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# The Fundamental Necessity of Interpretation

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Literary Rewriting and Hermeneutics in Naguib Mahfouz'

*Arabian Nights and Days*

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Finally, as a Muslim, I would like to publicly denounce the 'Islamic' attacks that have been carried out in the name of my beautiful religion. As Socrates once said: "There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance." That said, any form of literalism or fundamentalism can in my opinion only be a declaration of ignorance.

## ABSTRACT

The novel that is being discussed is Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* (1995), which is an adaptation of the *Arabian Nights* (1706). This thesis focuses on the implicit objective of the author's rewriting, which concerns the reawakening of the hermeneutic imperative at the heart of Islam. The novel emphasizes the importance of knowledge, reflection, and reevaluation in religion, thus rejecting blind imitation. The author is readdressing the past and trying to establish a new relationship with Islam in this particular instance. He is reconsidering the original source of Islam without trying to repeat it, but rather adapts it in order to come to a more profound relationship and more genuine understanding of religion. By reengaging with the narrative, the reader is following in the footsteps of the author: he is translating and shaping the text into a work of his own, and therefore instigating his own process of self-discovery and self-development. Subsequently, the reader - just like the Muslim - moves from a state of 'being' to one of 'becoming'.

**Key Words:** Hermeneutics, Rewriting, Exegesis, Naguib Mahfouz, Adaptation, Identity, Arabian Nights and Days

## SYNOPSIS

Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* (1995) is fulfilling two objectives simultaneously. The first objective consists of Mahfouz using literature to retell, rewrite, and reevaluate the original stories of the *Arabian Nights* (1706). However, I am arguing that there is a more profound implicit level to his rewriting, which concerns the reawakening of the hermeneutic imperative at the heart of Islam. By retelling and refocusing on the theme of the main piece of Arabic literature, the author is drawing the reader's attention to the responsibility of interpretation, and the repercussions of blind imitation and blind faith. Through his rewriting, he is showing the reader how important reinterpretation and reevaluation is by manipulating the stories into a work of his own. Also, by adapting the *Nights* he is clearly not trying to mimetically reproduce the past, yet it is rather an instance of readdressing the past in order to establish a more genuine understanding of religion, and a new spiritual relationship with Islam: one that is more profound.

Interestingly, Mahfouz' novel starts at night 1002, the night that Shahrzad's storytelling comes to an end. By focusing on the Arabian *days* and *nights*, as opposed to Shahrzad, he expands the interpretative responsibility, making it a continuous process. In the *Nights*, Shahrzad's stories serve as a means to extend her life span, yet most importantly they encourage the community, as well as the reader, to reflect on the present with the aim of improving the future. By starting at night 1002, Mahfouz is attempting to take over Shahrzad's narrative task in order to provide the reader with the hope of a better future. Accordingly, this entails a future of capable readers, but above all it refers to a rebirth of Islamic hermeneutics.

The novel addresses many Muslims' misunderstandings of religion, which result from a literalist reading of the Quran. Therefore, an interpretative approach seems to be crucial so as to fight ignorance and avoid misunderstandings. Furthermore, the Prophet Muhammad was sent to mankind as a sort of prototype, however following his example does not imply that one must imitate his interpretation. Instead, Muslims should follow

his example of pursuing knowledge, and consequently hermeneutically engaging with the Text. By reevaluating, embodying, and hence internalizing God's Word, they will be able to go from a state of 'being' a believer to 'becoming' one. This circular motion is continuously illustrated in the novel, indicating the characters' processes of self-discovery and self-development, initiated by interpretation. By constantly taking new steps, the reader and the characters are constantly being shaped into new beings. However, they do not become someone else, instead they become themselves.

Moreover, Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* is filled with many acts of violence, which are not only the result of a misunderstanding of religion, but they are also the consequence of the corrupt government that manipulates Islam for power purposes. However, due to the fact that the majority of the formerly corrupt rulers have accepted the responsibility of interpretation, they have managed to reestablish a just, and more inclusive government.

In sum, the process of reevaluation and reformation seems to be a never-ending project. Mahfouz' novel is instigating a fundamental reform of the believer's mind. Essentially, religion is not merely a matter of being a believer, instead, it is one of submitting to knowledge with the purpose of *becoming* a Muslim.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

An allegory is not meant to be taken literally.

There is a great lack of comprehension on the part of some readers.

— Naguib Mahfouz

Naguib Mahfouz, the only Egyptian author to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, was once accused of blasphemy and apostasy by radical Islamists due to the publication of one of his novels, *Awlad Haratina* (1959) (Najjar 139; Sultan 45). Since then, he is considered as an enemy of Islam by Islamists (Najjar 143) because he is not apprehensive to expose the political and theological problems of the Muslim community. His *Arabian Nights and Days* (1995) serves a similar purpose. On its surface level, the novel seems to be a retelling of the *Arabian Nights*. However, upon closer examination, the reader realizes that Mahfouz' rewriting is not a simple repetition.

What I will argue is that Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* is fulfilling two objectives simultaneously. The first objective consists of Mahfouz using literature to retell, rewrite and reevaluate the original stories of the *Arabian Nights* (1706). However, I will argue that there is a more profound implicit level to his rewriting, which concerns the reawakening of the hermeneutic imperative<sup>1</sup> at the heart of Islam. The point of unification between these two tasks will focus on identifying and recognizing the necessarily hermeneutic nature of any textual engagement.

Due to the fact that Mahfouz is addressing contemporary problems of Islam in his novel and due to the thematic content of the *Arabian Nights*, discussing the nature of Islam is in my belief a necessity to reading Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days*. Essentially, in my reading, the submission implicit in Islam is not a blind submission to

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<sup>1</sup> The 'hermeneutic imperative' refers to the necessity for Quranic interpretation.

the sign. Instead, it is a submission to the hermeneutic imperative, that which effectively creates the distance between God's perfection and human imperfection.

In essence, Islam, like all the Abrahamic religions, is fundamentally a religion of the Book. Thus, by retelling and refocusing on the theme of the quintessential piece of Arabic literature, the *Arabian Nights*, I believe the author is drawing attention to our responsibility of interpretation. Accordingly, Mahfouz, the Western Muslim Egyptian, is going to transfer the same interpretative responsibility that we have in literature onto our reading of religious texts. Yet, it is important to note that he is not committing heresy by doing so since he is not challenging the imperfection of the Text<sup>2</sup>. Instead, he is creating a distance between human imperfection and divine perfection. Therefore, it is my belief that he is showing greater respect for the Holy Book by teaching the reader to read literature - which is a fundamentally hermeneutic endeavor - first. Once the reader has learned the meaning of these individually understandable and more accessible texts, he can then proceed to reading and understanding more profound texts, such as the Quran. However, it is noteworthy that I am not automatically assuming that the content of the Quran is more profound as such. In fact, by 'more profound' I mean that the religious Text is more emotionally intense, and consequently more spiritually challenging than said pieces of literature.

Mahfouz' novel starts at night 1002, the night that Shahrzad's storytelling comes to an end. Therefore, we are clearly dealing with a circular structure as there has been one clear revolution of a circle. Yet, given the fact that the content has changed, Mahfouz is suggesting that our reading should change as well, which alludes to the creation of a new *hermeneutic* circle. Thus, he is not merely contemporizing the *Nights* by any means: it is not a simple circle of repetition, but rather a creative attempt to go from the state of *being* to *becoming* through the process of reading. As such, the book is not a mere

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<sup>2</sup> The Text (with a capital letter) refers to the Quran.



mimetic copy of the original *Nights*. Instead, it is actually a much more creative, hermeneutic and adaptive process of rewriting. It is drawing - or even redrawing - us into a non-mimetic and therefore more interpretative relationship with the main text of Arabic literature, which illustrates the necessity of reevaluation. Therefore, it is accurate to state that Mahfouz is not trying to repeat the past. Alternatively, it is more an instance of readdressing the past and trying to establish a new relationship with Islam in this particular instance. He is thus reconsidering the original source of Islam without trying to repeat it, but rather adapting it in order to come to a more profound relationship and more genuine understanding of Islam. By reengaging with the narrative, we are following Mahfouz and also posing the question of what he is trying to accomplish with his reengagement and adaptation of the *Nights*. This is where the notions of identity, self-discovery and self-development come into being.

Mahfouz is showing the reader how important reinterpretation and reevaluation are by manipulating the stories into a work of his own. Not only is this illustrated through his rewriting of the *Nights*, but similarly, several characters in the novel go through a process of physical and psychological rebirth. The latter demonstrates the process of self-discovery initiated by interpretation. Correspondingly, the reader undergoes a similar process: he reevaluates the stories and moves further in order to shape his own interpretation. Essentially, the self changes through particular acts (Culler 108) which are in this case the processes of rereading and interpreting. Therefore, the self is not something given, but rather an adaptive process which is achieved through narrative rewriting. In fact, the 'I' is more of a construct, as opposed to a fixed subject. Interestingly, this correlates to Heraclitus' views on change: according to him, the same being cannot step in the same river twice (Graham), which parallels my own argument. By constantly taking new steps, the reader is shaped into a new, different being. Correspondingly, it is important to note that there is a clear analogy between being a reader of literature and being a Muslim.

Today, many Muslims are indeed trying to find a sense of harmony between traditional readings of the Quran and their modern ways of living (Saeed, "Some Reflections" 221). In this regard, Muslims can be classified into one of the three major categories: Textualists, Semi-textualists and Contextualists. The Textualists aim for a literal and objective reading of the Text, while Contextualists are the ones who believe in interpretation and adaptation (Ibid.). A literalist reading of the Text would mean that the reader is incapable of making the transition from 'being' to 'becoming' which in my opinion alludes to a certain reluctance to change. This issue is clearly illustrated in the novel, where the sheikh, one of the wisest characters in the book, stimulates his fellow community members to "accept islam anew [...] so as to *become* a true believer" (Mahfouz 164, my emphasis) rather than to 'be' one. In other words, they already 'are' believers but the aim is to 'become' Muslims and this can only be attained through an internalization of the Text, which brings us to the contextualist approach. Essentially, this approach encourages the reader to change by reevaluating and giving a sense to what he is reading, since "a text is only a picnic where the author brings the words and the readers bring the sense" (Todorov, qtd. in Eco 24). Thus, God has not only given his followers a Text, but also the responsibility of interpretation to make the Text live. Making it come alive implies that each reengagement with the Text will mean a new content and a new reader. Accordingly, this makes narrative and hermeneutics a life-long project, just like being a Muslim.

Correspondingly, in the original *Nights*, Shahrzad accepts this hermeneutic necessity in order to create a new future, one night at a time. Mahfouz on the contrary, begins his story on day 1002. By focusing on the Arabian *days* and *nights*, he expands the responsibility of interpretation, making it literally a constant in one's life. Each day and night, Muslims have to pray to affirm their relationship with God. Accordingly, each time they are praying, they recognize the hermeneutic paradigm. Like Shahrzad, Mahfouz is

also attempting to create a new future by taking over Shahrzad's task of storytelling. Explicitly, this means a future of capable readers. Implicitly and more profoundly, it refers to a rebirth of Islamic hermeneutics.

Moreover, Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* addresses many Muslims' misunderstanding of religion. I believe that this misunderstanding is the result of a literalist reading of the Text as the characters in the novel who are being criticized for their ignorance are skilled at "memorizing" and "quoting" (Mahfouz 33). Therefore, an approach based on interpretation is crucial so as to fight ignorance and avoid misunderstandings, which are said to emerge naturally due to the changes in context that have arisen in the time separating the text from the reader (Eco xiii). Correspondingly, the Quran has been revealed at a specific moment in history and thus, in a specific context (Ramadan, "Western Muslims" 20) just like the original *Nights*. As a result, both books need a new hermeneutic approach in order to conform to the changing historical context. In Gadamer's words, "understanding is not reconstruction but *mediation*" ("Philosophical Hermeneutics" xvi - my emphasis). It is impossible for us to comprehend the past text in itself, and therefore our understanding will always be a mediation of the past meanings into the current present situation (Ibid.).

Most importantly, when the Quran was revealed, the Prophet Muhammad took the responsibility of explaining and interpreting the Quran (Saeed, "Interpreting the Quran" 44). Thus, Muhammad was accepting the interpretative responsibility God had given him in order to transmit it to his people. Furthermore, it is clearly stated in the Quran that Prophet Muhammad was sent to mankind as an example (Ali 351, Al-Ahzab 33.21), and due to the fact that the Prophet was not a Textualist Muslims should not be either. However, following the Prophet's example does not mean that they must imitate his interpretation. Instead, it is my belief that they should follow his example of hermeneutically *engaging* with the Text. As a matter of fact, Mahfouz' novel, which

serves as a prototype of this interpretative approach, is implicitly inciting the reader to follow its author's hermeneutic agenda. However, it is important to note at this point that there is no such thing as a 'perfect interpretation,' because each individual reads differently (Abbott 19).

