab has left the house.

In Chapter 59, Fahmy dreams of leading like Joan of Arc and winning Maryam. Amina has told him about Zaynab when Yasin enters, pleased at having been treated courteously by a British soldier. When Amina delivers the news, Yasin declares that contemporary girls unable to get along with people. He fears conflicts between Ahmad and Iffat. Zaynab is a bitch for causing scandal. Umm Hanafi's screaming outside diverts them. Kamal stands, singing, in a circle of soldiers. Afterwards, he and Umm Hanafi tell of being chased, Kamal receiving chocolate, and many questions. Kamal demands that they "bring back Sa'd Pasha." The soldiers' questions about girls in the house fans Fahmy's anger, as does Kamal's declaration that the soldiers look like Aisha. He declares Kamal a traitor.

Chapter 60 brings Iffat to Ahmad's store demanding an immediate divorce. Ahmad tries to calm him, but Iffat insists that the situation does not impinge on their friendship; Zaynab had look been heartbroken before the incident with Nur. Ahmad is shocked to learn that Yasin gets drunk every night. He tries to make Yasin's behavior sound typical of youth, but Iffat insists that Yasin is unfit to be Zaynab's husband. Both men's rage rises, but Iffat insists on immediate action. Both know that Ahmad has the final say. He reluctantly agrees and they part peacefully. Ahmad is furious at Yasin for disappointing all of his hopes. Yasin is too weak to tame a wife, reckless, and unable to save himself. Ahmad consoles himself that Yasin is not like him. When Ahmad tells Yasin his decision, Yasin is angry and humiliated but accepts his father's decision, just as he had accepted Ahmad's decision for him to marry. He considers declaring that he is no longer a child, but keeps silent.



In Chapter 61 Ahmad and sons attend the Friday prayer service, despite Amina's concerns. During the sermon, Ahmad feels singled out by the preacher's call to repentance. After prayers, a young theology student from al-Azhar loudly proclaims Yasin a spy. Ahmad angrily defends his son, but the crowd grows menacing. A young effendi (noble) intervenes, declares Fahmy a fellow freedom fighter, and the mob disburses. Chapter 62 shows Ahmad, relieved but angry at the humiliation he has suffered. "Haniya's son" causes him nothing but trouble and is useless in battle. Ahmad questions Fahmy about his political involvement, hears him downplay danger, and forbids involvement. Fahmy dares argue, but is silenced. Unable to swear obedience on the Qur'an, Fahmy flees his father's presence.

In Chapter 63 Yasin learns that his mother is dying and wants to see him. Heading to the old neighborhood, Yasin contemplates death and mourning. He fears the moment of meeting, how Haniya will react, how he will treat the husband. Feeble Haniya is grateful to see Yasin, who becomes a child again. She talks of her bad luck in life and hope in God's mercy, but stops short of a confession. Yasin grows uncomfortable and both feel awkward. She asks if he is married and is sorry to hear about his divorce. Yasin dismisses it as fate and urges her to forget the past. When he says he loves her, Haniya looks peaceful and falls asleep. After sitting with her a while, Yasin grows angry at the thought of her last husband and leaves for Costaki's. When he comes home at midnight, Amina tells him of his mother's death.

Chapter 64 finds Kamal making friends with the soldiers, despite the family's pleas. He visits them daily, prays for them when they go out on call, examines everything he can, and becomes a regular at "tea queue." Kamal builds a miniature camp on the roof and cannot decide which side should win in battle. Kamal's favorite soldier is sensitive Julian, who nonetheless dislikes talk about freeing Zaghlul. One soldier draws a caricature of Kamal, which Fahmy calls insulting; Kamal realizes that Fahmy wants to separate him from the British. Kamal catches Julian waving to smiling Maryam and refuses to take her a gift. The family is shocked at such shamelessness, and Fahmy alone believes Kamal. Yasin angers Amina by insisting that no one else lives by such strict standards as they; Maryam has probably always been a flirt. Fahmy flees to think about all that has been said.

## Chapters 58-64 Analysis

Chapter 58 continues the aftermath of the "incident." Zaynab, having been shown quietly leaving the roof, is shown to have raised the roof indoors, intending to confront Ahmad with proof of his son's transgressions. This is turned by both Ahmad and Amina into a greater crime than trying to rape Nur. Zaynab is not to demand greater rights than the repressed women of the household. It proves that she is not worthy of her lax father or of her husband. Ahmad has to find some way of interpreting events so that Yasin is not guilty of disobeying him after the Umm Hanafi incident. He needs this to maintain his authority and pride. When considering in passing how alike he and Yasin are in needing outside sex and alcohol, Ahmad prides himself on having good taste: the atmosphere must be artistic and alluring and the women are certainly not ugly servant women.



Amina is also judgmental of Zaynab and considers herself a far better wife than this ranting woman. Worst of all, from such a communal perspective, Zaynab simply leaves the house.

Chapter 59 interlaces Yasin's developing story with the menace of the British encampment opposite the door. Fahmy has guessed what has happened, and Amina is loath to say more than the bare outline. Yasin comes home, unaware that Zaynab has fled—life in a pre-cellphone era often shocks—feeling good about an encounter with a civilized British soldier. Yasin's good mood makes Amina's news all the worse. He wants to blame the others for not preventing Zaynab's departure but settles on blaming Zaynab for being uncontrollable. It sounds like the backlash against feminism in the 1960s/70s. There is an abrupt shift, as the family hurries to the window to see Kamal apparently endangered by the British troops. It looks like they will use him as a soccer ball, but as time passes, it appears only that they want to hear him sing. Kamal takes care to give a flawless performance. Umm Hanafi, whose shrieking had alerted the family, tells of the soldiers chasing him through the streets and causing him great fear. After putting up a brave front, Kamal admits to his family that he had been scared.

Kamal tells of how the soldiers speak a strange kind of Arabic, which he imitates. The modern Egyptian dialect differs considerably from the Arabic spoken in Palestine and Mesopotamia (Iraq), the regions of most interest to the British at the time of this novel. When Amina prays that there will be no residual effects of Kamal's fear, revealing yet another Arab superstition, Fahmy notes wryly that the chocolate, which the soldiers have given Kamal, is an excellent charm. More ominously, the British ask him if there are girls living in his home. He says that his sisters have married and left. Looking forward, expect to see Kamal often among the British and boldly repeating his demand that Zaghul be freed, Yasin somewhat in awe of their superior culture, and Fahmy dead-set against them in every way. The soldiers will continue looking for neighborhood girls with whom to flirt.

Chapter 60 shows the confrontation between the old friends over the mess that their children have made of their arranged marriage. Iffat demands that his daughter's honor and reputation be maintained. Ahmad believes her to be the major problem, for she refuses to kowtow like a proper wife. He admits that Yasin has made mistakes, but chalks them up to youth and suggests that he and Iffat, in their fifties, are still subject to such passions. Iffat insists that making love with ladies and raping black maids—there is a definite racial bias in relating to Nur—are categorically different. Ahmad considers the decision over divorce his alone and, sad that his skills as a mediator have failed, gives in. In Islam, an attempt at reconciliation is required between the initiation of divorce and its completion. Shiites and Sunnis differ in practice. Husband and wife may marry and divorce three times before they must remain apart forever. The possibility of a temporary divorce to let passions cool is floated. Note that had this been Ahmad's intention when getting free of Haniya, but she had wanted no second chance. At the end of the chapter, Yasin is filled with accusations to hurl at his father, but stays silent and meek.



Chapter 61 pictures the Abd al-Jawad males going to Friday prayer services. These are obligatory for healthy Muslim males and optional for females. The family has stayed away for some time, fearing the British troops on their street. The service consists of a sermon and ritual prayers. Mahfouz shows the characters' various attitudes towards repentance. Ahmad and Yasin both realize that their decadent lives require repentance, but are unwilling to give up their pleasures short of their death beds. Both depend on God's vast compassion and mercy. at the mosque. During the sermon, Ahmad prays for Yasin's reform and feels singled out by the preacher's call to repentance—as forcefully as once by Shaykh Mutawalli. Ahmad relieves anxiety by concentrating on religious duties and good deeds. Yasin does as he wants, counting on God not to condemn a Muslim for lapses that harm no one. He takes life as it comes. He watches his father pray, wondering if he knows that he is a hypocrite.

Young Kamal, who has just started attending services, sees it as putting him on a par with his brothers and father. He prays devoutly, imitating the grown-up's every posture and gesture, but prays better at home, undistracted. Fahmy has always enjoyed going to services. It is emphasized that Fahmy has read Muhammad Abduh and his followers. Abduh is an influential nineteenth-century Egyptian theologian, reformer, and nationalist. This mention helps clarify Fahmy's worldview. As a sidelight, Yasin contemplates the significance of the fiery preacher being a secret pedophile.

The confrontation with the young shaykh from al-Azhar University shows the family in a deadly situation. Al-Azhar is the Muslim world's premier center of learning. Having seen Yasin talk to British soldiers, the unnamed seminarian assumes that he is a traitor and within moments has a mob prepared to tear him apart. Fahmy points out that this is circumstantial evidence, but is ignored. Ahmad rallies to his son's defense, verbally and physically. An unknown effendi comes to their rescue, declaring that Fahmy is part of the resistance. This mysterious figure reappears at the end of the novel.

Chapter 62 examines Ahmad's ongoing reaction to the assault. More than ever he sees Yasin as worthless and troublesome, but he is more concerned about Fahmy's part in the revolution. Having heard himself proclaimed a freedom fighter, Fahmy knows that he will be summoned to explain. He is performing actions illegal under martial law, but tries to downplay his involvement and the circumstances. Ahmad supports the goals and actions of the revolution—but only outside his own household. He demands Fahmy end his involvement, but Fahmy is caught up in the spirit of patriotism and cannot. He decides to fall back on dissimulation—covering up his good intentions. He reviews in his mind various times when family members have done likewise. Believing he has gotten away with it, Fahmy is shocked when Ahmad pulls out a Qur'an and demands he swear on it. Fahmy gives an eloquent case for not denying the martyrs, while assuring his father that he is in no physical danger. Note that for the first time Fahmy tries to argue rationally with his father, but is silenced. Ahmad, of course, wants only to be obeyed.

Chapter 63 is devoted to Haniya's death. Yasin returns to the old house, determined not to fight with his mother and unsure what his reception will be, even though she has sent word for him to come. The sights of his childhood again torment him, but his mother is again relieved to see him. He reflects on her physical weakness, portrayed in multiple



figures of speech. He also contemplates death and grieving, particularly in a time when the martyrs are falling and being buried regularly. Life must go on. Haniya describes the course of her disease (malaria) and treatments, which have not availed. She tries not to mention the husband whom she knows Yasin hates. They talk briefly and eliptically of Yasin's marriage and divorce, and agree to let the past rest. Seeing the husband's water pipe and picturing him smoking it drives Yasin angrily from the house and to the bar. Thus he is not by his mother's side when she expires. Amina breaks the news, praying that he will have a long life. Haniya in her final day had not been so charitable towards Amina.