Finally, *Arabian Nights and Days* is filled with many acts of violence. These acts are not only the result of a misunderstanding of religion, but they are also the consequence of political opportunists who manipulate Islam for political purposes (Thomas 309). The characters are often being called hypocrites and especially the ones who are granted a position of power. They are "[raising] aloft the badge of God and yet [plunging themselves] in dirt" (Mahfouz 32). As a result, almost all characters are trapped into a vicious circle of violence caused by the imitation of each other's acts, and this is where René Girard's mimetic theory comes into play. Essentially, it is a theory where the subject learns what to desire by focusing on the desire of the other (Girard, "The Girard Reader" 9), showing the essentially conflictual nature of desire. As such, this concept brings us back to Mahfouz' unwillingness to produce a mimetic copy of the *Nights* in order to redirect the reader's attention to the importance of interpretation and reevaluation. In fact, the novel is portraying the adverse consequences originating from imitation and representation.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned, this thesis will be structured as follows: in the first section, a link will be drawn between interpretation - more specifically Quranic exegesis - and the author's necessarily hermeneutic agenda. In essence, the necessity of knowledge and interpretation will be discussed, explored and emphasized, and most importantly, the focus will be laid on their contribution to the inherent spirituality at the heart of religion. In the second part, the attention will be aimed at the author's literary rewriting of the *Nights*, and its profound implicit level of reawakening the hermeneutic imperative at the core of Islam. Subsequently, the third chapter will concern the

repetitive and therefore significant process of storytelling in the novel. The characters keep producing - or rather reproducing - the same stories over and over again, thus instigating the process of interpretation, and this can eventually be linked to Mahfouz' rewriting and the first section on Quranic exegesis. Furthermore, the following chapter will focus on the concepts of self-identification and self-development, provoked by the action of interpretation. More specifically, the circular process between 'being' and 'becoming' will be emphasized and linked with the believers' quest for knowledge and inner peace. Finally, the last part will contain an explanation on the exploitation of religion for purposes of power given that the issue of political corruption is omnipresent in the novel.

## 2. HERMENEUTICS

My destination is no longer a place, rather a new way of seeing.

– Marcel Proust

First of all, what is hermeneutics and what does it aim for? Hermeneutics, in short, is the principle of interpretation and the practice of thinking that attempts to clarify the notion of understanding (Bruns 1). Accordingly, Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* emphasizes the necessity for interpretation. The characters are given the interpretative responsibility to reassess and to reevaluate instead of simply assimilating. This is one of the reasons why, on night 1002, Shahriyar decides to abandon his plan of killing Shahrzad because her stories are said to "open up worlds that invite reflection" (Mahfouz 2). Therefore, it is not simply a matter of understanding the stories but rather a process of interpreting and rethinking one's own comprehension of the text. However, this does not mean that Shahriyar has immediately accepted said interpretative responsibility. In fact, he merely acknowledges the hermeneutic paradigm but has yet to apply it because at this stage, he still is the blood-thirsty man he was before. Especially so, since the concept of understanding is not ontological but solely epistemological given that Shahriyar's comprehension is only a way of knowing rather than one of being. To unveil what is covered up, a description and recognition of that what is concealed do not suffice (Weinsheimer 8).

Heidegger's phenomenology, for example, must be seen as fundamentally hermeneutic: firstly because its purpose is meaning, and secondly because the meaning must be disclosed. Said process of uncovering is the function of interpretation (Ibid.). Thus, Shahriyar's understanding is exclusively located on the level of meaning at this point because Shahrzad's stories have made him realize that interpretation is a necessity. Now that the process of storytelling has been halted, he has the time to make

said “reflection” (Mahfouz 2) alive by embodying it. Essentially, Shahriyar’s quotation emphasizes the hermeneutic responsibility because it means that Shahrzad’s stories encourage the community, as well as the reader, to reflect on the present in order to *improve* the future, which parallels to what I believe Mahfouz is doing throughout his novel.

However, the reflection Shahriyar addresses implies not only a reevaluation of Shahrzad’s stories on the explicit level, but it entails a more implicit and more profound type of interpretation, namely Quranic exegesis.

## 2.1 QURANIC EXEGESIS

The Quran is the most important Text on which Islam is founded. The Prophet Muhammad’s task, as stated in the Quran, was to interpret the Text and explain it to the people (Saeed, “Interpreting the Quran” 8). Hence, the Messenger accepted the responsibility of interpretation God bestowed upon humankind. However, many Muslims are still denying this responsibility by relying on a tradition-based interpretation, which implies that the interpretation of the Holy Book should be guided by three main sources with the hope of restoring the original source of Islam: the Quran itself, the sayings of the Prophet and the sources originating from the earliest Muslims (Ibid. 42). The original source Saeed is referring to is the period of the Quranic revelation through the Prophet Muhammad (570-632) (Ali and Leaman 56). To me, the original source also alludes to the pure religious and spiritual experience the early believers had with the Divine.

Someday we are bound to come back to the beginning. Even the most distant pathways always lead us inward, completely inward, into intimacy, solitude between our self and our self – in the place where there is no longer anyone but God and our self (Ramadan, “Western Muslims” vii).

In this quote, Ramadan accentuates the spiritual relationship I am referring to. Understanding the Text in itself is not enough if the believer desires to feel a close connection with God. The aim is to “raise knowledge to the level of gnosis [...] in which one experiences what one knows with all the intimacy of being, and this means above all the unmediated experience of God, where one no longer retains any sense of one’s self [...] but is absorbed completely into God’s being” (Bruns 127). One needs to go from the state of knowing to embodying and feeling the knowledge in order to experience this spiritual relationship. This can only be achieved through a hermeneutic approach of the Text, where one assimilates his knowledge into his own intellectual horizon within the foundation of his own experiences (Betti 62). The reason why this profound spiritual relationship was commonly established by the early believers, is due to the Text being adapted to their specific contexts. Therefore, if one wants to return to the original source, the Text must be reinterpreted and adapted according to the reader’s current context. Nevertheless, it is important to raise the question of how far one can go with adapting the Text to one’s context given that there is a potential danger of relativism. One cannot merely rely on personal opinion without bearing in mind the historical, contextual and linguistic evidence of the revelation (Saeed, “Interpreting the Qur’an” 66). As such, the interpreter cannot reject the most relevant and evident message of the religious Text, which implies that the most indisputable meaning of the Quran should not be disposed of without authentic reasons or evidence (Ibid.). In this respect, Nietzsche’s *perspectivism* comes into play. Nietzsche claims that the “human intellect cannot avoid seeing itself in its own perspectives” (336), which entails the possibility of multiple truths rather than one universal, objective truth. By rejecting objectivism, one would think his perspectivism corresponds to the above-mentioned theory of relativism. However, Nietzsche argued that not all perspectives and interpretations are equitably valid (“Perspectivism”), just like not all interpretations of the Quran are equally valid. These invalid interpretations can be described as a product of the interpreter’s fantasy or more importantly, unsubstantiated *opinions* (Saeed, “Interpreting the Qur’an” 67).



Indeed, any interpretation is personal and subjective to a certain extent, yet these interpretations ought to be supported by valid arguments as opposed to opinions, based on solid evidence.

Returning to the importance of adapting the context, Gadamer notes: "Given the intermediate position in which hermeneutics operates, it follows that its work is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place" ("Truth and Method" 295). Thus, the circumstances in which the revelation and the understanding of the Quran took place do not correspond to the contemporary context and therefore, the Quran needs to be reread in its historical context. One needs to extract the principles from the Text and try to implement them into a new context. Thus, in order to be faithful to the Text one needs to go through a double dialectical process by asking what the Text says in the light of the context of its revelation and in which way one needs to extract the principle so as to implement it in a specific context within one lives now. In other words, in order to be faithful to the Text and its principles, one needs to understand the context of today. Correspondingly, Mahfouz' characters are incited to reinterpret the Word of God in order to rediscover the spiritual relationship with the Divine.

However, several characters who try to rethink and apply their knowledge to their own situation are hindered by others: Abdul Qadir is criticized by his friend for overdoing his "submission to the intellect" to which he answers that there are believers who are of the opinion that the intellect has no limits (Mahfouz 6). In this passage, Mahfouz is making clear that Muslims can still be believers even if they do believe in science and interpretation. I even believe he wants to stimulate the reader to show an openness to interpretation by indirectly arguing that openness to science and the intellect do not necessarily equate to blasphemy. On the contrary, God encourages his believers to reflect upon his Word rather than relying on assimilation alone: "Do they not then earnestly seek to *understand* the Qur'an, or are their hearts locked up by

them?" (Ali 436, Muhammad 47.24 - my emphasis). As Gadamer puts it: "understanding is not reconstruction but mediation" ("Philosophical Hermeneutics" xvi). In order to understand the Quran, one needs to adapt and reassess the Text. This is also what the reader is supposed to do: translate and shape the text into a work of one's own.

Sindbad is no longer willing to subject himself to the community's rejection of interpretation and decides to leave on a voyage:

I am fed up with lanes and alleys [...], with no hope of seeing anything new. Over there is another life: the river joins up with the sea and the sea penetrates deeply into the *unknown*, and the unknown brings forth islands and mountains, living creatures [...]. And, like many others, I contented myself with learning the rudiments of reading and religion [...] (Mahfouz 9-10 - my emphasis).

All his life, he has contended himself with learning and memorizing the Quran without actually understanding it. It is important to note that the Quran demands real interpretative effort on different levels (Ramadan, "Western Muslims" 22) and it therefore not merely represents a process of memorizing, but rather a process of embodiment. Accordingly, the Arabic word *quran* means "recitation" (Bruns 125), which to me, is an embodied, creative process of repetition and thus, the enactment of interpretation. Essentially, Sindbad is motivated by a burning hermeneutic desire: the desire for understanding and mastering his own religion although technically, he will never be able to master the Text given that one does not have access to the whole. The Book will always be more than he realizes, which is comparable to the alterity of language and literature in general. In addition, the unknown Sindbad is referring to alludes to the hidden meanings behind the Text. On his quest for meaning he is expecting to find complete satisfaction since he will be doing what God expects his believers to do: extending his knowledge through interpretation.

A clear contrast can be noted between the community's beliefs and Sindbad's. Sindbad is now willing to explore and interpret his religion as opposed to the other

community members, who are still showing a reluctance to reconsider the Text. The central issue here is the difference between on the one hand tradition-based exegesis and on the other hand reason-based exegesis. The first category of tradition-based exegesis aims to confine the adoption of independent interpretation in the understanding of the Text while accentuating the significance of exegesis with reference to the Quran itself, to the Prophet's sayings and also to the practices of the earliest Muslims (Saeed, "The Qur'an" 178-179). On the contrary, however, reason-based exegesis allows for independent reasoning and the interpretation of the Text (Ibid.). Yet, Muslims who have accepted another truth based on their own approach and understanding of the Text are being condemned: the Shiites and the Kharijites are pursued (Mahfouz 47) for being "devils who [deviated] from the Path" (Ibid. 48). Both groupings, and especially the Shiites, tend to emphasize the obscure meanings behind the Text while relying on a reason-based approach to Quranic exegesis (Saeed, "The Qur'an" 197-198). Thus, the government is trying to impose Sunni Islam - which emphasizes a literalist reading of the Quran - on the community members. Accordingly, those who do not adhere to the Sunni movement are "exterminated" because they are considered "apostates" (Mahfouz 38).

However, the government members are the real apostates since they are not doing what God assigned them to do: "God's vastnesses are spread [...] to those who have adhered to *wisdom*" (Mahfouz 33 - my emphasis). By imposing a literalist reading of the Qur'an, they are denying the necessity of knowledge bestowed upon humankind. God gave his believers the responsibility to incarnate His Word, to relive and embody It in order to make It come alive. The point is not to have a theoretical understanding of the Word; rather, the goal is to reach a gnostic experience (Bruns 127) generated by the Text. Another reason why I would consider a literalist reading of the Quran as a form of blasphemy is because God cannot be represented. In other words, reading the Text *verbatim* will lead to Him being represented in one specific way: through His Word.

Accordingly, it is impossible for human beings to gain access to the totality of God because one has only access to the parts, which technically constitute the whole. This is the idea behind the concept of the hermeneutic circle, in which the parts lead to an understanding of the whole (Weinsheimer 14). However, in this case there can be no complete understanding of God's entirety, yet, "all understanding involves a prior understanding" (Risser 67). Essentially, we have the ability to appropriate the Word of God due to the fact that we pre-understand it; we can already recognize the fragility and the poverty of our existence, we also know what it would mean to be saved (Weinsheimer 11) and above all, we recognize God's perfection and our own imperfection. Sanaan al-Gamali, a character from the novel who has just committed a crime, explicitly recognizes God's perfection by saying that "perfection is God's alone" (Mahfouz 22), thus recognizing his own imperfection. By making mistakes he is in the process of understanding his own imperfection, through which he enjoys a greater and more profound understanding of God's perfection. Therefore, the greatest way of celebrating God is to recognize human imperfection. Clear support for this claim can be found when looking at the meaning the interpreter may give to Paradise for example: "it will remain a human construct and a product of the human imagination" (Saeed, "Interpreting the Qur'an" 91), thus proving the imperfection of human interpretation.

Not only does the "pursuit of the Shiites and the Kharijites [decrease]" (Mahfouz 40), but also, most importantly Gamasa al-Bulti decides to free them at his own initiative (Ibid. 46). Both these passages show a social compassion for those who have accepted another truth. By liberating them, he is emphasizing the interpretative necessity at the heart of Islam and the possibility and even the necessity for multiple interpretations. Gamasa is gradually turning into a more responsible and tolerant Muslim. In fact, he is starting to make the transition from a textualist approach to a more contextualist one. Contextualists are of the opinion that the Holy Book must be used in order to create good and just societies, instead of simply deriving and applying strict rules (Saeed,

“Some Reflections” 223). The rigid rules, imposed by the sultan, are causing Gamasa to withdraw because they contravene the hermeneutic paradigm that Mahfouz promotes.