Chapter 64 shifts to watch Kamal happily visiting the British encampment daily. Even Fahmy is reconciled to his activities. The atmosphere changes when Kamal catches his favorite soldier, Julian, flirting with Maryam and watches her flee when she realizes that she has been caught. He refuses to take her a gift. The family discusses this development. It is noted that not even fault-finding Khadija has ever criticized Maryam's behavior and Maryam's mother is declared a paragon of virtue. This has already been disproven by her visit to Ahmad's store, but this is unknown to the family. Soon it will prove a major plot point. Fahmy has been too busy to think of Maryam, but now the pain floods back. He alone can find no reason why Kamal would make up the story. Yasin seems to relish the story.



# Chapters 65-71

## Chapters 65-71 Summary

Sneaking out of Umm Maryam's house after midnight, Ahmad is arrested and force-marched to Bab al-Futuh and order to join in filling a trench dug by terrorists. All work hard, hoping to live. Ahmad works beside a drinking buddy, Ghunaym Hamidu. Ahmad curses the foolish revolutionaries. Soon voiding his bladder becomes more urgent than getting the British out of Egypt. Chapter 66 shows a stream of friends visiting Ahmad to hear his horrifying story. He finds humor in his sufferings and treats Khadija and Aisha with rare tenderness. The siblings banter about Kamal's friendship with the troops, Yasin's inheritance from his mother and the sincerity of his mourning, the girls' mother-in-law, Zaynab and her unborn child's fate, Khadija and Aisha's listless husbands, and their food cravings in pregnancy. Khadija tries to provoke Fahmy, but he is silent, which to Yasin is a sign that Fahmy is a saint.

Chapter 67 shows Ahmad happy in his store, as people talk about current events. He wonders why God would let his people's blood flow and worries about Fahmy. Shaykh Mutawalli visits and is amazed to hear of Fahmy's rebellion. Ahmad tells how one of Fahmy's close friends is slain and his family's grief. Mutawalli curses the British for atrocities that he details. Through Ahmad, Mutawalli advises Fahmy to leave things in God's hands.

In Chapter 68, when Aisha goes into labor, Amina rushes to her side, while Umm Hanafi resents being left out. The boys are excited about becoming uncles. Kamal wants to skip school and be present for the birth, but is forbidden. Racing over after school, he avoids his father and other men, and runs into Khalil in the sitting room. Before he can be sent away, he hears Aisha's tortured yells and trembles. He recalls seeing a cat give birth. Soon news of the birth spreads, but Khalil is concerned and wants to call a doctor. Widow Shawkat tries to assure everyone. Ahmad grieves silently for his daughter's pain and hopes it affects Fahmy. The doctor finds Aisha fine but the baby girl liable to die of a weak heart by morning. All is in God's hands. Khalil orders the news withheld from Aisha.

In Chapter 69 Cairo erupts in joy as Zaghlul is freed. Ahmad is deeply moved. The British are said to be striking their camps. Ahmad orders Zaghlul's portrait hung prominently beneath his "In the Name of God" calligraphy, sure that the "era of fear and bloodshed" is gone forever. Ahmad asks God's mercy on the martyrs and thanks him for sparing Fahmy. The whole family is filled with joy. Fahmy is sure that 7 Apr. 1919 is a historic date. Yasin comes in, elated after walking in a happy demonstration. He loves life and peace above country. Kamal talks about the younger students' participation and consigns the British to hell—while for a long time recalling his British friends. Amina's attitude is not sufficiently patriotic for Fahmy's taste, but she cannot see how any mother would rejoice over her son's death. Fahmy reveals to her how he has faced death in



demonstrations. She can only pray for his forgiveness. Kamal throws in having met Fahmy on the street, but Yasin calms Amina: all has turned out well.

Chapter 70 sees Fahmy thinking about how to make up with his father. Victory should reconcile them. Ahmad ignores him at first and rejects his apology. Fahmy recognizes sarcasm as the first step in forgiveness in his father and tries to work up a lawyer's defense. Instead, he says only that he had not intended to disobey Ahmad. Ahmad is impressed with the eloquence but cannot let his mask down. In the end, he offers a bit of conciliation and Fahmy leaves the house happy. He has been assigned a minor role in crowd control for a massive rally. He longs for a heroic part, but is happy to do his duty. He is proud to be recognized as a council member and tries to look the part. One day he will be a great leader and orator. As the enormous parade moves, Fahmy leads chants as his group packs into Ezbekiya Garden. Fahmy is amazed to hear a gunshot at this sanctioned event. There are more. People scatter. Fahmy is about to flee when he goes limp and falls into nothingness.

Chapter 71 shows Ahmad learning of Fahmy's martyrdom from a solemn delegation led by the effendi who had defended them at the mosque. Their fine words fall on deaf ears. Fahmy will receive a funeral procession with thirteen fellow martyrs. Ahmad pictures people swarming to his house, reprimands himself for fighting with Fahmy, and worries about telling Amina. She and Yasin and Kamal must be wondering why Fahmy is late for coffee hour. Reaching his door, Ahmad hears Kamal singing melodiously.

## Chapters 65-71 Analysis

Ahmad and an army of men are arrested to fill in a trench dug by saboteurs. Ahmad prays, although he realizes that in his ritually unclean state—having drunk and committed adultery with Umm Maryam—his prayers are ineffectual. All of the arrestees work hard, hoping that this will spare their lives. Ahmad recalls the "Battle of the Trench," when the Prophet Muhammad digs alongside his men. The faithful fight new pagans: British Christians. That Islam does not consider Christians pagans is immaterial in Ahmad's fury. The chapter ends with Ahmad needing to urinate far more urgently than he needs the British to leave Egypt. He wants them, however, off his street.

Chapter 66 uses the miracle of Ahmad's survival to gather family and friends. Amina is busy seeing to refreshments, but the siblings enjoy a free-wheeling, at times delightful, conversation about all that has gone and is going on in their lives. Khadija's comments are inevitably barbed and everyone except Fahmy is quite candid and emotional. Mahfouz briskly reveals the status of Yasin's estate (defrauded, Yasin claims, of money and jewels by the greedy widower), the state of Khadija, Aisha, and Zaynab's pregnancies (allowing a humorous aside as Kamal tries to get someone to explain pregnancy to him better than his school teachers have), the restoration of Ahmad and Iffat's friendship, and many minor details of daily life. Talk inevitably turns to Maryam's flirtation, which Khadija claims to have foreseen. Fahmy wants to change the subject; he still yearns for her. No one mentions Umm Maryam, showing that Ahmad has kept





the circumstances of his arrest secret. Withdrawn Fahmy is called a saint, prefiguring his approaching martyrdom.

Chapter 67 bring fiery Shaykh Mutawalli back to Ahmad's store, offering violent prayers against the British and describing rather graphically several recent atrocities: Bulaq and Asyut, al-Aziziya and Badrashin. They also discuss the tragedy end of a promising young life, a friend of Fahmy's, and the impact on his family. Such things are happening everywhere and making no impression on the colonial power. The chapter ends with a most confusing quotation from Qur'an 30.2-3 about "God-fearing" Byzantines being victorious after defeat and not "friends of the pagans." Again, it would seem that the British are considered pagans, albeit Christians. The sensation that Fahmy is in mortal danger grows heavily.

Chapter 68 depicts Aisha's labor and the delivery of a sickly daughter. Umm Hanafi recalls losing her son at birth and is angry not to be at Aisha's side. Kamal is the agent for describing the scene: menfolk talking solemnly, father-to-be worrying outside the birthing room, and the womenfolk helping inside. When Kamal first mentions wanting to see the birth, his brother tell him that is probably not true and he should wait until his own wife is in the situation. A servant tells Ibrahim as the eldest male that the news is good by declaring "Praise to God." Greater hoopla would have attended the birth of a boy. Ibrahim informs the other males. The father worries about the baby and fetches a doctor, leaving all to believe that it is Aisha in danger. When that proves not the case, Ahmad castigates his foolish son-in-law for letting a strange male come "face to face with her womb." They keep the baby's dim prognosis from the mother.

Chapter 69 pictures the celebration that breaks out when Britain backs down and releases the prisoners. Ahmad at his store and the family in the home are both relieved at what is seen as a major Muslim victory. Fahmy's participation in deadly demonstrations comes out, dampening the mood. Amina had believed that he was not in harm's way and is deeply hurt. Yasin tries tactfully to get them past the shock and to savor the day. The feeling is that no more blood will be shed.

Chapter 70 describes in rich detail a mass demonstration sanctioned by the British allowing the Egyptians peacefully to celebrate and hail their freed hero. Before it, Fahmy tries to make peace with his father, who is impressed with his eloquence but cannot give in. Being caught up in the crowd brings ecstasy. Fahmy thinks about future fame, his parents' attitude, and how Maryam is now a thing of the past. Shots ring out, the crowd panics, and Fahmy's last moments of life are portrayed in a confusing kaleidoscope of sounds and images, ending with a "calm, smiling sky with peace raining from it."

Chapter 71 concludes the novel by showing Ahmad receiving news of Fahmy's death. He is in shock. It is explained that renegade soldiers regrettably opened fire. Fourteen citizens are killed and are to be buried en mass as martyrs. The family will not be allowed a separate funeral, but may view the body beforehand. Ahmad decides unilaterally not to allow Amina to attend. The novel ends with Kamal singing a song he learns from the British. It concludes enigmatically with "it's wrong to abandon people forever." There is no loud lamentation, so it appears word has not reached them.



# Characters

## Ahmad Abd al-Jawad

The novel's central character, but hardly a protagonist, Ahmad is a prosperous forty-five-year-old merchant who runs his family as an old-style patriarchal tyrant, demanding total obedience from his wife and children while allowing himself pleasures forbidden by Islam: music, wine, and sexual promiscuity. Tall, with a massive, firm belly, and holding himself with awesome dignity, Ahmad has an expressive, long face, firm skin, clean-cut features, wide, blue eyes, and a large but proportioned nose. His lips are full and he twists up the ends of his thick, black mustache with care. He wears a fez, cloak, caftan, a large diamond ring, and gold watch all demonstrate good taste and wealth, and walks with a walking stick. He has black hair and dresses to demonstrate refinement and affluence.

Ahmad is a true Jekyll and Hyde character. A lover observes: "On the outside you are dignified and pious, but inside you're licentious and debauched." He ends his first marriage to Haniya when she refuses to obey him. In the first year of his second marriage, when Amina criticizes Ahmad's nocturnal wanderings, he declares, "I am a man. The matter is settled; I will not accept any comments on my behavior. You must obey me and take care not to compel me to discipline you." When Amina ventures out on a pilgrimage while he is on a business trip and is struck by a car, Ahmad sends her home to her mother, damning the family dishonor that she has caused.

Ahmad considers fathering girls "an evil against which we are defenseless," and looks forward to being relieved of the burden of protecting them when he gives them away in marriage. He is also overprotective of his sons. With customers, male friends, and mistresses, however, Ahmad displays wit and charm, and he does not see his behavior as hypocritical. He savors time with his friends, the popularity he enjoys because of his fine sense of humor, singing, laughter, and pretty girls. He is considered an expert on lyrics and tunes. He is known on street as a gifted storyteller and is proud of to receive tokens of people's love, respect, and honor. People vie for his friendship.

In religious matters, Ahmad prays with attention rather than rote recitation. He is not at all introspective. He has an adolescent's zest for life and encompasses many "mutually contradictory elements" in his life, primarily simultaneous piety and depravity, without "hypocritical rationalization." Ahmad's faith is deep. He has no room for innovation or blind ritualism. He loves prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, which he sees as the key to his salvation. He puts off repentance until his deathbed. Recalling how his father's multiple marriages have diminished his inheritance, Ahmad does not exercise his right to have multiple wives. Since his youth, Ahmad has considered himself a patriot and gives generous monetary support to patriotic movements. He signs a petition supporting the current nationalist leaders, but is not willing to waste precious time on political rallies. Politics is an interesting topic during his nightly round of parties.



## Amina (Umm Fahmy)

The wife of Ahmad Abd al-Jawad, Amina is in her forties, of medium build and slender, with long chestnut-colored hair, dutifully veiled. She has soft skin, an oblong face, a high forehead, and delicate features. Her small, beautiful eyes give her a sweet, dreamy look. Her nose is small, flaring at the nostrils. She has tender lips, a tapered chin, and a black beauty on her cheek. She is the model of a Muslim wife, obedient and quiet.

With a servant and a private bath, Amina has no need to leave the house, and Ahmad forbids her to show her veil in public. She is the daughter and granddaughter of religious scholars, priding herself on her father being a graduate of al-Azhar Mosque University, who has given her a modicum of religious learning, which she augments by reviewing her youngest son Kamal's lessons. She is hungry for any news of the outside world and shares it with her secluded daughters. Boredom is an irrelevant concept for a life as monotonous as hers. Rarely in twenty-five years of married life is she allowed to visit her mother, chaperoned by Ahmad who, by contrast, goes out every night and often does not return until dawn.

Amina's greatest trial comes when Ahmed takes a business trip and she listens to her children's urging that she make a long-desired pilgrimage to the Shrine of the Martyr al-Husayn, a few blocks away. Kamal accompanies her for this soul-satisfying experience. On the way home, Amina is sideswiped by a car and suffers a broken collar bone. She waves away the police but submits to a humiliating doctor's examination. The children urge her to say that she slips on the stairs, but she cannot lie to Ahmad. He is caring during her recovery but then upbraids her for disobedience and exiles her from the house. Broken, she takes refuge with her mother, hoping that she will not have to wait long for forgiveness. Her boys visit her regularly and eventually bring her home.

Amina prides herself on doing her wifely duty, awakening at midnight to greet Ahmad's drunken return and to help him dress for bed. She marries at age fourteen and after her inlaws die believes superstitiously that the big house is haunted. She recites suras from the Qur'an when patrolling the dark rooms. Her fear of jinns inspires her to complain about Ahmad staying out all night. Early in the marriage, he puts her in her place: she may not comment on his behavior, but must obey in order to avoid discipline. When her children are young, the feat of jinn (spirits) is even greater. Various lessons help her learn to avoid arousing Ahmad's anger. She represses resentment over his behavior, feigning ignorance and grief so intensely that she behaves almost willfully ignorant of the whole matter.

Amina is nicknamed "The Bee" by neighborhood women for her "incessant perseverance and energy." She supervises and inspects all household chores, but reserves to herself caring for the pigeons and chickens on the roof. She loves all of God's creatures—and even some inanimate objects that might praise God. Stepson Yasin's marriage to Zaynab changes Amina's personality. Within a month, "Amina's pure, devout soul was soiled by rancor and resentment after a lifetime of earnestness, discipline, and fatigue during which her heart had known nothing but obedience,



forgiveness, and serenity." During the revolution, Amina fears for her family's safety, particular Fahmy's as he passes out illegal handbills. She believes her husband when he claims that Fahmy is stopping that foolishness. Only after peace is restored does she learn that Fahmy has been a minor leader in the uprising, constantly in mortal danger. The novel closes with Ahmad learning of Fahmy's death and wondering how he can break the news to Amina.

## Yasin Ahmad Abd al-Jawad

Ahmad's only child from a first marriage to Haniya, Yasin, age twenty-one, is not only good looking like his father but shares his taste for pleasures forbidden by Islam, particularly music, alcohol, and prostitutes, upon whom he spends much of his income. Yasin lives for nine years, pampered and uneducated, with his mother before being "transferred to his father's custody." He considers that his stepmother Amina "is all the mother I need." After receiving his primary certificate at the advanced age of nineteen, Yasin goes to work as a clerk in al-Nahhasin School. He enjoys reading poetry and good prose stories but has no interest in further education. He begins seeing a prostitute whose adoptive mother services his father. Yasin understands where his father goes at night and is glad that they have similar interests. His brother, Fahmy, by contrast, is shocked.

When Yasin attempts to rape the household servant, Ahmad marries him off to the daughter of his father's close friends to control his passion. Not long beyond the honeymoon, Yasin tires of Zaynab and finds her too liberated to put up with absolute submission. She is pregnant when Yasin attempts to rape her maid and Zaynab flees the repressive Abd al-Jawad home. Yasin has no choice but accept his father's decision to grant her a divorce.

When the Egyptian revolution begins, Yasin probably detests the English as all his countrymen do—brother Fahmy in particular—but deep inside he respects and venerates them so much that he frequently imagines that they are made from a different stuff than the rest of mankind. Yasin is overwhelmed when an Englishman actually speaks to him — and thanks him (for some matches he fetches). Later, this brief meeting puts him in considerable danger when a theology student accuses him of treason. Yasin can build up no enthusiasm for politics or religion. He practices the external rituals as required by his father, but lives to enjoy himself and puts his eternal fate in God's merciful hands. He lacks any introspection. Ahmad considers him no better than a woman and prides himself on never lowering himself to the level of raping servants when he goes looking for extracurricular excitement.

Twice Yasin is forced to confront his painful childhood. The first time is when word comes that his mother is remarrying. Worried about losing his inheritance, Yasin visits her, determined not to lose his temper. All the old memories return, and the reunion after eleven years ends badly. He cannot express his frustrations. Yasin visits her again on her deathbed and feels a measure of pity for her wasted life. He sits with her a while as she sleeps, but grows furious seeing her latest husband's water pipe. He flees, gets



drunk, and learns from Amina of her passing. Yasin claims to have forgiven his mother and visits her grave, but is troubled when the widower claims her money and jewels. Yasin ends the novel a land-owner, but still living under his father's roof under his rules.

## **Khadija Shawkat (née Abd al-Jawad)**

Ahmad and Amina's eldest daughter, Khadija most resembles her mother in energy and early rising. At age twenty when the book begins, Khadija is sharp-tongued, opinionated, and jealous of her beautiful younger sister, Aisha. Khadija is a flawless brunette, but her parents' features combine in her face somehow out of proportion. She is highly self-conscious of her large nose and her siblings never allow her to forget it. The family servant, Umm Hanafi, has plumped Khadija up nicely. Khadija's sarcasm is tempered by love within the family circle, but she is venomous describing outside acquaintances. She is intolerant of others, particularly Umm Hanafi.

Khadija acts as "second-in-command" to her mother in ordering the household. Catching Aisha watching a man on the street, Khadija is merciless in denouncing the moral lapse and suggesting father would want to know. Certain after the first time Ahmad rejects the idea of the younger daughter marrying first, Khadija endures an inspection by unknown women and is shocked when Aisha again gets the call. This time it cannot be rejected. Khadija tries valiantly to mask her jealousy behind nobility. When invited to sew Aisha's wedding dress, however, Khadija rises to the occasion. A short while later, Khadija's new brother-in-law asks for her hand and she joins her sister in the Shawkat household, living far more luxuriously and leisurely than in their father's home. Predictably, Khadija gets on less well with her mother-in-law than does Aisha.

## **Fahmy Ahmad Abd al-Jawad**

Ahmad and Amina's oldest son together, Fahmy is a serious, intelligent student attending the Cairo University Law School in Giza. He stays up late every night studying, but awakens early and easily, imagining being with his beloved, their next door neighbor Maryam Ridwan. When Fahmy asks his father's permission to become engaged, postponing marriage until he graduates and has a job, Fahmy, normally calm and steadfast, grows sad and anxious, and continues to hope that fate will yet bring them together. Fahmy represents police officer Hasan Ibrahim when Ibrahim wants to marry sister Aisha, but Ahmad also turns this down. Throughout the novel, Fahmy is his younger brother Kamal's tutor.

Fahmy alone in the family is skeptical towards incantations, charms, amulets, and amazing lives of the saints. He is faithful about attending Friday prayer service in the al-Husayn Mosque and has been enlightened by reading Muhammad Abduh. As revolution sweeps Egypt, Fahmy is elected a member of the Supreme Student Executive Committee, pledged to sacrificing himself for his country. He distributes handbills, which is a major crime under martial law. Fahmy refuses on moral principles to obey his father's order to cease political activities. He finds himself "motivated by the most



sublime and most hideous emotions: patriotism and a desire to kill and devastate" and gets caught up in the tumult. He ends up hating the British. When peace comes to Egypt, Fahmy tries to apologize to his father, but they part without a true reconciliation. Thoughts of a bright future in politics fill Fahmy's mind as he is gunned down in Ezbekia Garden during a sanctioned and supposedly peaceful demonstration. He receives a hero's funeral with his fellow martyrs.

## **Aisha Shawkat (née Abd al-Jawad)**

Ahmad and Amina's younger daughter, Aisha is at age 16 "the very picture of beauty," a daydreamer and more mellow than her older sister Khadija. She is blond and radiates "a halo of beauty and good looks," but is a little too thin to be desirable in Egyptian society. Khadija considers her a "useless personification of good looks and charm," mocking her as a would-be Munira al-Mahdiya (a famous singer/actress) As it is considered unseemly to marry off a younger daughter before the older, Aisha has already been refused permission to marry one suitor before the novel opens and is again disappointed when Fahmy presents the case for Police Officer Hasan Ibrahim, whom Aisha watches longingly as he walks his beat beneath their windows, Ahmad refuses on principle, even though he is a very good candidate. Aisha ends up being the first married when the rich Widow Shawkat offers her son Khalid and rejects Ahmad's silly rule even before he can speak it. Weeks later, Khadija marries Ibrahim Shawkat and the sisters are reunited. Being separated from Aisha devastates younger brother Kamal, who worships her. Rules and chores in the Shawkat household are lighter. Both become pregnant and Aisha gives birth after a difficult labor to a daughter with a damaged heart. Khalil orders the prognosis kept from Aisha.

## **Kamal Ahmad Abd al-Jawad**

Ahmad and Amina's youngest child, Kamal is an intelligent, playful ten-year-old as the novel opens, enrolled in the nearby Khali Agha School. His mother covers up some of his innocent pranks, for his father has no place for "innocent games or amusements." Kamal is cautious around his father, fearing corporeal punishment. "Son of a bitch" is the epithet that Ahmad reserves for Kamal. Kamal likes school, despite its tyrannical atmosphere, and is particularly fond of religion class. He avoids fighting whenever possible. On his way home from school, he buys candy, looks at a poster of an alluring woman smoking a cigarette, and then venerates the Martyr Husayn outside his shrine.