In addition, Nur al-Din and Dunyazad’s story is full of references to the necessity of knowledge. Accordingly, the characters are being criticized by the genies for “[living] the life of imbeciles” while “[having] an intellect” (Mahfouz 78). Even the Prophet Muhammad, who could neither read nor write, focused on broadening his knowledge (Ramadan, “In the Footsteps” 30). Seeking knowledge by submitting to the intellect is therefore not blasphemous. On the contrary, by wanting to acquire deep knowledge, one is following in the footsteps of the Prophet. God sent the Prophet to earth to serve as an example: “Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for anyone whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the praise of Allah” (Ali 351, Al-Ahzab 33.21). This verse can be read in two different ways: literally and contextually. In a literalist reading, it would refer to the reproduction and imitation of the Messenger’s behavior. Contextually, it would mean that the believer has to take over the responsibility Prophet Muhammad assumed to explain and interpret the Quran. However, it is interesting to note that the Prophet himself was not a Textualist since he accepted the interpretative responsibility God gave him. Thus, in either way, believers are supposed to follow and adopt his behavior of *interpreting* the Text. Aisha, the Prophet’s wife, said her husband was “like a Qur’an walking on earth”, which refers to the fact that he was “the concrete *embodiment* of the teachings” (Ramadan, “Western Muslims” 122 - my emphasis). Also, it is noteworthy that the Prophet himself accepted the different recitations provided to him by several believers (Saeed, “Interpreting the Qur’an 72), and, most importantly, he even confirmed and emphasized that different methods were used to uncover the Quran, referring to the fact that the sections could be read and interpreted in more than one way (Ibid.). In other words, following the Prophet’s example does not mean that one must imitate his own interpretation. Instead, I believe that one should follow his example of hermeneutically engaging with the Text. I believe that if God wanted his believers to follow the Prophet’s individual interpretation,

he would have put the *hadith* in the Quran. Interestingly, the words of the Prophet were always kept very distinct from the Word of God.

Correspondingly, Ramadan argues “there can be no revealed Text unless there is human intellect up to the task of reading and interpreting it” (“Western Muslims” 20). In fact, the genies do not deny the human intellect but they accuse the characters of not using it. As a result of being only skilled at “memorizing” and “quoting” (Mahfouz 33), the characters do not have access to the real meaning behind the Text. However, their will to have access increases throughout the novel because “the days and nights have taught [them] [...] to knock at the door of the inscrutable so that it may open wide and reveal light” (Ibid. 104). Each day and night, Muslims have to pray to affirm their relationship with God and each time they are praying, they are recognizing the hermeneutic paradigm. By praying and constantly evoking said paradigm, they are gradually discovering the hidden and “inscrutable” (Ibid.) meanings of the Text. However, the door will not instantaneously open wide but by actively investigating the Text, the light they are searching for will be revealed progressively.

And yet there are still several characters who are unwilling to recognize and admit to the divine revelation, claiming they “don’t want the truth and [they] don’t like it” (Mahfouz 118). But how do they know they dislike the truth if they refuse to be confronted to it? The problem here is not one of ‘not understanding’ but rather one of not wanting to understand or, according to Schleiermacher, one of “misunderstanding” (Gadamer, “Philosophical Hermeneutics” xiii). Misunderstanding emerges naturally, and therefore understanding must be sought continually (Schleiermacher, “Hermeneutik” 86). That said, the characters show a deep reluctance to uncover the “truth” (Mahfouz 118) which will allow them to avoid misunderstanding. Similarly, Textualists abhor interpretation and as a result, the same question arises: how are they intending to discover the truth if they are unwilling to use their intellect? Accordingly, Schleiermacher sees hermeneutics as “the art of avoiding misunderstanding”

("Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts" 112), and in this case hermeneutics will aid the characters find their *own*, likable truth. At this point, they do not like "the truth" (Mahfouz 118) because it is too abstract and out of context. However, once their knowledge of the Text is connected to their own experiences, they will be able to discover a truth that they can support individually. Essentially, they need to "[reflect] [themselves] out of the space of the text and [place] it in a space of [their] own" (Bruns 126). In order to *feel* the Quran, they must merge into it and this is why the Qur'an can never be fixed as a Text (Ibid.). Each individual appropriates the text according to his beliefs and experiences, which means that there will always be different understandings of the text. The description of Anees al-Ghalees emphasizes these diverse interpretations:

Some said that she was fair-skinned and blonde; some that she was golden brown; some described her as plump, while others lauded her slender build. All this so inflamed the secret wells of passion that the well-to-do and the notables rushed off to take the unknown by storm (Mahfouz 133).

All male characters are physically attracted to Anees al-Ghalees, who is perceived differently by each man. Therefore, it is accurate to state that Anees' character serves as an exemplification of the characters' individual perception of the Text as they all 'read' her differently. This particular characteristic arouses their curiosity because they start to realize that it is not unnatural to have different outlooks and interpretations. As a matter of fact, they are progressively recognizing the hermeneutic paradigm by wanting to discover what lies behind the mysterious woman, or more specifically: behind the Text. Most importantly, she cannot be appropriated (Ibid. 135), just like the Text - or any other text in general - can never be fully mastered. The male characters do not have access to the whole, which is why they make contextually motivated interpretations. As a result, they endure a great amount of suffering on their quest to knowledge. Nevertheless, as Aeschylus puts it, we learn through suffering (Risser 91). Firstly, this refers to the fact that one learns from his mistakes and that he acquires knowledge

through the feeling of disappointment (Ibid.). However, one also discovers the limitations of humanity, the distance that separates the human being from the Divine (Ibid.). So the characters are experiencing and recognizing the distance between their own imperfection and divine perfection by submitting to interpretation: the Book is perfect, but one's ability to understand it is necessarily imperfect.

Additionally, "the world, following in the footsteps of religion, became lost" (Mahfouz 134) and completely alienated. All their lives, the characters have been learning "the rudiments of religion" (84) without being taught to develop an alternative, flexible approach. By seeing Anees al-Ghalees differently, they are confronted to several different readings of the Text at once. Hence, their alienation is the result of a first and direct confrontation with hermeneutics because they are directly facing the alienation of meaning that the Quran has been subjected to. Accordingly, the self-alienation of a past consciousness is overtaken by their own present horizon of understanding (Gadamer, "Truth and Method" 305-306). The process of interpretation will bring the written tradition back out of the alienation in which it is situated (Ibid. 362). As a result, the alienation they are feeling will be resolved by interpretation due to the fact that interpretation is an event of conquering self-alienation (Risser 166).

Similarly, the idea behind Aladdin's story is connected to Sindbad's as they both share a willingness to expand their knowledge. Aladdin encounters the sheikh, who tells him that he has learned what he needs to know and that now, he is ready to "take the tools of [his] trade and move off" (Mahfouz 158). More specifically, now that he has learned the "rudiments of religion" (Ibid. 84), he is ready to apply his knowledge of the Text to his own situation by interpreting the Word of God. Accordingly, the Quran serves as a sort of guide rather than a book of laws. There is a verse that describes the Quran as "a Guidance and a Mercy" for the believers (Ali 164, Yunus 10.57). Thus, it contains ideas, values and principles that are applicable through the changing context (Saeed, "The Qur'an" 221) and consequently it is the believer's task to apply his acquired knowledge



while being *guided* by the Text. One has to give meaning to the Text because the meaning in itself is not self-present. Instead, it is continuously awaiting further development (Weinsheimer 68).

However, before even having the chance to start searching for meaning, Aladdin is already complaining that he “[wants] to understand” (Mahfouz 161). Yet, understanding can only show itself in action (Bruns 10) and therefore, he will have to process and embody the parts he already understands in order to instigate the circular movement of understanding. It is essentially a sort of becoming of something that already is. In Heidegger’s words: “In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself” (qtd. in Weinsheimer 10). Thus, the basic values and principles of religion already understood by Aladdin will be reassessed and brought to life into a new, dynamic framework, and eventually they will form a new understanding - i.e. one that has not been acquired yet. Correspondingly, the sheikh tells Aladdin to have patience because “it is only the beginning of a mutual acquaintance under a starlit scene” (161). Although Aladdin was theoretically religious before his encounter with the sheikh, he was incapable of feeling God’s Word. However, due to his willingness to reevaluate and reinterpret the Text, he is now aiming to develop an unmediated relationship with God: a relationship that can only be established through an acceptance and a fulfillment of the hermeneutic responsibility. However, it is essential to note that one will never be able to attain an unmediated relationship because the relationship with the Divine will always be mediated in a certain way. As Saeed puts it, “God’s speech at the Unseen level is not accessible or comprehensible to humans” (Saeed, “Interpreting the Qur’an” 30). Therefore, the effort to try to explore God’s speech at the human level is doomed to fail considerably, and trying to uncover said speech would correspond to trying to describe the Unseen world, such as Heaven and Hell (Ibid.). Saeed further describes the mediated nature of the Word of God:

When the Qur’an describes Paradise, the language, ideas, meanings and descriptions used in that context are based on the experiences of human beings in

this world. What is beyond human experience and imagination cannot be comprehended in anything but approximate terms and within the confines of our experience and via our language, which itself is extremely limited (Ibid.).

Of course, the oneness that a believer feels with God could certainly be described as 'immediate' and thus not mediated, but at this point it is important to recognize the distance between Divine and mortal: since the Divine will always be limited by one's ability to perceive and understand Him, human finitude will always be a mediating factor in one's relation with the Divine. So, while I believe it is argumentatively consistent to speak about the feeling of immediate intimacy with the Divine, one's own limitations mean that one is always only getting a fraction of the full experience, and therefore, it is accurate to state that human finitude mediates the possibility of full revelation.

Most importantly, the unmediated spiritual relationship with God that both characters are aiming for is actually one of the goals of Sufism. In fact, the sheikh is even said to have "[written] a book about Sufism which only the perfect could aspire to" (Mahfouz 161). Only God is perfect, which means that no one will ever be able to reach perfection, hence the impossibility of attaining said relationship. Essentially, basic to Sufism is the belief that knowledge is ineffective unless it is linked internally with one's experiences (Bruns 127), which is also the idea behind philosophical hermeneutics. In both cases, the aim is to "become what you are" (Heidegger 186). However, "only the mystics can raise knowledge to the level of [gnosis], in which one experiences what one knows with all the intimacy of being" (Bruns 127). There is a similar parallel between the sheikh's sayings and Bruns' as they both claim that not everyone can reach a level of gnosis. I believe it can be reached on two conditions: firstly, by submitting to the distance between oneself and the Divine, and secondly by accepting and submitting to the interpretative responsibility God bestowed upon humankind. By complying with these two conditions, one will be able to experience and feel what one already knows.

Most importantly, the mystical and Sufi traditions continuously remind us that there are multiple ways as opposed to only one, comparable to the fact that there are many paths up the mountainsides that can be ascended in order to reach the same top, ideal or truth (Ramadan, "The Quest for Meaning" 48). However, the fact that there are multiple ways does not take away the nature of the essential truth (Ibid.). Thus, by emphasizing the Sufi tradition, Mahfouz is drawing attention to the many paths - and therefore the diverse interpretations - that can be taken in order to reach a spiritual relationship with the Divine. In other words, the outcome remains the same, but the manner in which one appropriates and exploits his religious knowledge differs.

While Aladdin is attempting to reach a higher spiritual level, Ugr is trying to hold him back by telling him he is "sufficiently religious" and that he has to be "careful not to overdo it" (Mahfouz 162). Due to the fact that Ugr has not yet learned the importance and the necessity of interpretation, he is assuming that becoming more religious amounts to a transition to fanaticism. To put it differently, like many Muslims he is a believer whose faith is based on a literalist reading of the Text. Accordingly, he seems to be fully aware that there is a risk of fundamentalism if the whole Quran is to be taken literally, which indirectly indicates that he knows that the verses are out of context. In fact, Ugr seems to be nurturing a certain fear towards Aladdin's spiritual transformation due to the fact that he does not know enough about his own tradition and religion. In other words, by not knowing who he is, he is scared of who he is not and who he might become. By merely focusing on the static meaning of the Text as such, he is denying the spirituality that lies at the core of religion.

Aladdin, who is in the process of growing in his religion, hears a meaningful song:

My night is resplendent with your face  
with darkness in force among people  
While people are in the depths of darkness,  
we are in the brightness of daylight (Mahfouz 168).

The lyrics of this song provide the reader an allegorical representation of what is occurring in Aladdin's mind. The darkness stands for the ignorance that has veiled the people's eyes and hearts from discovering the spiritual purpose of religion. Aladdin in contrast, has found the light in his life by aiming for spirituality. The evolutionary process of becoming what he knows is finally taking place. Due to the sheikh's help he will now be able to feel the Quran and most importantly, the Text will help him "[heal] the [diseases] in [his] [heart]" (Ali 164, Yunus 10.57) just like it was supposed to do. As a result, Aladdin's individual relationship with God will be emphasized and the authentic religious task of knowledge and interpretation will eventually be accomplished.