Kamal is not good looking like his brothers, but has a large head and sunken eyes. He is close with his mother and sisters, and upset by the prospect of Khadija and Aisha's getting married. Visiting them will not be the same as living with them, and having only brothers around is strange. Often feeling ignored, Kamal tells tall tales to get attention. When British troops set up camp opposite the Abd al-Jawad house, Kamal befriends them, much to brother Fahmy's disgust. He sings songs for them with the beautiful voice he inherits from his father, and joins in their tea queue. He frequently annoys the soldiers by demanding the release of the revolution's hero, Sa'd Zaghlul.



Whenever comic relief is needed, Kamal asks questions and makes observations.

## Amina's Mother

Never named in the novel, Amina's mother is a blind 75-year-old widow, proudly the daughter and granddaughter of religious scholars. She has struggled to remain independent despite her blindness, refusing to move in with her son-in-law. She does not want to give up the house full of memories. She spends her time worshiping God in a mixture of "true religion and pure superstition." She is known in her neighborhood as "the blessed shaykha." Only her black maid, Sadiqa, knows the lady's good and bad sides. She has a temper and assumes that Sadiqa is stealing and cheating her. Amina's mother takes her in when Ahmad banishes her from his house, counseling her that he will cool down. When word comes that Amina may return home, her mother advises that she go. Early in Amina's marriage, her mother tells her that no matter how badly Ahmad treats her, other men are worse.

## Jamil al-Hamzawi

The assistant in Ahmad Abd al-Jawad's store on al-Nahhasin St., al-Hamzawi is 50 years old. He begins in his position under Ahmad's late father. He is a loyal employee, appreciated by customers and friends. Jamil's son, Fuad, is a friend of Kamal Abd al-Jawad.

## Haniya

Yasin Abd al-Jawad's wealthy birth-mother, Haniya retains custody of the boy for nine years after Ahmad divorces her and takes the boy into his home. Haniya is "beautiful and full of feminine attractions" when she marries Ahmad, but sees no harm in visiting her father occasionally. Ahmad forbids it, scolds, beats, and finally divorces her until she regains her senses. She never does and it becomes permanent. Haniya is an affectionate, caring parent until she begins an affair with the local fruit merchant and uses her son to arrange trysts. The man gives him fruit as a reward. It appears that Haniya Yasin refrains from marrying the man because of Yasin.

Haniya's brief marriage to a coal merchant so angers Yasin that he breaks all contact for eleven years, despite her pleas to meet. Hearing that she is about to marry a man ten years younger than she, Yasin goes to talk with her, caring only to protect his inheritance of property and wealth. The meeting ends badly and he does not invite Haniya to his own wedding. When all hope of recovering from malaria are gone, Haniya summons Yasin and they say a somewhat tender farewell. He sits with her a while as she sleeps and shortly after he leaves, Haniya dies. Yasin claims to mourn her sincerely and visits her grave.



## Martyr al-Husayn

A historical personality woven into the story, al-Husayn is the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. He is assassinated in CE 680, decapitated, and his "immaculate" head is brought to Cairo for burial. Devout reverence for his memory characterizes Shiite Muslims, while Sunnis consider him a heretic. The shrine is located near the Abd al-Jawad home on a street named in al-Husayn's honor. Young Kamal passes daily on his way home from school and has a special reverence for the martyr. He imagines al-Husayn living in the mosque as a normal house at night and talking with him face-to-face. Kamal would request unlimited play time, his sisters never to move out, his father's temper to be changed, and his mother's life to last forever. He also wants them to afford Paradise without judgment.

## Muhammad Iffat

A textile merchant in al-Hamzawi and one of Ahmad Abd al-Jawad's oldest and closest friends, Iffat is part of his carousing nighttime circle but also accepts Ahmad's alter ego of sober, authoritarian father figure. Iffat gives his daughter Zaynab as wife to Yasin and soon demands a divorce when Yasin's actions bring dishonor on his daughter. He insists that the break-up will not harm their friendship and comes to check on Ahmad after his run-in with British authorities. Things are never completely the same between them, however. Iffat is more politically active than Ahmad, collecting signatures for a petition backing the Egyptian leaders who seek to negotiate with the British. Iffat is said to have "ties of kinship to some influential Egyptian personalities" and serve as a link between the merchants, civil servants, and attorneys.

## Jalila

A popular singer, a bitter rival of Mme. Zubayda, Jalila is also Ahmad Abd al-Jawad's childhood playmate and later his lover. They remain friends after going their separate ways. Jalila sings at Aisha's wedding feast and introduces herself drunkenly to Amina and her daughters in terms that make Amina suspect Ahmad has cheated on her. Jalila's late father is the head of a Qur'anic primary school and a "blessed man." He brings her up strictly to no avail; love, music, and flirtation become her life. After drawing laughter from the women guests, Jalila causes a stir by joining the men's party and embarrasses Ahmad, demanding to know how he can pretend to be pious.

## The Ridwans

The Ridwans are the Abd al-Jawads' long-time neighbors. They get along well but are not close friends. The father, Muhammad Ridwan, is paralyzed and never moves from his bed. The attractive mother, Umm Maryam (her name is never given) is the object of young Kamal's puppy love as he watches her primp before her mirror when visiting. When Ahmad banishes Amina from the household, the children ask Umm Maryam to





intercede. She comes in seductively, almost shaking Ahmad's firm resolve about not taking advantage of friends' and neighbors' wives. After Muhammad's death, Umm Maryam becomes Ahmad's nighttime lover and it is while sneaking home from a tryst that he is arrested by the British Army and forced to perform demeaning manual labor to repair road damage caused by nationalist terrorists.

Daughter Maryam is a vivacious, black-eyed girl, friends with Khadija and Aisha, and the object of Fahmy's desire. He reviews lessons with his younger brother on the roof in order to have an opportunity to watch Maryam gather in the laundry. When Fahmy asks his father's permission to marry Maryam, he is told that he is too young and must finish school. He asks Maryam to wait for him, but she does not know what she would do if another suitor asks for her hand. Maryam takes part in Aisha's wedding, and Fahmy falls even more deeply in love. Fahmy's passions cool when Kamal reports seeing her and a British soldier flirt. The Abd al-Jawad women decide that Maryam has always been promiscuous and assume that the mother must also be. They do not know about her tryst with Ahmad.

## Shaykh Mutawalli Abd al-Samad

A nearly blind holy man, Mutawalli comes and goes from the neighborhood. When he is present, he comes in the morning to recite the Qur'an in Ahmad Abd al-Jawad's shop on al-Nahhasin—and to offer spiritual advice. Mutawalli dresses in a threadbare cloak. At 75, he is in excellent health and is said to perform miracles. He insists on not being spoken to until invited. He curses the infidel Australians, who have assaulted him on the street and openly rebukes Ahmad for well-known adultery and drunkenness, insisting that a Muslim must obey and love God both by word and deed. As the anti-British violence grows, Mutawalli's curses become more vehement. He confronts Ahmad's transgressions against bans on alcohol and adultery and advises Ahmad's militant son Fahmy to shun politics and allow God to act on his own.

## The Shawkats

Of Turkish origins, the Shawkat family owns real estate in Cairo, and enjoys high social standing. They are for generations close to the less prominent Abd al-Jawads. The family is currently headed by the elderly Widow Shawkat (no name given). Her late husband had been a special friend of Ahmad's and she had arranged Ahmad's betrothal to Amina. She treats him as her own child. During Amina's banishment from the household, the Widow visits Ahmad and is "scathingly frank" in working over his emotions. She gives Ahmad little chance to speak as she intercedes on Amina's behalf and then proposing that Ahmad's younger daughter, Aisha, marry her son Khalil.

Khalil is 25-years-old, living on a monthly income of £30, has no occupation and little education, but is "pleasant, generous, and polite." He is of medium size with a full, oval face, white skin, bulging eyes, full lips, and thick black hair parted at the top, styled much like Ahmad. He has a good-humored, languid look. Ibrahim, in his 40s, is nearly



identical, except he wears his hair short and twists his mustache. After being widowed and losing his two children, Ibrahim returns to live with his mother. Having seen Khadija at the wedding, Ibrahim months later marries her and both live in the Widow's house on al-Sukkariya (Sugar St.), under her regime. Predictably, Aisha gets on with her better than caustic Khadija. Both sisters get pregnant and Aisha delivers a baby who suffers a heart defect and is not expected to survive.

## Umm Hanafi

The Abd al-Jawad family servant, Umm Hanafi is in her 40s. She serves as a maid in the household as a girl, leaves when she marries, and returns after her divorce and the delivery of the stillborn son whose name she carries (Umm Hanafi means "Mother of Hanafi"). Umm Hanafi is stout, shapeless, and formless, but vigorous. Her goal in life is to fatten up the family, specifically the females, and apply beauty charms. Amina treats Umm Hanafi as one of the family, but her daughter Khadija suspects that she eats too much of the family's food and pampers Aisha too much. Umm Hanafi overlooks Khadija's behavior for her mother's sake. Oldest son Yasin, too weary to leave the house to find a sexual partner, finds Umm Hanafi asleep in the courtyard and tries to rape her. Her screams awaken the household. Umm Hanafi is later bitterly disappointed when she is not invited to attend the birthing of Aisha's child.

## Sa'd Zaghlul

A historical figure, the leader of Egypt's first revolution, Zaghlul is Vice President of the Legislative Assembly. With colleagues Abd al-Aziz Fahmy, Ali Sha'rawi, and Muhammad Farid, he resigns his post in protest against the British refusal to let them visit London to present the nation's case for independence. Fahmy Abd al-Jawad's fellow students are divided on whether these leaders have previously "sold out" to the British or are true patriots. When demonstrations break out in their support, Zaghlul and his colleagues are exiled to Malta, and the demonstrations only escalate. The novel describes many bloody confrontations, the last of which—supposedly peaceful in celebration of Zaghlul's release, claims the life of the idealistic Fahmy Abd al-Jawad.

## Zaynab

The daughter of Ahmad Abd al-Jawad's old friend and companion in debauchery, Muhammad Iffat, Zaynab is briefly the wife of Ahmad's eldest son Yasin, but she is brought up in a household that allows greater liberties than Ahmad's patriarchal tyranny, and finds herself challenged by the "virus of submission." Zaynab alienates her mild-mannered mother in law, Amina, shirking housework and priding herself on being of Turkish origins. When Zaynab convinces her husband to take her out for an evening's entertainment, she is ordered to conform or leave the house. Later, when she finds Yasin trying to rape her maid Nur, Zaynab, by then pregnant, leaves without permission and through her father demands a divorce.



## Zubayda and Zanuba

Female entertainers, Zubayda is a chanteuse (singer) and Zanuba her niece/foster daughter, who plays the lute in her troupe. Zanuba has dark, laughing eyes filled with "merriment and devilry." Yasin Abd al-Jawad stakes out their residence, watching Zanuba from Ali's Coffee Shop, eventually gets up the courage to visit her for seduction purposes and sees with his own eyes that his revered, straight-laced father Ahmad is being entertained by Zubayda. Zubayda previously appears in Ahmad's shop with her servant Jaljal, acting flirtatious, and Ahmad responds in kind, addressing her as Sultana. Ahmad knows that this beautiful, second-rate singer has recently broken up with Khalil al-Banan after a long affair. "Her folds of flesh and fat would warm a chilly man during the bitter cold of winter." Zanuba is bitter when Yasin breaks off their tryst to marry, but Zubayda is more philosophic when Ahmad moves on to a new affair.



# Objects/Places

## Palace Walk / Bayn al-Qasrayn

The street in Cairo, Egypt, where the Abd al-Jawad family has lived for a quarter century, the northbound Palace Walk intersects Coppersmiths St. (al-Nahhasin ) within view from the upper stories. To the left the street is narrow, twisting, and gloomy when viewed from upstairs. At street level, light from handcarts and from vapor lamps outside coffeehouses and shops that stay open until dawn, alleviate this. To the right, the street is engulfed in darkness because there are only large stores that close early. The minarets of the ancient seminaries of Qala'un and Barquq stand like ghostly giants.

The Abd al-Jawad house has a wide courtyard with a covered well at the far right. To the left are the women's quarters and two large chambers, one for baking and the other for storage. Amina spends much happy time at the oven. The three brothers share a first-floor bedroom adjacent to the two girls, who sleep in one bed. The father sleeps on the top floor, away from as much household noise as possible, but it still filters up and angers him. Also on the top floor are a sitting room and unused fourth room. Amina keeps pigeons and chickens on the roof and a unique arbor garden of hyacinth beans and jasmine. From there, Fahmy enjoys furtively watching beautiful next door neighbor Maryam gather laundry. Other notable features are the dark green wooden grilles and large door with bronze knocker.

Overnight, about a week into public demonstrations against continued British rule in Egypt, troops are camped on Palace Walk under the cistern building: troops, trucks, pyramids of rifles, and stiff sentries.

## Ahmad Abduh's Coffee Shop

An establishment that Yasin and Fahmy Abd al-Jawad both frequent, Ahmad Abduh's is an antique, underground refuge from prying eyes where students like Fahmy and other patriots meet to "talk, scheme, predict, and await forthcoming events." Yasin begins visiting when he is forced to abandon Ali's Coffee Shop after breaking up with Zanuba. It is conveniently near Costaki's Bar, where he finishes his evenings. The brothers often meet briefly in one of the small rooms before getting down to their true intents.

## Ezbekiya Garden

An entertainment district in Cairo, Ezbekiya Garden is cut off from would-be revelers by Australian troops before the novel opens, creating intense animosity. Among the afflicted are Ahmad Abd al-Jawad and his eldest son, Yasin. At the end of the novel, during an enormous peaceful demonstration, Fahmy is among those shot dead by renegade British soldiers inside Ezbekiya Garden.



## Goldsmiths' Bazaar

An area near the Abd al-Jawads home, the Goldsmith's Bazaar is also near the al-Salih Ayyub Seminary. Fearing loss of virility whenever he meets a new lover, Ahmad buys a potion from Muhammad Ajami, a couscous vendor there. Ahmad's roving son Yasin regularly passes through the area to reach Ali's Coffee Shop. During public demonstrations against continued British rule in Egypt, troops are camped where al-Nahhasan intersects the Goldsmiths' Bazaar.

## al-Husayn Street

The Cairo street on which Shrine to the Martyr al-Hussayn stands, al-Husayn St. draws Kamal daily to honor the martyr, and once has him take his sequestered mother Amina there on a mini-pilgrimage. As they spiral in line towards the shrine to venerate it, Kamal imagines al-Husayn living there as a normal house by night and talking with him face-to-face. During the British crackdown, the Abd al-Jawad menfolk attend Friday prayers in the mosque and afterwards a seminarian charges that Yasin is a British spy. A revolutionary leader vouches for Fahmy and the menacing crowd disperses.

## al-Khurunfush

The street where Amina's unnamed mother lives, al-Khurunfush receives one of three British troop encampments, along with Palace Walk and the Goldsmiths' Bazaar/al-Nahhasan. Amina is briefly exile there by her irate husband but cannot enjoy the luxury of doing no chores.

## Khalil Agha School

The school, located in the vicinity of al-Darrasa, New Street, and al-Husayn, attended by Kamal Abd al-Jawad, Khalil Agha enrolls students as young as ten and as old as fifteen to twenty. The latter treat the younger students harshly. When school lets out, students run to roving vendors who are ready to accept their business. Fights, postponed during the school day, are not infrequent. During anti-British demonstrations, the older students join the boycott, leaving the younger ones to sit idly all day. When college students break in and liberate all students, Kamal is dragged along.

## al-Nahhasin Coppersmith Street)

Busy al-Nahhasin is the location of Ahmad Abd al-Jawad's medium-sized store selling coffee beans, rice, nuts, dried fruits, and soap. The shelves are crowded. The owner's desk sits opposite the entrance. Beside it is a green safe. Framed calligraphy of "In the name of God" hangs on the back wall. Behind the store stands the Barquq Mosque.



## **New Street**

Home to Costaki's bar, New Street is Yasin Abd al-Jawad's last refuge for entertainment when barred by Australian troops from Ezbekiya Gardens. Costaki is a Greek grocer who operates a bar in an inner room. It is there that Yasin first learns the joys of wine and women.

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

The cul-de-sac where Yasin Abd al-Jawad grows up in his mother's house, Qasr al-Shawq holds bad memories when returning there in adulthood. He remembers being sent to a shop on the corner with invitations from his mother to the proprietor to visit her and being given bags of apples and oranges to win the man's approval. Yasin visits twice, first to try to talk her out of yet another marriage and secondly to bid her goodbye on her deathbed.

## **Qirmiz Alley**

A desolate area that raises fears in young Kamal Abd al-Jawad, Qirmiz Alley is, nevertheless, his favorite path home from school, because it avoids his father's store and the possibility of facing Ahmad's terrible and unpredictable wrath. The alley has a vaulted roof, where the jinn are said to play at night. Kamal recites Qur'an Sura 112.1 loudly whenever he enters the alley and watches the light at the distant end. From there, he can see his Palace Walk home.

## **al-Sahadiqiya Street**

The site of Ali's Coffee Shop, al-Sahadiqiya is reached via the Goldsmiths Bazaar and al-Ghuriya. Ali's has windows on both street with padded benches in the corners. Yasin drinks tea while watching the house of Zubayda the chanteuse across the street, hoping to seduce her foster daughter, Zanuba, who plays flute in her ensemble. The resplendent interior of Zubayda's house is volubly described when Ahmad and Yasin Abd al-Jawad are both entertained there.

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

The Shawkat family, with whom the Abd al-Jawad family has ties for generations and into which Ahmad's two daughters marry, resides on Sugar St. When first seen in the novel, the home is decked for the wedding celebration, in stark contrast with the ordinariness of the brides' home on Palace Walk. Standing at the entrance to Sugar St., the Mutawalli Gate is too narrow for motor vehicles. Without wedding lights the Shawkat house is a relic, but its mass and furnishings suggest power and prestige. Aisha and Khadija both marry Shawkat men and move into their house. Aisha gives birth there.



# Themes

## Religion

Much of *Palace Walk* deals with characters, father and son, who are addicted to pleasures forbidden by Islam, alcohol consumption and adultery. Prosperous, prominent Ahmad Abd al-Jawad goes on nightly binges with his friends, puts off repentance until the end of his life in order not to have to forgo his pleasures, and sees no hypocrisy in his behavior. His cloistered wife, Amina, suspects what he is up to, but waits dutifully for him to come home so she can help him change clothes for bed. She prays that God may forgive his drinking but is glad that it makes him temporarily less stern. When challenged by a religious shaykh, Ahmad observes that "a good deed is worth ten others," and is careful to give alms (one of the "Five Pillars of Islam"). Ahmad is also diligent to pray and fast (additional pillars) with good intentions. He attends Friday services with his sons and takes sermons to heart. He pays to have the Qur'an chanted mornings in his store and prominently displays a pious calligraphic plaque. Oldest son Yasin picks up the same vices with even fewer concerns about the religious aspects.

The novel is filled with religious phrases that trip naturally off every character's tongue, from the most pious to the most debauched. This is typical of Arabic, and amounts to little more than the reflexive "Bless you" that a Westerner might utter when someone sneezes. Several authentically religious characters sincerely pray in circumstances good and evil. Amina is proud that her grandfather and father are both Qur'an scholars. She and her mother are models of piety, with an infusion of superstition. Jinns and amulets are seen often in the novel. Young Kamal helps his mother memorize his daily sura before bedtime.

Many of the practices of Islam are woven into the texture of the novel, including Friday prayer and fasting during Ramadan; the staging for the pilgrimage to Mecca is mentioned often as a major neighborhood event. The Shrine of the Martyr al-Husayn is near the Abd al-Jawad home. Kamal prays outside it daily while walking home from school, and takes his mother on pilgrimage there once when his father is on a business trip. Al-Husayn is the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who is assassinated in CE 680. His "immaculate" head is enshrined in the local mosque. Devout reverence for him characterizes Shiite Muslims, while the more numerous Sunnis consider him a heretic. A leading Sunni scholar, al-Bukhari, is quoted however, and Ahmad's religion is said to have a "Hanbali bias." This would make him a Sunni, but he attends al-Husayn's mosque.

The novel depicts both marriage and divorce. In Islam, an attempt at reconciliation is required between the initiation of divorce and its completion, and Ahmad is a notable mediator. The possibility of a temporary divorce to let passions cool fails in both Ahmad and Yasin's cases. Ahmad's greatest concern is to preserve his womenfolk from the outside world. Most Egyptian men, it seems, have relaxed standards, but Ahmad will not allow them outside even fully veiled and deigns to chaperone Amina to visit her mother



only rarely. The thought than males may have seen his daughter's faces before marriage (deduced because they ask for beautiful Aisha's hand rather than the older daughter Khadija's) sends Ahmad into rage.

## Sex

Palace Walk looks at sex from a number of angles. Ahmad Abd al-Jawad hears from one of his many lovers, A lover observes: "On the outside you are dignified and pious, but inside you're licentious and debauched." His eldest son Yasin shares the same tastes. Both go out drinking and "skirt chasing" nightly. It is a while before their paths cross. Ahmad has been doing this for at least the twenty-five years of his marriage to faithful Amina and she chooses to ignore the signs, knowing that she could have a worse husband. He at least does not practice polygamy, legal in Islam.

Ahmad is a connoisseur of passion. He needs beauty, atmosphere, and above all good music during sex. He shares with most Egyptian men of the World War I era a preference for "well-fleshed" women, even on the fat side. His son Yasin considers only large breasts and buttocks ample reason to seduce a woman. Twice Yasin attempts to rape household servants, the second time a black maid (the novel betrays racial bias) Ahmad disdains such tastelessness and sees that his artful methods of seduction make the acts differ in essence. When confronted by their behavior—by a man or religion, a friend, or just their internal mental processes (not to say consciences), Ahmad and Yasin both fall back on the excuse that all males do filthy things and are entitled.