Similarly, Sindbad has returned from his voyages having learned several lessons that coincide with Aladdin's revelation. Firstly, he has learned "that man may be deceived by illusion so that he thinks is the truth" (Mahfouz 211). This perfectly correlates with the idea behind tradition-based exegesis. Its advocates are persuaded of the prohibition of a reason-based, personal interpretation. In this quotation, they are said to be misled by the illusion of thinking that the only way of approaching the Quran is through a literalist reading. As a matter of fact, Sindbad is showing the non-heretical nature of recognizing imperfection in interpretation and therefore the necessity for multiple interpretations and the implicit heresy of fundamentalism because fundamentalists assume they understand the Text perfectly. Additionally, the sultan asks "how [he makes] a distinction between illusion and truth" to which Sindbad answers: "We must use such senses and intelligence as God has given us" (Ibid. 211). He is publicly acknowledging the importance of knowledge conveyed to humankind by openly drawing a definite link between faith and intelligence.

Additionally, Sindbad is said to be "the first human to exploit [the roc] to his own ends" because on his adventures, he chose to cling to the bird when it was on "its journey toward the unknown" (Ibid. 212). This passage refers without any doubt to Sindbad's willingness and his initiation to explore the obscure meanings of the Text "to

his own ends” which means he is discovering the Word of God by applying It to his own situation. Subsequently, he is finally understanding the Text because “to understand a text always means to apply it to ourselves” (Gadamer, “Truth and Method” 398).

Furthermore, he has also learned that “food is nourishment when taken in moderation but is a danger when taken gluttonously” (Mahfouz 213). Accordingly, there are many Muslims who have never read the Quran, yet, It can become a safe haven for those in times of hardship. Owing to their oblivion to religion, the Quran can become a dangerous weapon due to the different historical framework in which the verses are set. As Ramadan puts it, “the most beautiful words can become the most dangerous of weapons when they are in the hands of human beings” (“The Quest for Meaning” 530). Therefore, if one takes religion “gluttonously” by relying too heavily on a literalist reading of the Text, the Book may become dangerous. Instead, one needs to take the time to read, interpret and reflect upon the Quran with the aim of strengthening the spiritual relationship with the Divine and only in this case, the “food [will be] nourishment”.

The next lesson Sindbad has learned is that “[continuing] with worn-out traditions is foolishly dangerous” (Mahfouz 213). On his travels, he was introduced to a horrible cultural practice that was nevertheless justified:

“But our religion does not require this from us.”

“We are not concerned with your religion [...] and our traditions are sacrosanct” (Ibid. 214).

In this case, tradition serves as an “anti-argumentative authority” (Risser 72). In fact, the voices of the past are being represented as the ‘truth’ because of the characters’ reliance on past traditions. It is thereby important to note that, indeed, the past designates the ground which the reader occupies when he understands (Gadamer, “Philosophical Hermeneutics” xv), and that accordingly the past plays a big role in shaping the reader’s current understanding. Yet, it should not *determine* the reader’s present interpretation

but rather *guide* it. In tradition, only the voices of the past acquire their meaning (Ibid. 11) and those of the present remain empty and useless. Correspondingly, tradition is the “inexhaustible reservoir of possibilities of meaning” (Ibid. liv) in which the interpreter brings the sense. Generally, holding on to tradition does not mean that one is stuck in the past. Instead, one cherishes and refers to one’s own tradition in order to be equipped to deal with contemporary issues. As such, tradition involves a sort of mediation of the past into present situations and it is therefore the believer’s task to transform these past meanings by making them fit into the contemporary context.

Moreover, Sindbad has also learned that “freedom is the life of the spirit and that Paradise itself is of no avail to man if he has lost his freedom” (Mafhfouz 214). The freedom he is referring to is one of an intellectual kind. It is the same kind of intellectual freedom that the first generation of Muslims enjoyed (Saeed, “Interpreting the Qur’an” 126). Yet, it is not only a freedom of interpretation and critically engaging with the Text, but also a right to religious freedom. Accordingly, the right to self-determination is an Islamic value captured in the Quran: “Let there be no compulsion in religion” (Ali 33, Al-Baqarah 2.256). So if God Himself gave his people the right to believe in him or not to believe in him, then it is not for any human being to take that freedom from another. However, the Quran takes a fascinating, unapologetic stance for what It claims is the truth and this is the beauty that Muslims have to embody through their intellectual discourses: how to develop an opinion that they are passionate about, and at the same time be able to engage with other interpretations and opinions that might differ from their own.

In addition, addressing Shahriyar’s dramatic change is a necessity at this point: he has gone from being a blood-thirsty man to a more tolerant and responsible human being. As I have already argued, he was merely thus acknowledging the hermeneutic paradigm rather than accepting it when he decided to free Shahrzad. This recognition has become

more of an acceptance throughout the novel, and by the end of the book he is eventually accepting the obligation of interpretation:

Knowledge is not gained by numerous narratives but through following knowledge and using it (Ibid. 210)

Traditions are of the past and of the past there are things that must become outdated (Ibid.214)

The sultan is finally accepting the necessity of becoming what he knows. In other words, he accepts the fact that interpretation not merely represents a static process of repeating past traditions, but rather an ontological process of embodiment which is also emphasized in literary theory: language is said to be performative because the information is not merely transmitted but enacted (Culler 98). As such, the sultan does not only describe his awareness concerning the embodiment of knowledge, but he really 'performs' the action he entitles by "[abandoning] throne and glory, woman and child" (Mahfouz 223) with the aim of seeking knowledge and experience. As a result, his level of understanding has shown an upward progression: it is no longer static. Instead, it is now established on the level of experience.

In order to illustrate Shahriyar's drastic change, Mahfouz goes a step further by transforming his appearance (Mahfouz 224) and by placing him "in a city not of human making: in beauty, splendor, elegance [...]" (Ibid. 225). Eventually the reader realizes that the last chapter is an adaptation of Adam and Eve's story and that Shahriyar is teleported to Paradise, where he is tempted to open the forbidden door: "Everything is clear except for this door" (Ibid. 227). The reason almost everything seems clear to him is because he has finally started interpreting and reassessing his knowledge. However, he is ignoring one of the lessons Sindbad taught him, namely to not take food gluttonously (Ibid. 213). Interestingly, the story of the Fall is essentially about desire and temptation for absolute knowledge. Thus, Sindbad is motivated by a desire to know the whole before having the chance to enrich his understanding of the parts. Making

contextually motivated interpretations is in this case important because he will never be able to have access to the whole. Similarly, Shelley states: "Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed" (509) and as such, Shahriyar may have never discovered the true meaning behind the door had he not succumbed to his desire of opening it. By revising the situation of Genesis the reader's attention is once again drawn to the importance of the intellect. Quranic revelation associates recognition of the Creator to knowledge, thus mirroring the source of creation itself (Ramadan, "In the Footsteps" 31).

In addition, the book ends with a strong quote that emphasizes the importance of hermeneutics:

It is an indication of truth's jealousy that it has not made for anyone a path to it, and that it has not deprived anyone of the hope of attaining it, and it has left people running in the deserts of perplexity and drowning in the seas of doubt; and he who thinks that he has attained it, it dissociates itself from, and he who thinks that he has dissociated himself from it has lost his way. Thus there is no attaining it and no avoiding it - it is inescapable (Mahfouz 228).

Although Mahfouz is not explicitly referring to the importance of hermeneutics in this quotation, a close analogy can be made. It seems as if he deliberately did not use any noun before using the pronoun 'it' with the aim of accentuating the importance of interpretation one last time: the reader can only speculate on the significance of the pronoun by interpreting. Essentially, the fact that there is no path to truth refers to the absence of one, universal truth. Conversely, by linking knowledge to one's individual experience, each individual can have his own exclusive truth. It also alludes to the inability to gain access to God's being, yet, one can cherish a hope of attaining the whole by developing an understanding of the parts.

Furthermore, the incapability of escaping and attaining allies with the impossibility of achieving one specific interpretation. The horizon of understanding is not immutable (Weinsheimer 15), thus mirroring the unfixability of the Text itself. Moreover, the



inability of escaping refers to the idea that one's comprehension is never purely objective as it is always a process of mediation. For example, the Quran I am using for this thesis is a mediated version of the original Word of God due to the fact that it has been translated from Arabic to English. It is based on the personal interpretation of the translator and, accordingly the same verses are to be found written differently in other translated versions. Just like Saeed puts it: "When it is translated it becomes an interpretation" (Saeed, "Interpreting the Qur'an" 113). The world is meaningless in itself and all meaning is the consequence of an interpreting mind (Elleström 21). Thus, it is accurate to state that hermeneutics is inevitable due to the fact that the text and the interpreter are stuck in a never-ending dialogue.

## 2.2 THE GENIES

Genies are mysterious and frightening creatures that can cause humankind infinite grief (Lebling 1). Yet, some of them can be good while others can be mischievous and, most importantly they can help as well as hinder (Ibid.). The Quran itself dedicates a whole *surah*<sup>3</sup> to the genies where God makes a distinction between genies who are guided by the Qur'an (Ali 507, Al-Jinn 72.1-2) and those who are not. Similarly, Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* comprises two believing genies who are guided by God and two non-believing genies.

The God-fearing Sanaan al-Gamali is confronted to Qumqam, who is one of the believing genies of the book. Subsequent to their encounter, Sanaan seems to be falling into an abyss of violence and misery which is why he accuses Qumqam of interfering in his life and being the primary cause of his own violent crimes. However, a sharp contrast can be noted between Sanaan's radical transformation and the genie's positive attributes: Why did Sanaan become evil after being introduced to a good and God-

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<sup>3</sup> Chapter of the Quran.

fearing genie? I argue that the genies serve a specific purpose in this novel: they are sent to humankind to remind them of their hermeneutic responsibility. Most importantly, Qumqam is said to have nominated Sanaan “to be saved” because he recognizes his “good points” (Mahfouz 22), which indicates that the genies choose their victims carefully. Yet, even though Sanaan disposes of desirable characteristics, he remains an imperfect human being because “perfection is God’s alone” (Ibid.). As such, the believing genies recognize the imperfection of humans by helping them in order to understand their own misinterpretation.

After Sanaan shifts the blame onto Qumqam for the murder he committed, the latter puts him in his place by saying “[he] never asked [him] to do something evil” (Ibid. 19). Instead, the genie attempted to direct Sanaan’s attention to interpretation in order to avoid misunderstanding yet Sanaan failed to do so. Qumqam nevertheless decides to grant him another chance by giving him explicit and detailed instructions for his next task. Still, rather than reassessing and reevaluating the genie’s instructions, Sanaan does exactly what Qumqam asks him to do without any consideration. By mimetically complying with the genie’s instructions, he is refusing to accept the hermeneutic paradigm, which leads to his downfall. Accordingly, he is being criticized for not “[*thinking*] like a human being” (Ibid. 27 - my emphasis) with the aim of gaining knowledge. While there are no explicit references to the concept of Quranic exegesis in this passage, a close parallel can be drawn. Sanaan’s story uncovers the dangers of a literalist reading of the Quran. As I have previously argued, the Quran is set in a different historical framework, and by relying too heavily on a mimetic reading of the Text the Quran may become dangerous which will in turn cause It to lose its spiritual purpose.

Similarly, Gamasa al-Bulti has found himself confronted to another believing genie, after which he has been suffering from insomnia: “He stayed awake nights *thinking* about the consequences [...]” (Mahfouz 35 - my emphasis). The genies make an appearance into their lives with the aim of stimulating their process of thinking, and in

this respect Gamasa seems to have succeeded in grasping the importance of reassessment and interpretation with the help of the genie, whom he later describes as his “spiritual guide” (Ibid. 67). In fact, Gamasa “had forgotten God until he had been reminded of Him by a genie” (Ibid. 43). Through reevaluation and a recognition of the hermeneutic paradigm, he is reminded of the interpretative responsibility God bestowed upon his believer, thus reinforcing his spiritual relationship with the Divine.

In contrast, the characters in ‘Anees al-Ghalees’ are confronted to two non-believing genies who want nothing more than to cause their downfall. Much to their delight “all were, with one single force, descending to ruin” (Mahfouz 135). Instead of helping the characters with their understanding of religion, the bad genies encourage more misinterpretation by tempting them away from submission. As a result, they tend to make the hermeneutic paradigm even more complex by exasperating it. In addition, Fadil Sanaan suffers the same fate after being given the cap of invisibility by the same genies. Essentially, they give the characters what they think they want: mastery. But in fact, they provide them with a reading and tempt them away from the responsibility of interpretation, thus making them feel “lost” (Ibid. 134).

### 3. THE CONCEPT OF REWRITING

The real voyage of discovery consists not in  
seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

– Marcel Proust

On its surface level, Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* seems to be a retelling of the *Arabian Nights*. However, upon closer examination, the reader realizes that Mahfouz' adaptation is not a simple repetition. The author chose thirteen disconnected tales from the *Nights* and manipulated them in order to convey a message (El-Enany 160). The tales that are originally all independent of each other are shaped and joined up in a narrative continuum (Ibid.) with the aim of exposing the political and theological problems of the Muslim community. There is, however, a more profound implicit level to his rewriting, which is the reawakening of the hermeneutic imperative at the heart of Islam and a rejection of blind imitation common to Islamic practice. Therefore, his *Arabian Nights and Days* is not merely a mimetic copy of the *Nights* but rather a reevaluation and a reassessment of the original tales.