In keeping with the "double standard," women are to be perfectly chaste for life. They are not to be seen by outsiders, even a glimpse through a slightly parted window shutter. Neighbors seeing it would be scandalized—and gossip. Fahmy breaks this taboo whenever possible by arranging to tutor younger brother Kamal on the roof where he can see his beautiful next door neighbor, Maryam, doing laundry. He wonders that she does not run and hide from him, but soaks in her beauty. When, towards the end of the novel, Maryam appears at a window exchanging gazes with a British soldier, she and her mother are both declared obviously wanton all along. The judgmental Abd al-Jawad women do not realize that the Maryam's widowed mother has enticed Ahmad into her bed. He is tempted earlier, but refuses until her husband dies. Only one woman, a drunken singer performing at a wedding, admits to enjoying sex—with over one hundred partners.

The novel pictures Khadija catching her beautiful younger sister primping herself and gazing longingly out a nearly-closed window at a policeman walking his beat below. According to the code of ethics, he does not raise his head to see her, but strains his eyes upward. Khadija threatens to tell their father about this family shame and makes Aisha swear not to repeat this sin. The girls obviously buy into the taboo. When Aisha marries, young Kamal is filled with questions and is shocked when he sneaks up and sees the groom kissing his sister. He is told to say no more. When Aisha gets pregnant, Kamal is curious why she is bloating and how the baby they say will come out soon as





gotten in. Only because he has seen a cat give birth does he have any idea of what is happening.

## War and Revolution

Palace Walk is set in the closing months of World War I and the two years of domestic violence that grip Egypt while Great Britain refuses to withdraw its unilaterally-imposed Protectorate and grant independence. The final war years are dealt with impressionistically, showing Egyptians grumbling about inconveniences. Ahmad Abd al-Jawad taunts the Australian troops that occupy Cairo whenever possible, angry over them cordoning off his favorite entertainment area. This forces him to satisfy his taste for drink and women closer to home. His eldest son Yasin, following in his footsteps, is similarly inconvenienced and annoyed. Stories of intentional harassment and looting by the Australians are given. In one case, a religious shaykh claims to have been taunted and had his turban cloth unravelled.

Egyptians blame Kaiser Wilhelm for starting a "stupid" war far away that has resulted in inflation and shortages of goods. Still, many hope that he will win because he is allied with the Ottoman Sultan, and as Muslims they must look to the good of Islam. Word of the Armistice (11 Nov. 1918) is greeted with hope. A delegation consisting of Sa'd Zaghlul, Vice President of the Legislative Assembly, Assembly colleagues Abd al-Aziz Fahmy and Ali Sha'rawi, and nationalist Muhammad Farid, meets with Sir Reginald Wingate, the British High Commissioner for Egypt, to request permission to go to London to present Egypt's case for independence. Refusal brings the assemblymen's resignations and citizens' petitions to both the British and to the British-installed Sultan. When the British exile the delegation to Malta, Zaghlul becomes the rallying point for mass demonstrations and a general strike. The British respond with bullets, creating martyrs and an atmosphere of holy war. The British are portrayed not as nuisances but as barbarians, whom the Qur'an assures the faithful, will not stand.

The novel examines how various factions of the Egyptian population react. The older generation, represented by Ahmad and Amina, recall from childhood how Urabi Pasha had sought to throw off European control from Egypt and spent the rest of his life on Ceylon. They long for the return of "Our Effendi," Khedive Abbas II, exiled at the start of the Protectorate when Turkey enters the war. As hope of that fades, the older generation signs petitions and makes financial donations to the nationalist cause. Ahmad considers himself a patriot, but his time is too important for rallies.

At the van of revolution stand college students, among them Fahmy Abd al-Jawad, a future lawyer, longing to make great speeches and even to fall as an immortal martyr, but relegated to the minor—albeit dangerous—task of handing out anti-British handbills. Fahmy prides himself on being named to the Supreme Student Executive Committee, pledged to sacrificing himself for his country. Confronted by his father, Fahmy refuses on moral principles to obey his direct order to cease political activities. He finds himself "motivated by the most sublime and most hideous emotions: patriotism and a desire to kill and devastate" and gets caught up in the tumult. When Zaghlul is released and

British encampments are withdrawn, as peace comes to Egypt, Fahmy tries to apologize to his father, but they part without a true reconciliation. Thoughts of a bright future in politics fill Fahmy's mind as he is gunned down in Ezbekia Garden during a sanctioned and supposedly peaceful demonstration. He receives a hero's funeral with his fellow martyrs.

# Style

## Point of View

An impersonal narrator tells the stories of Palace Walk as a simple narrative of events. This narrator is privy to character's thoughts and reveals them, particularly when they conflict with what that character is saying out loud or wishes he or she were able to vocalize. A great deal of the novel is given over to dialog, actual and internal.

Authoritarian Ahmad Abd al-Jawad is frequently torn between his perceived need to enforce his iron will and the touching circumstances of his wife, sons, and daughters. He wrestles with his inability to let down his vigilance. When he learns that eldest son is a "chip off the old block," spending his nights in drinking and carousing, Ahmad approves, but when Yasin in desperation rapes servants, Ahmad distances himself, insisting that he enjoys women in a cultivated setting. Yasin burns to tell his father off for his hypocrisy, but can do so only in his own mind. Outwardly, he is humble. Son Fahmy comes closer to openly rebelling, but his inward speeches are grander than what comes out of his mouth.

On a number of occasions, Ahmad is confronted by the fact that he breaks fundamental rules of Islam by drinking and committing adultery. These force him not to repent, because this would spoil his fun during his remaining years, but to rationalize his behavior: it is innocent fun, harming no one; his generous good deeds outweigh his bad ones on God's scales of justice; all of his friends do the same; he could do much worse if he permitted himself. Yasin is less given to religion and introspection. He simply does what he likes and trusts God to forgive.

Amina's dialog is nearly exclusively inner and deeply pious, tinged with superstitions. She ignores the circumstances that keep Ahmad out late every night and deliver him home recovering from drinking. She is happy that he is mellower in these hours. She is content with her life for most of the novel, until she comes in contact with a (by the standards of Egypt in 1917-19) liberated woman, her new daughter-in-law. She then struggles not to verbalize her antagonisms. Her polar-opposite daughters, sarcastic Khadija and primping Alisha, keep up a constant barrage of squabble, and young Kamal pops up as comic relief at regular intervals as heavy events befall the family.

## Setting

Palace Walk is set in Cairo, Egypt, just after World War I. It follows the family of the prosperous merchant Ahmad Abd al-Jawad from 1917 until 1919. The captures a broad spectrum of life within small geographic areas. The reader experiences the sequestered life of Egyptian females, with all fits yearnings, the rhythm of dysfunctional family life, the hubbub of colorful streets but decaying and alleys, and the luxury of houses of pleasure.



Most of the novel is set in the Abd al-Jawad home on Palace Walk—in Arabic Bayn al-qasrayn (literally "Between the Two Palaces") and in locales within walking distance of it. The ill-defined term "al-Ghuriya" encompasses it all. Ahmad's modest store is located on busy Coppersmiths St. (al-Nahhasin ). The Shrine to the Martyr al-Hussayn attracts sequestered Amina with tragic results, getting her temporarily exiled to her mother's home on al-Khurunfush. Several events central to the political theme take place inside this historic mosque. The Khalil Agha Elementary School is described, both in normal times and during the anti-British demonstrations. Khadija and Aisha's gala wedding receptions take place on Sugar Street (al-Sukkariya) in the home of the wealthy and prominent Shawkat family. Yasin twice visits his birth mother at her home on Qasr al-Shawq (Palace of Desire), the cul-de-sac where he grows up and is traumatized.

Yasin frequents New Street, home to Costaki's grocery store with its back room bar. He often sits in Ali's Coffee Shop on al-Sahadiqiya, watching the building across the way, home to Zubayda the singer, whose foster daughter, Zanuba, hopes to seduce. Once he is married, he forsakes Ali's for Ahmad Abduh's, also an underground refuge for students like Fahmy who "talk, scheme, predict, and await forthcoming events." The most intriguing geographical reference is Ezbekiya Garden, a popular entertainment district that is cut off from would-be revelers by Australian troops, creating animosity. Among the afflicted are Ahmad and Yasin. Only at the end of the novel is the Garden depicted, during an enormous peaceful demonstration, Fahmy is among those shot dead by renegade British soldiers there.

## Language and Meaning

Palace Walk is narrated in the past tense in flowing idiomatic English. The original is, of course, in modern Egyptian Arabic. The translators are William M. Hutchinson, a professor of Philosophy and Religion, and Olive E. Kenny, a veteran translator of Arabic literature. The Arabic novel is published in 1956, another chaotic time in the history of Egypt, when the British (and French) again bring war, making this look back particularly relevant. Egyptian society has changed much since World War I, so the story line is obliged to help Egyptian readers understand lost contexts. This also benefits English readers. The text is heavy with political material that is left unexplained, but its object is to set up a black-and-white contrast between the British and the nationalist. Only young Kamal tries to see good in the occupying forces.

Western readers may find it odd that God (only once transliterated as Allah) is present in virtually every line of dialog spoken by every character non-British, from the most pious to the most debauched. This is typical of Arabic, and amounts emotionally to little more than the reflex of saying, "Bless you" when someone sneezes. Amina is more consciously pious, frequently quoting the Qur'an to seek blessings and ward off evil, but her piety is heavily mixed with superstition. Fahmy and Kamal inherit her spirituality, but Ahmad and Yasin wear religion rather lightly, given their addiction to alcohol and sex.

The text is rich in homely figures of speech drawn largely from the world of nature and domestic practice. There are frequent allusions to figures and events from Islamic



history, particularly to the martyrdom of al-Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, whose tomb near the Abd al-Jawad home is frequently mentioned and portrayed. Rebels from the time of Ahmad's youth are glorified as well as the martyrs created in the current rebellion. Most are obscure to Westerners, but the spirit they represent is more important than their actual deeds.

## Structure

The first volume in Mahfouz Naguib's Cairo Trilogy, *Palace Walk* consists of generally seventy-one short, numbered but untitled chapters. There is no higher-level division of the novel. Multiple character-focused story lines weave together, creating a colorful tapestry.

The early chapters establish that Ahmad Abd al-Jawad is a tyrant at home who expects instant and absolute obedience. His household adheres to a standard of compliance with the rules of Islam that few others attempt or would want to attempt. Wife Amina, daughter and granddaughter of Muslim scholars, prides herself on being submissive and supportive. She is intelligent and hungry for knowledge, but also superstitious. She prays constantly for her family's welfare. Ahmad rarely speaks except to command obedience. Still, his family loves and honors him. Amina alone knows of his other side, which consists of nightly rounds of drinking and sex. She carefully ignores the evidence, convincing herself that other husbands do worse things.