Accordingly, the novel does not focus on Shahrzad's process of storytelling itself, but rather on what happens following night 1002, creating a narratological inversion from the very beginning. By focusing on the Arabian *days* and *nights*, as opposed to the *Nights*, he expands and highlights the responsibility of interpretation, making it literally a constant in one's life. Each day and night, believers are expected to pray in affirmation of their spiritual relationship with God. As such, each time they are praying they are recognizing the hermeneutic paradigm.

The traditional interpretation of the *Nights* has colored the reader's understanding on the surface level. The reader would rather expect to encounter the *Nights'* most popular characters and stories in Mahfouz' novel, such as Ali Baba, Jaafar, and especially

Aladdin's famous story. Admittedly the novel contains a story on Aladdin, yet it is not the story of the genie and the magic lamp with which he is generally associated. Instead of presenting known characters and stories to the public, I argue that Mahfouz deliberately decides to confront the reader with stories that are less familiar. The aim of this approach resides in reflecting the underlying objective of the text, which consists of a confrontation with the hermeneutic imperative so that the reader can be acquainted with some of the more obscure meanings behind the text. Accordingly, Sindbad's quest reflects the reader's journey into the unknown: he is "fed up with lanes and alleys [...] with no hope of seeing anything anew" (Mahfouz 9). Similarly, the reader has always been confronted to the most famous storylines of the *Nights* without having the opportunity to reflect on about anything different. It is therefore accurate to state that Sindbad's character is a personification of the reader's voyage into the unknown.

Western Muslims, such as Mahfouz, are confronted to new challenges. There are always new answers to the new questions that arise in the new context. Muslim communities try to confront the contemporary challenges by suggesting effective and efficient answers. Through the process of rewriting, Mahfouz is reevaluating Islam by searching for said answers. By rewriting the stories, he is technically positioning himself under God, thus recognizing his own imperfection as opposed to God's perfection. As a matter of fact, he does not create a completely new story from scratch because in the novel's Islamic context this would be considered blasphemous due to the fact that he would be *de facto* adopting God's role. In essence, the original is often said to be better than the adaptation, which is generally judged negatively. To put it differently, the process of adaptation is perceived as a sort of 'lowering' a story to another medium or genre, which explains why the response to adaptations is inclined to be negative (Hutcheon 3). However, one needs to adopt a different perspective on this issue because a reevaluation means that the author is reconsidering the original and eventually shaping and manipulating it into a work of his own. Hutcheon, who confidently argues in favor of revision, states that adaptation is not merely a process of blind imitation and

slavish copying. Instead it is the act of making the revised material one's own (Ibid. 20). Mahfouz' adaptation is therefore not merely a process of rewriting but also one of re-possession (Ouyang, Van Gelder ix). Similarly, the process of adaptation always includes both a re-creation of the original creation and a re-interpretation, which has been called appropriation (Hutcheon 8) - or which I would rather call re-appropriation. In fact, there is a direct link with the reader due to the fact that he undergoes the same process as the author: he needs to reevaluate the stories and move further in order to shape his own interpretation. Benjamin sees the act of adaptation as a sort of re-engagement with the original text that leads the reader to perceive the text in different ways (Hutcheon 16). Accordingly, this correlates to the way Mahfouz wants people to reassess and reinterpret Islam. This lack of interpretation is the problem that he is emphasizing throughout his novel, where the people of the community are said to be "skilled at memorizing, quoting, and hypocrisy" (33). Yet, it is important to note that he is not trying to reform Islam because faithfulness to the Islamic principles does not equate to a reform of the religion itself. However, I argue that the novel serves as a means to reform the believers' *minds*.

In Hijazi's view, the religious theme of the novel does not particularly make it a religious text (M. Najjar 156). However, it is my contention that Mahfouz' adaptation serves as a means of reevaluating Islam without committing blasphemy. His argument seems to be that many believers have forgotten the hermeneutic approach required for reading the Text. According to Schleiermacher, correct interpretation demands "a regulated re-creation of the creation to be understood" (qtd. in Weinsheimer 3). Due to his inability to recreate and rewrite the Quran without committing blasphemy, adapting the quintessential book of Arabic literature seems to be the best alternative. It is thereby important to note that, as a Muslim, he is not claiming the Quran is not a perfect Text. Instead, it is my belief that he is showing greater respect for It by teaching the reader how to read literature first. Once the reader has individually understood and formed an

interpretation of his literary novel, one can proceed to reading the Holy Text, which can technically be considered as being more profound due to its inherent spiritual meaning.

Another aspect that alludes to the religious nature of the novel is the use of stories that stretch over numerous chapters, which corresponds to the narrative techniques used in the Quran (Cross 22). Cross further claims that neither one of the two books adopts a monotonous diachronic sequence. Instead, both proceed in accordance with dramatic requirements that specify where the various parts of the story should be situated. Accordingly, in the Quran, one individual story may be extended over several *surahs*. Similarly, in Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days*, several sub-narratives develop in different chapters. In this regard, there is a distinct narrative continuity at the end of each chapter and the beginning of a subsequent one (Ibid.). This specific narrative technique is not only borrowed from the Quran, but it is also a remainder of the original *Nights*: each night, Shahrzad used to bring her unfinished story to a halt, which she would then resume the next night in order to stay alive. Correspondingly, Mahfouz is taking over Shahrzad's narrative task in order to show the reader that the end of Shahrzad's storytelling does not equate to the fact that there is no hope anymore. Both are making use of narration in order to generate hope for a better future.

In addition, Mahfouz can be seen as a postmodernist since its advocates defend a rethinking and a reconfiguring of the past (Saeed, "The Qur'an" 225). This significantly correlates with Hijazi's views on Mahfouz' purpose of rethinking history (Najjar 156). Essentially, the fundamental necessity of reevaluation is illustrated through his process of rewriting. As a result, the reader is drawn into a non-mimetic and therefore more hermeneutic relationship with the main text of Arabic literature. Therefore, it is accurate to state that Mahfouz is not trying to repeat the past. Alternatively, it is more an instance of readdressing and rethinking the past and trying to establish a new, more spiritual relationship with Islam in this respect. He is thus reconsidering the original source of Islam as such without trying to repeat it, but rather by adapting it in order to come to a

more profound relationship and more genuine understanding of Islam. Accordingly, one of the most frequently used terms to refer to interpretation in the Quran is *ta'wil*. This word comes from the word *awl*, which designates a return to the origin of something (Saeed, "Interpreting the Qur'an" 58). As a matter of fact, returning to the origin does not mean reiterating history but rather reconnecting with the past. By reengaging with the narrative, the reader is following in the footsteps of Mahfouz.

This reengagement is emphasized by Shahriyar when he admits that Shahrzad's stories "open up worlds that invite reflection" (Mahfouz 2) and by Sanaan, who utters that "life gives opportunities for both reflection and repentance" (Ibid. 23). Both characters seem to be aware that life is more than just a static repetition of the past. Correspondingly, there is a difference between dynamic (hermeneutic) and static repetition: "It is by virtue of human finitude that I subject everything to review and revision, and consequently, a dynamic repetition would seem to be universal for the kind of knowledge at issue in the hermeneutic experience" (Risser 39). Risser further addresses Gadamer's assertion that understanding means always understanding differently and this seems to be coherent from the viewpoint of dynamic repetition - which I would call a dynamic revision rather than a repetition in order to avoid confusion. Accordingly, in hermeneutic revision, one's understanding is not a simple reiteration of the original (Ibid.), but instead hints at more of a creative rewriting and reassessment of the authentic text. This significantly correlates with Mahfouz' rewriting of the *Nights*: he shows his personal understanding of the *Nights* and most importantly, his individual understanding of the divine Text by not merely forming a circle of repetition but by adopting a creative loupe. Also, both Shahriyar and Sanaan finally realize that understanding will not be attained by a mere repetition, hence expressing the need for reflection and interpretation. By emphasizing the hermeneutic responsibility, they are encouraging the community and the reader to reflect on the present with the aim of improving the future, which is also what I believe Mahfouz is doing.



### 3.1 IMITATION

Mahfouz' refusal to imitate does not only become clear through his rewriting of the *Nights*, but it also becomes evident when comparing the content of the different chapters of his novel. Sanaan's story closely resembles Gamasa's as both characters are confronted to a believing genie and they are both charged with the same task. However, Gamasa himself perceives one major difference between his own story and Sanaan's: "Why did Singam not desert me at the crucial moment, as Qumqam did with Sanaan al-Gamali?" (Mahfouz 57). Furthermore, the reluctance to imitate also becomes clear when Gamasa's reincarnated persona - Abdullah the porter - is granted a position in the government, which he eventually declines because he resolutely refuses to replicate his corrupted past life. As a matter of fact, by continuously rejecting the idea of imitation, the reader is constantly being reminded of the importance of interpretation and reevaluation.

Not only is Mahfouz rejecting the idea of imitation, but most importantly, he is also criticizing it throughout the novel. The characters are said to be "skilled at memorizing, quoting and hypocrisy" (Mahfouz 33). Also, the government is "[increasing] the exhortations at the *mosques* and at *religious festivals* (Ibid. 25 - my emphasis) because they are aware that the religious people of their community are easy preys owing to their heavy reliance on repetition and blind imitation. Likewise, some verses of the Quran indicate that the Prophet himself, when being confronted to God's revelation, was constantly trying to repeat the Words with the aim of memorizing them (Saeed, "Interpreting the Qur'an" 32). Yet, God advised him not to be worried about the process of memorizing itself (Ibid. 33), which once again proves that the believers are supposed to take the responsibility of hermeneutically engaging with the Text. By continuously focusing on the literal meaning of the Book, one will not be able to grasp the underlying objective. In my opinion, the ultimate goal of Islam is to be faithful to the objective rather than constantly relying on a literalist reading. Hence, if the believers want to keep

the objective, they are obliged to deal with the historical context from the very beginning.

In addition, the Prophet Muhammad once said, according to a *hadith*, that “the believer is a mirror to his brother” (Kabbani par. 9). This idea is actually illustrated through Mahfouz’ literary rewriting of the *Nights* because his novel is mirroring the original tales. Yet, due to the fact that he is reevaluating and reinterpreting the stories rather than mimetically reproducing them, he is exemplifying that the notion of mirroring does not necessarily equate to copying. Accordingly, this concept becomes clear in ‘The Sultan’: Ibrahim the water-carrier decides to “set up an imaginary kingdom” (Mahfouz 177) where he pretends to be the sultan Shahriyar. Instead of abusing his power to kill innocent souls like the real sultan does, he is determined to create - or rather *recreate* - a just kingdom where everybody “could all be on an equal footing” (Ibid.). Therefore, it is accurate to state that Ibrahim is mirroring Shahriyar by pretending to be him. Yet, he is refusing to imitate his immoral behavior:

I thank God, Who has helped me to repent after I had become immersed in the shedding of innocent blood and in plundering the property of Muslims (Ibid. 174).

Instead of copying Shahriyar’s corruptness, the presumed sultan decides to follow the path of repentance. In this respect, Ibrahim is recreating and reevaluating Shahriyar’s character by mirroring him, which closely correlates to how Mahfouz is manipulating the stories of the *Nights* into a work of his own. Subsequently, when the real sultan discovers Ibrahim’s betrayal, he asks his companion if he thinks he should be “guided by what the sultan Ibrahim the water-carrier did” (Ibid. 178). Thus, he seems to be inspired by Ibrahim, who was actually reassessing the sultan’s own character. As such, the idea of Ibrahim using his interpretation to recreate his own persona instigates him to change into a more responsible human being. Ultimately, even Shahriyar refuses imitation and

repetition when he tells Sindbad that he “[should not] repeat anything unless it is necessary” (Mahfouz 210) when recounting his journey.

Moreover, the sultan tells Shahrzad that Sindbad’s stories are “similar to [her] own”, to which she answers that “All originate from a single source” (Mahfouz 216). Note that the word ‘similar’ is used, which means they are not completely identical. Once again, Sindbad’s stories are mirroring Shahrzad’s famous tales, yet a clear difference can be noted: Sindbad’s stories are a dynamic repetition, or rather a dynamic revision as I called it earlier, of Shahrzad’s fictional stories. The major difference between the two characters’ stories is that Sindbad’s have been experienced, embodied, and linked with his knowledge while Shahrzad’s remain abstract. Most importantly, the “single source” (Ibid.) Shahrzad is referring to is an allusion to the Quranic Text due to the fact that It is a fertile source for different interpretations. In other words, Shahrzad’s stories are a representation of the Text as such whereas Sindbad’s have already been developed and materialized into an individual truth.

To further my train of thought on imitation, I believe it is necessary to address the sultan’s divinely representation. Essentially, Shahriyar has been continuously portrayed as a god throughout the novel. He is said to be “not like the rest of humankind” (Mahfouz 4) and most importantly, he “pronounces judgments” (37) on a “throne” in the “Hall of Judgement” (47). Accordingly, God is generally associated with the throne due to the fact that the Quran repeatedly refers to Him as the “Lord of the Throne” (Ali 286, Al-Mu’minun 23.116). Also, Shahrzad explicitly states that Shahriyar is “under the delusion he is a god” (Mahfouz 90). Therefore, it is accurate to state that Shahriyar is in a way imitating God. Throughout the novel, the other characters praise the Lord at least once whereas Shahriyar has not once mentioned God prior to his drastic change at the end of the book. In fact, it is only in the last chapter that he differentiates himself from the Divine by praising Him (Ibid. 225). By finally submitting to the hermeneutic imperative, he creates the distance between his imperfect human self and God’s divine perfection.

### 3.1.1 THE EFFECTS OF IMITATION

The act of imitation can have problematic and conflictual repercussions. Several chapters involve envious characters who imitate each other's desires: Firstly, in 'Anees al-Ghalees', all male characters have Anees as their object of desire, which is why they "[vie] madly with one another through love and jealousy" (Mahfouz 135). Similarly, in 'Ugr the Barber' Gulnar is jealous of her younger sister owing to the fact that she is "excelling her by her youth" (108). Hence, this leads to her killing her sister because the latter possesses what Gulnar wants, which is youthfulness. Finally, in 'Qut al-Quloub' Lady Gamila "[calls] upon [an accomplice] through jealousy and [urges] [him] to get rid of [her husband's] favorite slave-girl" (152).

As a matter of fact, all these characters are trapped into a vicious circle of violence caused by a mimetic reproduction of each other's desires, and this is where René Girard's mimetic theory comes into play. Essentially, it is a theory where the subject learns what to desire by focusing on the desire of the other, which eventually generates mimetic violence (Girard, "The Girard Reader" 9). However, in this novel it is also a kind of hermeneutic desire. The other has allegedly reached an understanding and a certain mastery of himself and of the Text. Due to the fact that the other has supposedly gained access to the whole, one expects to reach the same kind of mastery and unity by imitating the other's desires and behavior.

As such, the concepts of mimetic desire and mimetic violence bring us back to Mahfouz' unwillingness to produce a mimetic copy of the *Nights* in order to redirect the reader's attention to the responsibility of interpretation. In fact, the novel seems to be portraying the adverse consequences originating from imitation and representation.

### 3.2 REWRITING ON A META-LEVEL

The concept of literary rewriting lies at the heart of the work's structure. Not only is Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* in itself a rewriting of the *Nights*, but the chapters individually also contain adaptations of other categorically religious stories. First of all, Sanaan and Gamasa's confrontation to the believing genies portrays a significant parallel to God's revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad. The Angel Gabriel appeared to the Prophet and ordered him to read (Ramadan, "In the Footsteps" 29). In the same way, the genies order their victims to think and to contemplate before they act. However, after the Angel Gabriel left, the Prophet remained in a deeply troubled state thinking he was possessed by a genie (Ibid.) just like both characters were terrified after the genies' appearance. The question that arises at this point is why Mahfouz chose to rewrite this specific story of the Prophet's revelation. Essentially, the believing genies in the novel appear to Sanaan and Gamasa in order to remind them of God. By reminding them of Him, the genies also remind them of the hermeneutic responsibility at the core of Islam, as I have previously argued. Similarly, the Angel Gabriel was sent to the Prophet with the aim of revealing the Word of God: "God had revealed His presence to him" (Ibid. 33) through Gabriel, which is comparable to the genies reminding Sanaan and Gamasa of God. As such, by redirecting the reader's attention to the Quranic revelation, the reader realizes that the genies serve a purpose analogous to the divine revelation: they are in charge for instigating the characters' process of interpretation.

Secondly, the last chapter of Mahfouz' novel is a rewriting of Adam and Eve's story. By adapting and reevaluating the Fall of Adam and Eve, the reader's attention is once again drawn to the importance of knowledge: Adam learned the names of all things (Ramadan, "In the Footsteps" 31) and as such, learning means acquiring knowledge. There is a constant dialectical process between the text and the interpreter: it is always a process of learning. God has not only given his followers a Text, but also a responsibility to bring the Text to life. Making it come alive implies that each reengagement with the Text will

mean a new content and a new reader. It is important for the believer - or even the reader in general - to deal with the changing world and the changing context. The world is telling him that the overall objectives he had acquired by reading the Quran in the past should be reassessed, and that the principles he extracted a long time ago are not adequate anymore. Hence, he needs to reexamine his mind, return to the Text, and reread the Text in the light of the contemporary and individual challenges, thus making the process of reevaluation and reformation a never-ending project. This is the reform Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* is instigating: it is a fundamental reform of the believer's mind.

## 4. STORYTELLING

The purpose of a storyteller is not to tell you how to think,  
but to give you questions to think upon.

– Brandon Sanderson, *The Way of Kings*

Evidently, the process of storytelling plays a significant role in the original *Nights*. Every night, Shahrzad recounts a story to the sultan with the aim of staying alive. However, Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* starts on night 1002, exactly when Shahrzad's storytelling comes to an end. The major question that arises at this point is why Mahfouz chose to discard Shahrzad's process of storytelling, which is actually one of the most important and typical characteristics of the *Nights*. Essentially, in the original tales, Shahrzad's motivation for telling stories in the first place is to stay alive, as I have argued in the section on rewriting. Metaphorically speaking, through the process of narration she is creating the possibility for a better future. So does this mean that there is no hope anymore following night 1001? As a matter of fact, Mahfouz is the one who is now taking over Shahrzad's narrative responsibility in order to keep the community and the reader's hopes alive. To put it differently, he is now in charge for providing both the community and the reader with a possibility for a better future by rewriting the *Nights*. Explicitly, this means a future of capable readers. Implicitly and more profoundly, this refers to a rebirth of Islamic hermeneutics.

The process of storytelling remains very important in Mahfouz' novel even though Shahrzad has stopped recounting stories. Not only is Mahfouz himself taking over Shahrzad's narrative task, but there are also numerous characters who use storytelling as a means to change the course of their lives. Accordingly, Gamasa, Ugr, and Ibrahim are all characters who have been tried for their crimes. In order to escape the death penalty, they all recount their stories to the sultan since he is known to be "drawn to the word

'story'" (Mahfouz 48). Significantly, Sanaan and Aladdin are the only characters whose process of storytelling in itself is not emphasized. Customarily, Mahfouz vividly describes what the characters are saying and how the sultan reacts prior to their sentence. However, in both Sanaan and Aladdin's case, the action of storytelling is completely omitted, hence jeopardizing their chances to change the course of their lives. Conversely, "Ugr [is] called upon to speak and he told his story" (129), similar to Ibrahim, who asks the sultan permission to "relate [his] story" (177). Ultimately, they are both spared from execution. Yet, Gamasa is the exception to the rule:

The truth is that I was on the point of contenting myself with imprisoning Gamasa al-Bulti. [...] But I executed him as a penalty for his insolent way of addressing me (Mahfouz 55).

Gamasa was on the verge of being spared after recounting his story, which indicates the transformative nature of narration. Yet, the only reason Shahriyar changed his mind is because Gamasa has shown total disrespect towards him. Furthermore, Shahrzad's storytelling has clearly exerted a permanent effect on Shahriyar, as a result of which he has become vulnerable when it comes to stories. The latter cherishes a hope for a better future, which has been generated by Shahrzad's continuous process of storytelling. Clear support for this claim can be found in the beginning of Mahfouz' novel, when the sultan decides to free Shahrzad due to the fact that her stories "open up worlds that invite reflection" (Mahfouz 2). In essence, her powerful stories encourage the community, as well as the reader, to reflect on the present with the aim of improving the future. Here again, the transformative nature of her storytelling is emphasized because "thanks to those stories, Shahrzad's life span had been extended" (1). The attention is not drawn to her stories as such, but rather to the effect they have.

Furthermore, the stories of Sanaan and Gamasa are repeatedly recounted throughout the whole novel: they are said to "[circulate] on every tongue" (Mahfouz 29), thus being repeated over and over again. Similarly, Benjamin sees storytelling as the "art of



repeating stories” (367). However, this definition is rather problematic in this regard due to the fact that the stories in the book are orally transmitted, thus constantly being *mediated* and reassessed instead of repeated. As Abbott puts it, a “story is always mediated (constructed) by narrative discourse” (19). The listener is always required to be actively participating in the narrative because the reception of the story as such depends on how the listener constructs it from the discourse (Ibid.). As a result, all listeners will shape the perceived story into a new story, which will eventually be different from the one they have heard. The sultan’s account of Sanaan and Gamasa’s stories (Mahfouz 29) will undoubtedly be different than Fadil’s (59). Correspondingly, a clear parallel can be noted between being a listener and being a reader. Each reader reads differently (Abbott 20), just like each listener constructs each story differently by implementing his own personal experiences and feelings. In fact, both reader and listener go through a process of reevaluation in order to shape their own interpretation of the story. As such, the stories are being revised instead of mimetically repeated, and therefore I would state that storytelling in the *Arabian Nights and Days* is a process of reevaluation rather than one of repetition.

Shahriyar is said to “[recall] [Sanaan’s story] many a time” (Mahfouz 29). By recounting it over and over again, he is stimulating his mind to produce different interpretations. Each reengagement with the story means a new story and a new Shahriyar, which in turn correlates with Mahfouz’ rewriting of the *Nights*. By rewriting the original, he is not only stimulating the reader but also the characters, who are the listeners, to follow in his footsteps and to recreate new - or rather different - content. As Culler puts it, “writers and readers shape events into a plot in their attempts to make sense of things” (85). This interpretative process is exemplified by the amount of times that a particular story is told and retold. In fact, stories are transposable, which refers to the fact that the same story can be told in different ways (Smuts 5). In other words, one single story will have different variations according to the individual who tells the story, which does not mean that its message will be lost. Instead, a story may be transposed

without losing its essential properties (Ibid. 6). As a matter of fact, the body of the message may be preserved, but due to the many retellings of the same story, the overall content may change radically. Accordingly, Shahriyar tells Shahrzad that Sindbad's stories are similar to her own, to which she answers that they originate from one single source (Mahfouz 216). So the nucleus of the story has remained immutable, yet the manner in which the story itself has developed differs.

In addition, Gamasa goes to see the sheikh, determined to recount his story:

“I have a story I would like you to hear. [...] I must make a decision and in no way can its significance be understood without the story being told.”  
“[...] The story is yours alone and the decision yours alone” (Mahfouz 45).

As I have previously argued, the stories serve as a means of reflection. In this respect, Gamasa feels a burning desire to uncover his story in order to be able to reflect upon it. In other words, the fact that the message of the story cannot be understood without the story being told refers to the fact that the meaning of the story will remain unclear if it is not recited. Note that I am again drawing the link with the Arabic word *quran*, which literally means “recitation” (Bruns 125). It is my contention that the recitation implicit in Islam is an embodied, creative process of repetition and thus, the enactment of interpretation. That said, Gamasa must recount his story in order to be able to give meaning to it. Hence, his recitation will instigate the process of interpretation and the significance of the story will gradually be uncovered. However, the sheikh is reluctant to hear Gamasa's story because he thinks that his story needs to remain personal. Again, this correlates to the idea that interpretation is not a universal process but rather an individual one. Accordingly, the sheikh wants Gamasa to link his story to his own experiences and knowledge, which is why he refuses to interfere in Gamasa's individual and spiritual quest for meaning.

To further my train of thought on storytelling, it is important to note that in the Quran God's speech is referred to by verbs such as *qassa*, which literally means telling or

narrating (Saeed, "Interpreting the Quran" 29). More importantly, the verses of the Quranic revelation are referred to as a *qawl*, meaning 'sayings' or "words" (Ibid. 35), similar to *qassa*. Said verses are indicated as *hadith*, which signifies 'narrations' or 'stories' (Ibid.). It is as if Mahfouz is emphasizing the process of storytelling in order to redirect the reader's attention to the Islamic nature of the text. It is also noteworthy that the author is not equating himself or the characters as storytellers to God by any means. On the contrary, through his process of rewriting and through the characters' process of dynamically reevaluating the stories each time they are recounting them, Mahfouz is accepting his own imperfection as opposed to God's perfection and showing more respect for God's Word. The continuous processes of reassessment indicate that the author - through his rewriting - is positioning himself and his characters - through their retelling of stories - under God, whose Word as such is not mediated: it only becomes mediated when it is *read* by the reader.

## 5. SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND SELF-DEVELOPMENT

### 5.1 BEING VERSUS BECOMING

“To be or not to be?”

That is not the question.

What is the question?

The question is not one of being, but of becoming.

“To become more or not to become more.”

This is the question faced by each intelligence in our universe.

— Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man*

As I have argued in the previous chapters, Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* is not a simple circle of repetition. Instead, it is a creative rewriting of the quintessential piece of Arabic literature. As a result, Mahfouz is illustrating the importance of the transition from the state of 'being' to 'becoming' through his rewriting as such. In essence, the author, the reader, and the characters embark altogether upon a journey: a journey towards knowledge and reflection, one towards 'becoming.' In the first chapter of this thesis, I have focused on the hermeneutic circle in terms of parts and whole. However, in this chapter, my focus will shift to Heidegger's temporal approach of the hermeneutic circle, which he perceives as a circular motion between the 'already' and the 'to be' (Weinsheimer 10). However, I would rather define the hermeneutic circle as a circularity between the 'to be' and the 'to become' due to the fact that his 'already' as such alludes to a mode of being. In addition, the self is more of a construct, rather than a fixed subject. The 'I' is continuously being transformed and shaped into a new self, hence activating and stimulating the process of becoming. Accordingly, Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* encourages said process by inciting the characters and the reader to interpret.