The rest of the family is introduced in the context of the daily regimen. The loud kneading of dough by servant Umm Hanafi serves as an alarm clock. Amina rises early to begin breakfast preparation. Sons Yasin, Fahmy, and Kamal eat breakfast with their father and go out to work or school with him. Yasin enjoys the same debauchery as his father, although neither knows about the other. Fahmy is a serious and pious law student. Inquisitive young Kamal regularly provides comic relief. Daughters Khadija and Aisha eat with Amina afterwards. The girls are a study in contrasts in appearance and temperament. All of the Abd al-Jawad offspring enjoy verbal jousting together. The women occupy their day with housework. Ahmad comes home from his shop for lunch and a siesta, and then returns to work and goes out on the town. The other family members gather towards dusk for "coffee hour," which is a major venue for discussing the events that move the story forward.

Ahmad as the affable life of any party is developed after his Jekyll and Hyde nature is established, partly redeeming him as a character. He loves music and has a wonderful singing voice, which Kamal in particular inherits. He is generous with money but not his precious time in support of Egyptian nationalism, and hopes that his good works will offset his breaking of fundamental laws of Islam.

The novel turns to discovery: Yasin learns of his father's other side while himself visiting a call girl and is impressed that they are so much alike. When Yasin attempts to rape Umm Hanafi, he is married off to calm his passions, but the marriage fails. Fahmy wants to marry the next door neighbor but is forbidden. Fahmy becomes involved in the



dangerous revolutionary movement and conflicts with his father, finally disobeying a direct order to cease and desist. Both sisters are married off and move out. At Khadija's wedding party, part of Ahmad's secret life is embarrassingly revealed.

Political aspects dominate the last part of the novel. To quell nationalistic demonstrations, British garrisons are established, one across the street from the Abd al-Jawad home. Kamal befriends the soldiers while Fahmy in particular grows to hate them. Ahmad leaves a late-night debauch to be arrested and forced to help repair damage caused by terrorists. The nationalists gain their goals and a great, joyful celebration is sanctioned. Idealistic Fahmy is one of those gunned down by renegade British troops.



## Quotes

"Although he was in the habit of drinking to the point of intoxication every night, he postponed his return home until the effects of the wine had worn off and he had regained control of himself. He wished to protect his dignity and image at home. His wife was the only member of his family allowed to see him after he had been out carousing. The only effect of the drinking she could remark was the smell.

"She had never encountered any alarming or perverse conduct from him, except when they were first married, and she had chosen to overlook that. Paradoxically, by keeping him company at this hour, she reaped a chattiness and expansiveness in his conversation she could rarely gain when he was completely sober. She well remembered how distressed she had been when she first noticed he was coming home drunk from his evening escapades. To her mind, wine had always suggested brutality and craziness and, most shocking of all, an offense against religion. She had been disgusted and scared. Whenever he came home, she had suffered unbearable torments. In time, experience had revealed that on his return from his partying he was more gentle than on any other occasion and not so stern. His look was more tender and he was much more talkative. She grew to enjoy his company and stopped worrying, although she never forgot to implore God to pardon his sin and forgive him. She dearly wished he would be that good humored when he was sober and in his right mind. She was thoroughly amazed that this sin made him more amiable. She was torn for a long time between her hatred for it, based on her religious training, and the comfort and peace she gained from it. She buried her thoughts deep inside her, however, and concealed them as though unable even to admit them to herself.

"Her husband spared no effort to safeguard his dignity and authority. His moments of tenderness were fleeting and accidental. As he sat there, a broad smile might appear on his lips at a memory that cropped up from his happy evening. At once he would get control of himself and press his lips together while stealing a glance at his wife. He would find her as usual, in front of him, with her eyes lowered. Reassured, he would return to his memories and his heart that cherished them as though from an unquenchable thirst for the pleasures of life. It seemed he could still see the party, composed of a select group of his favorite friends and chums. In the midst of them was one of those moonlike beauties who shone in his life from time to time. He could still hear the jokes, wisecracks, and witty comments for which he had such a talent, stringing one after the other, when he was animated by wine and music. He recalled his clever remarks with a care and attention accented by wonder and self-satisfaction. He remembered their effect on people and the success and delight they occasioned, making him everyone's best friend." Chap. 2, pp. 9-10

"When they had finished breakfast, the mother said, 'Aisha, you do the laundry today and Khadija will clean the house. Afterward meet me in the oven room.'

"Amina divided the work between them right after breakfast. They were content to be ruled by her, and Aisha would not question her assignment. Khadija would take the trouble to make a few comments, either to show her worth or to start a quarrel. Thus she said, 'I'll let you clean the house if you think washing the clothes is too much. But if



you make a fuss over the washing so you can stay in the bathroom till all the work in the kitchen is finished, that's an excuse that can be rejected in advance.'

"Aisha ignored her remark and went off to the bath humming. Khadija commented sarcastically, 'Lucky for you that sound reverberates in the bathroom like a phonograph speaker. So sing and let the neighbors hear it.'

"Their mother left the room and went through the hall to the stairs. She climbed to the roof to make her morning rounds there before descending to the oven room. The bickering between her daughters was nothing new to her. Over the course of time it had turned into a customary way of life when the father was not at home and no one could think of anything pleasant to say. She had tried to stop it by using entreaty, humor, and tenderness. That was the only type of discipline she employed with her children. It fit her nature, which could not stand anything stronger. She lacked the firmness that rearing children occasionally requires. Perhaps she would have liked to be firm but was not able to. Perhaps she had attempted to be firm but had been overcome by her emotions and weakness. It seemed she could not bear for the ties between her and her children to be anything but love and affection. She let the father or his shadow, which dominated the children from afar, straighten them out and lay down the law. Thus their silly quarrel did not weaken her admiration for her two girls or her satisfaction with them. Even Aisha, who was insanely fond of singing and standing in front of the mirror, her laziness notwithstanding, was no less skillful and organized than Khadija." Chap. 6, pp. 32-33

"With the same ardent, overflowing vitality, he opened his breast to the joys and pleasures of life. He delighted in fancy food. He was enchanted by vintage wine. He was crazy about a pretty face. He pursued each of these pleasures with gaiety, joy, and passion. His conscience was not weighed down by guilty feelings or anxious scruples. He was exercising a right granted him by life, as though there was no conflict between the duty life gave his heart and the duty God entrusted to his conscience. At no time in his life had he felt estranged from God or a target for His vengeance. He communed peacefully with Him. Was he two separate people combined into one personality? Was his faith in the divine magnanimity so strong that he could not believe these pleasures really had been forbidden? Even if they were forbidden, should they not be excused so long as no one was harmed? Most probably what happened was that he embraced life with his heart and emotions without resorting to thought or reflection. He found within himself strong instincts, some directed toward God and tamed through worship and others set for pleasure and quenched in play. The integration of all these within him was secure and carefree. His soul was not disturbed by any need to reconcile them. He was not forced to justify them in his thoughts, except under the pressure of criticism like that with which Shaykh Mutawalli Abd al-Samad confronted him. Under such circumstances, he found himself more distressed by thinking than by the accusation itself, not because he shrugged off being accused before God, but because he could not believe that he was actually being accused or that God would truly be angry at him for having a little fun that harmed no one. Thought, however, was a burden and revealed how trivial his knowledge of his religion was. For this reason, he frowned when the other man challengingly asked him whether his obedience was 'by word or deed.'" Chap. 7, pp. 42-43





"Despite his great number of amorous adventures, out of all the different varieties of love, al-Sayyid Ahmad had experienced only lust. All the same, he had progressed in his pursuit of it to its purest and most delicate form. He was not simply an animal. In addition to his sensuality, he was endowed with a delicacy of feeling, a sensitivity of emotion, and an ingrained love for song and music. He had elevated lust to its most exalted type. It was for the sake of this lust alone that he had married the first time and then for the second. Over the course of time, his conjugal love was affected by calm new elements of affection and familiarity, but in essence it continued to be based on bodily desire. When an emotion is of this type, especially when it has acquired a renewed power and exuberant vitality, it cannot be content with only one form of expression. Thus he had shot off in pursuit of all the varieties of love and passion, like a wild bull. Whenever desire called, he answered, deliriously and enthusiastically. No woman was anything more than a body to him. All the same, he would not bow his head before that body unless he found it truly worthy of being seen, touched, smelled, tasted, and heard. It was lust, yes, but not bestial or blind. It had been refined by a craft that was at least partially an art, setting his lust in a framework of delight, humor, and good cheer. Nothing was so like his lust as his body, since both were huge and powerful, qualities that bring to mind roughness and savagery. Yet both concealed within them grace, delicacy, and affection, even though he might intentionally cloak those characteristics at times with sternness and severity. While he was devouring the sultana with his glances he did not limit his active imagination to having sex with her. It also wandered through various dreams of amusing pastimes and tuneful celebrations."  
Chap. 6, p. 99

"Khadija was possibly the one who felt most uncomfortable, since this was the second time she had stood in the way of her sister's getting married. She brooded about her anguish, not while her future was on the line, but after her father's categorical decision, when the danger threatening her had retreated. Then her anger and pain faded away, to be replaced by a distressing feeling of embarrassment and anguish. Fahmy's words did not please her, because deep inside she wanted everyone to support her father's decision and leave her the only one opposing it. All the same, she commented, 'Fahmy was right in what he said. That's what I've thought all along.'

"Yasin reaffirmed his idea: 'Marriage is the destiny of every living creature.... Have no fear.... Don't panic.'

"He contented himself with this general observation, even though he was very fond of Aisha and indignant over the injustice that had befallen her. He was afraid that if he stated his opinion frankly, Khadija might misunderstand and suspect some link between this and the innocent squabbles that frequently broke out between them. His sensitivity about being a half brother also prevented him from volunteering an opinion that might offend a family member whenever they confronted a serious matter of delicate family business.

"Aisha had not uttered a word but finally forced herself to speak, so her silence would not betray her pain, which she was determined to conceal. She would pretend to have no feelings about the engagement, no matter how much that distressed her, and announce her relief about the outcome, to conform with the atmosphere of the household that did not allow human emotions their rightful place and where the affections of the heart were hidden behind veils of self-denial and hypocrisy. So she



said, 'It wouldn't be right for me to marry before Khadija. The best thing by far is what my father has decided.' She continued with a smile: 'Why should you all be in such a hurry to get married? How do you know that we'll enjoy as happy a life in our spouse's home as we do here in our father's house?'" Chap. 66, pp. 158-159

"With this final statement, al-Sayyid Ahmad freed himself from the burden of a thought that had dominated his brain during the past three weeks. His mental struggle had begun the moment the woman tearfully confessed her offense when confined to her bed. At the first instant he had not believed his ears. As he started to recover from the shock, he had become aware of the loathsome truth that was an affront to his pride and dignity but had postponed his wrath when he saw her condition. In fact, it would be correct to say that he was unable to reflect then on the challenge to his pride and dignity because of his deep anxiety for this woman, verging on fear and alarm. He had grown used to her and admired her good qualities. He was even fond enough of her to forget her error and ask God to keep her safe. Confronted by this imminent threat to her, his tyranny had shrunk back. The abundant tenderness lying dormant within his soul had been awakened. He had gone back to his room that day sad and dispirited, although his face had remained expressionless.