In the novel, the sheikh prompts his fellow community members to “accept Islam anew [...] so as to *become* a true believer” (Mahfouz 164 - my emphasis). It is important to note that prior to the sheikh’s utterance, Aladdin told the sheikh that he already *is* “a sincere Muslim” (Ibid.). The word choice in this passage has been meticulously selected, drawing the reader’s attention to the difference between being and becoming. In this regard, the aim of becoming will only be attained through an internalization of the Text. Every single experience, which is always an experience in which one already is, engenders an openness to a new experience that occurs when the experience is guided by its own negative instances (Risser 10). Drawing on Hegel’s philosophy, I would say that the characters are what they are not and they are not what they are. However, I would not go as far as saying they are not believers because admittedly they are to a certain extent. Yet, in order to *become* true believers (Mahfouz 164), they must use their intellectual capacities so as to connect the abstract knowledge they have on religion - the “rudiments of reading and religion” (Ibid. 10) - internally with their own experiences, and only in this case will they become what they already are.

The sheikh continues questioning Aladdin on his religiousness:

“What sort of Muslim are you?”

“I’m a sincere Muslim.”

“Do you pray?” [...]

“I do, thanks be to God.”

“I don’t think you have ever prayed! [...] With us prayer is performed in depth, and the person praying feels nothing if touched and burnt by fire” (Mahfouz 164).

This quote aptly illustrates the difference between being and becoming, between imitation and reflection. Praying is not merely a matter of replicating verses from the Quran. Instead, it is something much deeper than that. Not only does the believer need to pray with his heart but he also needs to pray with his *mind*. Aladdin is being criticized for not using both his heart and his mind to communicate with God. I have previously

argued that each time Muslims are praying, they are recognizing the hermeneutic paradigm. However, I would like to rectify my claim by saying that not all believers *think* while they pray. For many Muslims, including Aladdin, praying has become mechanical and self-evident, thus losing its purpose. Likewise, Ramadan claims that “practice may become a mechanical ritual, lifeless and without spirituality. Memory repeats the invocations and prayers, the lips say the words, the body goes through the motions, the hand gives, but the soul is absent” (“Western Muslims” 121). Thus, praying in depth (Mahfouz 164) refers to the fact that one needs to be completely absorbed into God’s being (Bruns 127). Praying is an instance of reflection, of reevaluation, and actually, it is not only about praying during the nights and disappearing during the days. Instead, Mahfouz’ *Arabian Nights and Days* - as the title indicates - is about praying during the nights to be intellectually and spiritually prepared to reform the community’s minds during the days. A question that arises at this point is why many Muslims such as Aladdin keep praying even though they deny the responsibility of reflection. In fact, the answer is simple. Essentially, Muslims believe they will find inner peace through the act of praying even though they are oblivious to the meaning of the verses they are reciting during their prayers. However, they deny the fact that they will never find inner peace if they do not aim for intellectual peace. The condition for feeling inner peace is attained when the mind receives its answers. In other words, the believer has questions and when these questions are answered, he will eventually be able to feel peace. Praying serves as a means to stimulate the constant dialectical process of posing questions and receiving answers.

Furthermore, sheikh Abdullah al-Balkhi criticizes the community for their “lack [of] true faith”, to which the governor instinctively reacts: “But the people are believers” (Ibid. 190). There is however a difference between having “true faith” (Ibid.), as the sheikh calls it, and being a believer. Being a Muslim equates to believing that there is no other God than He, whereas having “true faith” refers to the actions that the believer

undertakes with the aim of strengthening his spiritual relationship with the Divine. In other words, he is making a distinction between Muslims and practicing Muslims. A clear parallel can be drawn to the literary concepts of constative and performative language. The constative in this case is the governor claiming that the people *are* believers. The people are represented as they are originally. On the contrary, the actions that must be undertaken in order to have “true faith” (Mahfouz 190) are performative in nature due to the fact that they are brought into being (Culler 100) - or rather brought into *becoming*. As a matter of fact, constative would correspond to the ‘to be’ in the hermeneutic circle, whereas performative would conform to the ‘to become.’ The latter implies a constant reevaluation of oneself and of the Text with the aim of reaching a gnostic experience with God. A contextualist reading of the Quran encourages the transition from the state of being to becoming what one knows, and therefore I believe that a reliance on a literalist reading of the Text would mean that the believer is incapable of making the transition from being to becoming, which in Mahfouz’ novel alludes to a certain reluctance to change. This reluctance is the cause of the many religious dogmas appearing in the Muslim community:

It would be a mistake to think that [the dogmatic mind] accepts the existence of only one point of view: the dogmatic mind is a binary mind. Whilst it states that its truth is the only truth, that its Way is exclusive and that its universal is the only universal, that is because it stipulates - at the same time - that anything that does not partake of that truth, that path and that universal is, at best, absolutely ‘other’ and, at worst, culpably mistaken (Ramadan, “The Quest for Meaning” 62).

Mahfouz’ novel serves as a means of refuting dogmatic mindsets. The sheikh, who is represented as the most religious person in the novel, utters that “each sheikh has a Way of his own” (Mahfouz 164). Therefore, he recognizes the possibility of different truths and different interpretations, as opposed to one universal truth. The mystical and Sufi traditions that the sheikh has been continuously praising remind us that there are multiple ways as opposed to only one, comparable to the fact that there are many paths

up the mountainsides that can be ascended in order to reach the same top, ideal or truth (Ramadan, "The Quest for Meaning" 48), thus illustrating the impossibility of one exclusive Way. The persecution of the Shiites and the Kharijites in the novel indicates the characters' reluctance to accept different Ways, and most importantly their reluctance to change. Their diligence to hold on to one single truth is the cause of their religious and intellectual stagnation, leading them to be ensnared in the state of being, hence repressing their own process of becoming. Similarly, Ugr tells his son Aladdin he is "sufficiently religious" and that he has to be "careful not to overdo it" (Mahfouz 162), thereby effectively encouraging Aladdin to stagnate instead of evolve into the 'becoming' of a more responsible Muslim.

When the mind does not continuously ask questions and when one does not adopt a critical thinking, it can be said that one is in a state of intellectual stagnation and the consequence of a stagnant mind is regression. The world around us is constantly changing and if one refuses to look at the world the way it is, regression is inevitable. Hence, a reform of the mind is necessary. However, reforming the mind does not equate to adaptation in this particular instance. Rather, the characters need to *transform* themselves. The manner in which they have to reform themselves is the way they have to reform their understanding of themselves, of the world and most importantly, of their relationship with the Divine. Eventually, they will be able to reach their ultimate destination: truly becoming what they have always been.

The characters' transition from being to becoming is often exemplified through a process of physical and psychological rebirth, which demonstrates the process of self-discovery initiated by interpretation. Thus, the 'to become' of the hermeneutic circle coincides with the recognition and the acceptance of the interpretative responsibility. As I have argued in the chapter on rewriting, Sanaan and Gamasa's stories are remarkably similar. One of the differences is that Sanaan, as opposed to Gamasa, does not go through a movement of physical rebirth. The genie has given him the opportunity to change into



a more responsible Muslim by helping him understand his misinterpretation, yet Sanaan spoils his chance by continuously and persistently relying on literalism. Therefore, it would be accurate to state that Sanaan's attempt to 'become' has proven to be unsuccessful due to his heavy reliance on blind imitation and literalism. Conversely, Gamasa is said to be "burying the old Gamasa and evoking another one" (Mahfouz 46). Not only has he changed mentally, but he has also been physically reborn into a new, unrecognizable man (50). By accepting the hermeneutic responsibility and by showing a certain openness to reevaluation, Gamasa is taking the initiative to fight ignorance. He is no longer satisfied with relying on imitation, and he now feels the desire to be free in exploring his own religion. Accordingly, I firmly believe that ignorance and freedom do not go together because Gamasa will only be free to decide who he is when he is learning who he wants to become. Correspondingly, Ramadan notes that "education is what allows human beings to become the true 'subject' of freedom" ("The Quest for Meaning" 151).

Similarly, Sindbad is also "fed up with lanes and alleys" (Mahfouz 9), which is why he decides to go on a quest for knowledge and meaning. As Ramadan puts it, "the goal of the journey is the journey itself ... poetically put, it is a journey that takes us far away, and back to ourselves" ("The Quest for Meaning" 15). The quest is about setting out, asking fundamental questions and searching for meaning. Though in order to do find meaning, one has to travel towards himself and re-explore - just like Mahfouz - the desire for questions, constructive criticism and complexity (Ibid. 9). Thus, one does not necessarily become somebody else. Instead, it is a sort of becoming of something that already is. Here again, a link can be drawn to Heidegger's statement: "In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself" (qtd. in Weinsheimer 10). The question that arises at this point is why Gamasa is transformed into a different man if one does not become somebody else. During his quest for meaning, Gamasa has changed considerably and, as a matter of fact, the author dramatizes Gamasa's inner transformation by changing his appearance in order to show

the reader that a drastic change has taken place. I would accordingly argue that Gamasa's physical change mirrors and symbolizes his inner change, as it were. In fact, Gamasa does not become a different person, instead, he becomes the Muslim he has always been. In other words, he discovers who he is, "not by learning something about [his] past [...] but by acting in such a way that [he *becomes*] what then turns out, in some sense, to have been [his] 'nature'" (Culler 110). As from now, his physique and his behavior become consistent with his state of heart.

Sindbad, Gamasa, Aladdin and Shahriyar are all looking for peace. Indeed, all human beings' ultimate goal is to find peace: we all want to find answers to our questions, solutions to our concerns and certainties beyond our doubts (Ramadan, "The Quest for Meaning" 39). ). In order to reach said peace, there is a path, or rather multiple paths that one can follow. One thing is certain: peace can only be reached through education (Ibid. 294). Yet, human beings are not naturally born peaceful: peacefulness is something that must be acquired. Most importantly, we cannot discuss peace if we are not ready to address violence. Note that there is no single religion that does not discuss violence in its Text. God created imperfect human beings, knowing that they are capable of being violent. Yet, it is important to point out that I do not see violence as something necessarily physical. Admittedly, there are many non-physical acts that can be seen as being violent, such as the utterance of hurtful words, selfishness, and most importantly, a refusal to seek knowledge, which itself can be seen as a sort of *intellectual* violence. Thus, if one wants to reach peace, violence must indubitably be tackled. As such, I believe that the Quran discusses violence with the aim of pleading for peace. Interestingly, a clear parallel can be drawn to Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* due to the fact that it serves the same purpose: Mahfouz addresses numerous violent passages in order to show the characters and the reader the importance of seeking peace, which - again - indicates the religious nature of Mahfouz' rewriting.

The starting point of reaching inner peace is a submission to knowledge, which equates to the abandonment of blind imitation and an openness to self-criticism. Accordingly, Gamasa feels “a sense of shame” (Mahfouz 45) after having personally reflected on his behavior, which is why he decides to “[bury] the old Gamasa and [evoke] another one” (46). Similarly, after hearing Sindbad’s stories, Shahriyar also realizes his wrongdoings:

Shahriyar rose to his feet, his heart surging with overpowering emotions [...] The falseness of specious glory was made clear to him, like a mask of tattered paper that does not conceal the snakes of cruelty, tyranny, pillage, and blood that lie behind it [...] (Mahfouz 216).

Sindbad’s stories have caused Shahriyar to reflect upon his life: he finally realizes how cruel he has been during his reign and how he has been misled in thinking he had reached glory and peace. Thus, both Gamasa and Shahriyar reflect upon their past misdeeds and misbehavior in order to *improve* their current self. They start submitting themselves to knowledge and interpretation, and in this way they create the distance between God’s perfection and their own imperfection. At the end of the day, there will be no inner peace if they do not look at themselves the way they are. Clear support for this claim can be found in Gamasa’s story: Gamasa sees his own persona being led to execution, which symbolizes the fact that he looks at himself, his own flaws and his imperfection. Yet, even though he has changed physically, he remains the same person: “Am I Gamasa al-Bulti?” at which the voice of Singam came in answer, ‘How could you doubt it?’” (Mahfouz 50). Again, this proves that Gamasa has not changed into another person, but rather that he has become himself. In essence, he has become aware of who he really, is and as a result he can become the Muslim he has always been. Due to his openness to self-criticism and reflection, he will now be able to embark on his quest to inner peace: an inner journey towards the purification of the self.

The moment Gamasa realizes he needs to transform himself, “*memories* were inhaled like the perfume of a wilted rose, and in the empty space there materialized before him

the verses of the Quran and the Sayings of the Prophet and the remnants of good intentions, like drops of blood” (Mahfouz 45 - my emphasis). In times of conflict, crisis or doubt, memory can be seen as a refuge, a remedy or even a hope (Ramadan, “The Quest for Meaning” 307). Essentially, Gamasa finds himself in a conflicted situation, provoked by his state of being. It is an internal conflict between staying who he is and becoming who he already is. As such, Gamasa is finding refuge in the verses of the Quran and in the *hadith*. However, it is important to note that Mahfouz is using the word “materialized” (Mahfouz 45), which refers to the fact that the words of the Quran are being interpreted and *embodied* rather than reiterated. The Text is coming into being and Gamasa is starting to *feel* the Word of God deep within, which means he begins to use both his heart and his mind to communicate with God, hence activating his own process of becoming:

The intellect pauses for a moment, turns its attention to itself and its recent or distant past and waits for the conscience to draw up a balance sheet of what it remembers in a bid to understand, change and grow. It tries to reveal the intentions and meaning of the past, to trace the path that led us to where we are now and the events that nurtured and shaped us. Memory reveals, often explains things and sometimes clarifies things (Ramadan, “The Quest for Meaning” 308).