"When he saw her make rapid and steady progress toward recovery, his composure returned. Consequently he began to review the whole incident, along with its cause and results, with a new eye, or, more accurately, the old one he was accustomed to using at home. It was unfortunate, unfortunate for his wife, that he reviewed the matter when he was calm and all alone. He convinced himself that if he forgave her and yielded to the appeal of affection, which he longed to do, then his prestige, honor, personal standards, and set of values would all be compromised. He would lose control of his family, and the bonds holding it together would dissolve. He could not lead them unless he did so with firmness and rigor. In short, if he forgave her, he would no longer be Ahmad Abd al-Jawad but some other person he could never agree to become." Chap. 31, p. 194

"He did not miss the implications of her reference to the generosity of the performer's lover. He had accepted from the start that his new romance would cost him dearly, but her reference to it seemed in poor taste and offended him. Motivated by an instinct of self-defense, he found himself forced to say, 'Perhaps he's a rich man.'

"Responding to his maneuver, she said, 'Wealth is one thing, generosity is another. Many a wealthy man is stingy.'

"He inquired, not because he wanted to know but merely to avoid silence, which he was afraid would seem to express disapproval, 'Who do you suppose this generous man is?'

"Turning the knob to raise the wick on the lamp, she answered, 'He's from our district. You must have heard of him ... al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad.'

" 'Who!'

"She turned toward him in astonishment to see what had frightened him. She found him in a rigid pose with his eyes bulging out. She asked him disapprovingly, 'What's the matter with you?'

"The name she had spoken had come upon him like a hammer falling violently on top of his head. The question had escaped from him unintentionally in a scream of alarm. For some moments he was bewildered and oblivious to his surroundings. When he saw



Zanuba's face again and its expression of astonishment and disapproval, he was afraid he would give himself away. He exerted his willpower to defend himself. To conceal his alarm, he resorted to some playacting. He clapped his hands together, as though he could not believe what had been said about the man, because he thought he was so respectable. He muttered incredulously, 'Al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad! ... With a store in al-Nahhasin?'

"She gave him a bitterly critical look for alarming her for no reason. She asked him scornfully, 'Yes, him. ...So what made you cry out for help like a virgin being deflowered?'

"He laughed in a perfunctory way. Praising God secretly that he had not told her his full name the day they met, he replied with mock astonishment, 'Who would believe this of such a pious, respectable man?'

"She looked at him with skepticism before asking him sarcastically, 'Is this what really alarmed you? ... Nothing but that? Did you think he was a sinless saint? ... What's wrong with his doing this? Can a man attain perfection without having an affair?'

"He said apologetically, 'You're right . . . there's nothing in this world worth being astonished at. He laughed nervously and continued: 'Imagine this dignified gentleman flirting with the sultana, drinking wine, and swaying to the music....'" Chap. 39, pp. 247-248

"Taken as a whole, their conversation betrayed Khadija's prejudice against Zaynab and the mother's fear of the consequences, although Amina did not divulge everything she felt. That evening she had learned things about herself she had not known before. She had frequently felt disappointed or uneasy with Zaynab but never to the point of hating or disliking her. She had blamed the problem on the girl's pride, whether or not it was justified. Today she was appalled to find Zaynab violating common decency and tradition. In Amina's opinion, Zaynab was arrogating to herself masculine prerogatives. She took exception to this conduct, precisely because she was a woman who had spent her life shut up inside her house, a woman who had paid with her health and well-being for an innocent visit to al-Husayn, the glory of the Prophet's family—not to Kishkish Bey. Her silent criticism was mixed with a feeling of bitterness and rage which she seemed to be rationalizing when she observed to herself, 'Either that woman is punished too or life has no meaning.'

"Thus in one month of living with this new woman, Amina's pure, devout soul was soiled by rancor and resentment after a lifetime of earnestness, discipline, and fatigue during which her heart had known nothing but obedience, forgiveness, and serenity. When she retired to her room, she did not know whether she wished that God would conceal Yasin's crime, as she had stated in front of her children, or whether she hoped that he or, more appropriately, his wife would receive the scolding and punishment she merited. That night nothing in the world seemed to matter to her except preserving the family's traditions from being tampered with and defending them from the attack launched against them. Her moral fervor was keen enough to be cruel. She buried her normal, tender emotions deep inside herself in the name of sincerity, virtue, and religion, as an excuse for ignoring her troubled conscience. A dream may similarly reveal suppressed drives in the name of freedom or some other lofty principle." Chap. 46, pp. 310-311



"She performed her prayers and then went back to the window, driven by her curiosity. She peered out. Rays from the rising sun were beginning to adorn the gown of night. The light of morning was streaming off the peaks of the minarets and the domes. She was able to see the road much more clearly. Her eyes examined the shapes that had alarmed her when it was dark. She could see what they really were. A moan of terror escaped her, and she stepped back to rush to Fahmy's room. She woke him without any hesitation.

"The young man shuddered and sat up in bed. He asked in alarm, 'What's wrong, Mother?'

"Trying to catch her breath, she replied, 'The English are filling the street below our house.'

"The young man jumped out of bed to run to the window. Looking down, he saw a small encampment on Palace Walk under the cistern building at a vantage point for the streets that branched off there. It consisted of a number of tents, three trucks, and several groups of soldiers. Adjacent to the tents, rifles had been stacked up in groups of four. In each bunch the muzzles leaned in against each other and the butts were separated, forming a pyramid. The sentries stood like statues in front of the tents. The other soldiers were scattered about, speaking to each other in a foreign language and laughing. The young man looked toward al-Nahhasin and saw a second encampment at the intersection of al-Nahhasin with the Goldsmiths Bazaar. There was a third encampment in the other direction at the corner of Palace Walk and al-Khurunfush.

"His first impulse was to think that these soldiers had come to arrest him, but he soon decided that was silly. He attributed the idea to his rude awakening, from which he had not quite recovered, and to his sense of being followed that had not left him since the revolution had broken out. Then the truth gradually became clear to him. The district that had frustrated the occupying forces with its continual demonstrations had been occupied by troops. He went on looking through the blind, examining the soldiers, tents, and wagons while his heart pounded with terror, sorrow, and anger. When he turned away from the window he was pale and muttered to his mother, 'It's the English, just as you said. They've come to intimidate people and to stop the demonstrations at their source.'" Chap. 56, pp. 369-370

"Al-Sayyid Ahmad sensed what his son was going through and was touched. Therefore he shared some of his own thoughts with him. He told him, 'I know that, but I've decided we should be generous. Muhammad Iffat has an inflexible, Turkish mentality but a heart of gold. This is not the last word. It's not the end. I'm not forgetting your welfare, even though you don't deserve it. Let me proceed as I wish.'

" 'As you wish,' Yasin thought. 'Who has ever gone against your wishes? You marry me and divorce me. You give me life and take it away. I don't really exist. Khadija, Aisha, Fahmy, Yasin ... all the same thing. We're nothing. You're everything. No. ... There's a limit. I'm no longer a child. I'm just as much a man as you are. I'm the one who is going to decide my destiny. I'm the man who will grant the divorce or have her legally confined to my house until she's ready to obey me. Muhammad Iffat, Zaynab, and your friendship with her father can all lick the dust from my shoes.'

" 'What's the matter? Don't you have anything to say?' Without hesitation, Yasin answered, 'Whatever you want, Father.'

" 'What a life! What a household! What a father!' Yasin reflected. 'Scoldings, discipline,



and advice.... Scold yourself. Discipline yourself. Give yourself some advice. Have you forgotten Zubayda? Jalila? The music and the wine? After all that, you appear before us wearing the turban of the most authoritative Muslim legal scholar, the Shaykh al-Islam, and carrying the sword of the Caliph, the Commander of all Muslims.... Ira not a child anymore. Look after yourself and leave me and my affairs alone. "Marry." Whatever you say, sir. "Divorce." Whatever you say, sir.... Curses on your father." Chap. 60, pp. 409-410

" 'A boy or a girl?'

" 'Which do you prefer?'

" 'A boy, of course.'

" 'Perhaps she'll begin with a girl, like her mother.'

" 'Why not start with a boy, like her father?'

" 'Ah ...by the time school lets out, the baby will already have arrived. Then I won't get a chance to watch him come out.'

" 'You want to see him being born?'

" 'Of course.'

" 'You'd better postpone this desire until it's your own child.'

"Kamal was the most deeply affected by the news. It preoccupied his mind, heart, and imagination. Had he not felt that the school disciplinarian was keeping track of him and watching his every move to report in detail to his father, he would have been unable to resist the temptation to go to Sugar Street. He remained in school, but only in body. His spirit was hovering over Sugar Street, inquiring about the new arrival he had been awaiting for months, in hopes of learning its secret.

"He had once seen a cat give birth when he was not quite six. She had attracted his attention with her piercing meows. He had rushed to her, finding her on the roof under the arbor of hyacinth beans, writhing in pain with her eyes bulging out. When he saw her body part with an inflamed bit of meat, he had backed away in disgust, screaming as loudly as he could. This memory haunted his mind, and he felt the same old disgust. It was a pesky, distressing memory, encompassing him like a fog, but he refused to let himself be frightened. He could not imagine any connection between the cat and Aisha, except the slight relationship between an animal and a human being, whom he believed to be as far apart as earth from heaven. But what was going on in Sugar Street, then? What strange things were happening to Aisha? These were vexing questions that appeared to have no easy answers. The moment he got out of school that afternoon he dashed off at full speed to Sugar Street." Chap. 68, pp. 471-472

"The sea of people surged and swelled, and the waves thrust through every opening, sparing nothing in its way and leaving nothing behind it.

" 'I'll flee. There's no alternative. If the bullets don't kill you, the arms and feet will.' He meant to run or retreat or turn, but he did not do anything. 'Why are you standing here when everyone has scattered? You're in an exposed position. Flee.'

"His arms and legs began a slow, limp, disjointed motion. 'How loud the clamor is. But what are they screaming about? Do you remember? How quickly memories are slipping away. What do you want? To chant? What chant? Or just call out? To whom? For what? There's a voice speaking inside you. Do you hear? Do you see? But where? There's nothing. Nothing. Darkness and more darkness. A gentle motion's pushing with the



regularity of the ticking of a clock. The heart is flowing with it. There's a whisper accompanying it. The gate of the garden. Isn't that so? It's moving in a fluid, rippling way and slowly dissolving. The towering tree is dancing gently. The sky ... the sky? High, expansive ... nothing but the calm, smiling sky with peace raining from it." Chap. 70, pp. 492-493



## Topics for Discussion

Describe Maryam's roles in the novel. Are her various personas consistent? Is she more a woman or a symbol of womankind? Give examples.

How is young Kamal used in the novel to explore the institution of marriage and its rituals?

How do mothers in this novel counsel their daughters to react to their husbands' bad behavior? Does it have the desired effect or is the younger generation in early twentieth-century Egypt unwilling to play the traditional role?

How does British imperialism provoke Islamic radicalism? Does the novel provide insights into the present state of the Middle East?

How do Ahmad Abd al-Jawad and his son Yasin compare and contrast? What other factors help form Yasin's personality?

How is the sexual "double standard" portrayed in the novel? How do the men justify their actions?

How is martyrdom treated in the novel? Is it heroic, tragic, or both? What impact do you suppose Fahmy's death will have on his family and the society he wanted to serve as a lawyer?