Ramadan’s quotation fits neatly into Gamasa’s state of mind. Gamasa is evoking and reevaluating his memories with the aim of enforcing his spiritual relationship with God. The memories do not only make him finally understand the importance of knowledge in Islam, but they also instigate him to grow into a more intellectually responsible being. Thus, it can be said that Gamasa is reborn into a new man - not another man, but a new Gamasa. This process of rebirth is - as previously mentioned - symbolized by his explicit change of appearance, yet most importantly, the “blood” (Mahfouz 45) Mahfouz addresses in the above-mentioned quotation seems to be an allusion to the creation of human beings. In the Quran, God is said to have “created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood” (Ali, Al-Alaq 96.2). Essentially, Mahfouz’ indirect reference to the

creation of humankind emphasizes Gamasa's physical and spiritual rebirth, as well as his re-creation into a new Gamasa. By reflecting upon his memories, he discovers himself and, predominantly, he rediscovers his faith, which is considered to be the most essential element of Muslim identity (Ramadan, "Western Muslims" 79). However, it is worthy of note that there is a difference between faith and spirituality. Ramadan describes Islamic spirituality as the manner in which a Muslim nourishes, reinforces and intensifies his faith. Furthermore, spirituality is about remembrance and recollection, along with the intimate energy that is involved in the effort to remember God (Ibid.). By recollecting memories of the Quran and other Islamic texts and principles, Gamasa is evolving from having simple faith to a more profound and powerful feeling of spirituality, thus once again emphasizing his transition from being to becoming. Interestingly, the Arabic word for faith is *imân*, which in fact expresses a state of peace and well-being rather than the idea of 'faith' (Ramadan, "The Quest for Meaning" 41). This indicates that Islam - and any other religion in general - is not only about having faith and being a believer, rather, it is about intensifying and transforming said faith into spirituality with the aim of finding inner peace by reinforcing the relationship with the Divine. "Muslim identity, at its central pivot, is therefore a faith, a practice, and a spirituality" (Ramadan, "Western Muslims 79).

However, Gamasa does not only change once: he changes a second time after a voice orders him to plunge into the water (Mahfouz 75). He was on the verge of relapsing into his old behavior and this is where the genie decides to interfere once again by reminding him of God and his hermeneutic responsibility. The fact that Gamasa changes over and over again emphasizes the possibility of different interpretations due to the fact that he remains the same person, even if he is perceived differently each time. Similarly, the Quran remains an unchangeable Text, but its interpretation as such is unfixable. As a result, one's interpretation is most likely to change each time one rereads and reevaluates the Text. As I have argued in the second chapter on Quranic exegesis, the Quran needs to be reread in its historical context and ultimately adapted to the changing

contemporary context. Correspondingly, this scene corresponds to Heraclitus' idea that the same being cannot step in the same river twice (Graham):

Everything is repeated, but never in the same way. This is another way of speaking of the experience of the quest: we must walk down roads and through towns as we seek, and that is a temporal experience. A being will live what others have already experienced, the days will repeat themselves, experiences will be similar, as will the questions, the doubts and the suffering ... we will even return to our place of origin, to ourselves, but nothing - the self, the questions, the experiences or the quest - will ever be the same (Ramadan, "The Quest for Meaning" 33).

Literally speaking, it would mean that the Gamasa who emerges from the water is not the same Gamasa that plunged into it before. This refers to the fact that the believer and the reader are constantly being shaped and re-shaped into new beings each time they read, re-read, and reflect upon what they have read. In fact, "it is a matter of changing the way we see" (Ibid. 501) and discovering new things each time we read.

At the end of the novel, Shahriyar undergoes the same process as Gamasa:

Quickly he obeyed his sudden desires, stripped off his clothes, and plunged into the water. The throbbing water massaged him with angelic fingers, penetrating right inside him. Emerging from the water, he stood in front of the mirror and saw himself as new in the skin of a beardless young man [...] (Mahfouz 224).

These two scenes remind me of the Christian baptism due to the fact that both characters dive into the water with the purpose of seeking repentance and changing themselves for the better. Water also occupies a fundamental role in Islam since Muslims are required to perform ablutions before they pray in order to purify themselves. However, I believe Shahriyar's depiction in the quotation alludes to a certain purity and childlike innocence, as he is said to be reborn into a new, "*beardless young man*" (Ibid. - my emphasis). The combination of Shahriyar's emergence from the water - which would represent the amniotic fluid in this case - and the emphasis on his

beardlessness insinuate a sort of childbirth, thus drawing the reader's attention to the origin of creation. Also, the Quran states that "it is He Who has created man from water" (Ali 299, Al-Furqan 25.54). Consequently, Shahriyar is given the opportunity for a fresh start, the opportunity to become the Muslim he has always been, which indicates the continuous process of the notion of identity (Culler 115). Most importantly, the fact that he is seeing himself as the other in the mirror implies that he is changing the way he looks at himself and the way he perceives the world, which means he is finally converting his understanding of the Text and consequently reforming his mind. By re-reading and reflecting upon the Text, he is "arousing [his] consciousness and infusing it with continuous spiritual energy" (Ramadan, "Western Muslims" 121), hence strengthening his relationship with the Divine.

In 'The Adventures of Ugr the Barber' Ugr feels a sense of lack that he is continuously trying to fill. Accordingly, his "desire for love" (Mahfouz 114) keeps increasing even though he is already married. Not only does he have an insatiable desire for love, but above all, he is motivated by a deep desire for wealth. Although he seems to have fulfilled both desires by extorting the rich community and by marrying the woman he loves, he still feels a sense of lack:

All sense of security had vanished from his world and hope's lamp had been extinguished. Though he was Qamar's husband, she was more distant from him than the stars. He was rich yet he was threatened with death (Mahfouz 126).

Ugr is overpowered by a constant need for something more even though he possesses everything he always longed for. Essentially, he is "becoming conscious of *having* so much, [which leads] to a feeling, deep down, of not *being* at peace, or in harmony, or simply happy" (Ramadan, "Western Muslims" 118). Correspondingly, Arthur Rimbaud states in his poem 'Les Étrennes des Orphelins' (1869): "on sent dans tout cela qu'il manque quelque chose", which refers to the idea that there is something missing, thus reflecting Ugr's current state of being. The primary cause of his inner conflict is due to

the orientation of his desire, which is mainly directed towards superficialities rather than towards finding inner peace. As a result, he is unable to feel at peace with himself owing to the fact that he is “caught between longing for the Most High and the attraction of the world” (Ramadan, “Western Muslims” 120). The choice he has to make resides in liberating himself or losing himself by “drowning in the vicissitudes of life” (Ibid.). Drawing on the Greek aphorism “know thyself”, Ugr must know himself first if he desires to change himself and find inner peace because, after all, possessing knowledge of oneself is the beginning of every spiritual journey.

Additionally, Fadil Sanaan is confronted to a genie who entrusts him with the cap of invisibility. The genie explicitly tells him to use it under the strict condition of “not [committing] any evil” (Mahfouz 181), yet “it was impossible for him to do good with the cap” (184). Along the lines of my previous claims, I argue that the cap symbolizes the hermeneutic responsibility, the liberation of the intellect, and accordingly, the power to ‘become.’ In other words, he is handed over the responsibility to interpret the Word of God, which leaves him alienated, “anxious and depressed” (185). His alienation is the result of a first and direct confrontation with interpretation. Normally, the alienation he is feeling is supposed to be resolved by interpretation, as interpretation is an event of conquering self-alienation (Risser 166). However, although he has technically accepted the responsibility, he is not putting it into action yet. As such, it remains abstract and meaningless given that understanding can only show itself in action (Bruns 10). Here again, the difference between constative and performative language can be noted. Fadil’s behavior is merely constative in nature due to the fact that he is not undertaking any actions to display his openness to interpretation, hence leading him to be trapped in the ‘to be’ of the hermeneutic circle. Furthermore, the way Fadil deals with himself is the way he is going to deal with others. As long as he is not at peace with himself, he will remain violent towards the world. As Ramadan argues, “there can be no harmony with the environment without a search for inner peace” (“Western Muslims” 114) and



correspondingly, a search implies action. However, throughout the chapter, Fadil gradually realizes the importance of taking responsibility and performing action:

He yearned to resurrect the old Fadil at any price. Yes, the old Fadil was over and done with, but along the way there was still room for action. From the depths of the darkness there was a gleam of light (Mahfouz 192).

Fadil recognizes his wrongdoings by wanting to “resurrect the old Fadil” (Ibid.), yet at the same time, he realizes it is impossible to return to his old self because even if he would attempt to go back, “nothing [...] [would] ever be the same” (Ramadan, “The Quest for Meaning” 33). However, he acknowledges that there is “still room for *action*” (Mahfouz 192 - my emphasis), which indicates he is aware of his religious and intellectual stagnation, and, correspondingly, of his regression. Nevertheless, the last sentence of the above-mentioned quotation indicates that he still cherishes a hope to move from a state of being to one of becoming. Interestingly, it also confirms the religious nature of his internal conflict, given the fact that God is said to “lead [his believers] forth into the light”, removing them “from the depths of darkness” (Ali 33, Al-Baqarah 2.257).

Finally, Ma’rouf the cobbler pretends to have discovered Solomon’s ring, hence “[finding] himself rising up into the air” (Mahfouz 195). Explicitly, it would refer to the idea that he is submitting himself to his lie. Yet, implicitly and more profoundly, it means that he is showing a total submission to his religious beliefs, which implies a submission to knowledge and an openness to self-criticism. He is said to have “opened a new page, even if he has not as yet attained the hoped-for perfection” (Ibid. 199). Accordingly, Ma’rouf has taken a new path: one of wisdom, knowledge and interpretation, and consequently, one towards the becoming of the Muslim he already is. The reason he has not yet attained perfection is because he recognizes God’s perfection as opposed to his own imperfection, which he explicitly states by saying that “perfection is with God alone” (Ibid.).

In sum, religion in itself is not a matter of being. Instead, it is one of taking actions and submitting to knowledge and wisdom with the aim of becoming. Therefore, in the context of this chapter, Descartes' famous phrase "I think, therefore I am" should be remodeled into "I think, therefore I *become*."

## 5. THE EXPLOITATION OF RELIGION

All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.

– Nietzsche

The majority of Mahfouz' novels address issues such as social justice, the exploitation of power by the government and the manipulation of the poor by the wealthy (Najjar 139). As a result, Mahfouz represented a threat to the defenders of political Islam, who incited people to violence (Ibid. 141). His *Arabian Nights and Days* is filled with many acts of violence resulting from a manipulation of Islam for political purposes by political opportunists (Thomas 309). Accordingly, the characters who occupy a position of power are said to “[raise] aloft the badge of God” and “[plunge themselves] in dirt” (Mahfouz 32), thus being criticized for their corruption and their hypocrisy. As such, Mahfouz is ridiculing the way in which religion is institutionalized by the allegedly religious government, as well as the manner in which it is abused for material and immoral advantages (Najjar 163). The corrupt government is in fact handling and manipulating religion into their own truth, as a result of which it serves as a sort of justification for politics and power.

In ‘Sanaan al-Gamali’ the government decides to “increase the exhortations at the *mosques* and at *religious* festivals” (Mahfouz 25 - my emphasis) with the goal of influencing the community members. It is important to note the government's particular emphasis on religious establishments as the primary target of their pleas. The government is aware of the manipulability of the Muslim community, whose members show a heavy reliance on blind imitation and repetition, and subsequently takes advantage of it. Instead of encouraging the community to *become* Muslims by inciting them to extend their knowledge and to be open to interpretation, more imitation and

misinterpretation is stimulated by fear of their losing influence, and accordingly, their power. In other words, if all the members of the community were to reform their minds and gain knowledge in this regard, they would refute the strict rules and regulations they are now subjected to, and the government would ultimately lose its power.

Prior to that, the government decided to arrest all the innocent vagabonds and beggars (Mahfouz 21) because they were unable to find the culprit for the murder on the young girl. This is a case of what Ramadan calls “symbolic violence” (“The Quest for Meaning” 197). The way in which the government neglects and exploits the weak is a matter of said violence. As I have argued in the previous chapter, addressing violence is crucial in order to reach peace. Establishing peace is also about achieving a certain harmony and unity with the people who find themselves at the lowest level of the society. The weak are the ones that have no voice of mastery, and, correspondingly, a hermeneutic parallel can be drawn. Due to their lack of education and, perhaps, their illiteracy, they are not intellectually capable to read, reflect, and interpret, which is why they are most likely to be influenced and dominated by the powerful people of the community.

Gamasa, the chief of police, is one of the characters who is being criticized by the genie for serving the corrupt government and for his hypocrisy:

“Mercy is for him who deserves mercy [...]. God’s vastnesses are spread with the opportunities granted to those who have adhered to wisdom. Thus mercy is due only to those who strive, otherwise offensive smells would spoil the purity of the air illuminated by divine light, so don’t make corruption an excuse for corruption.” “We believe in mercy even when we are chopping necks and cropping heads” (Mahfouz 33).

The genie explicitly recognizes the inherent necessity of knowledge implicit in Islam. He further emphasizes the essentiality of taking action, embodying knowledge and subsequently *becoming* a Muslim in order to receive mercy. Gamasa, who has not yet accepted the hermeneutic responsibility at this point, says “[his] duty is to carry out

orders" (34), thus mimetically executing the government's orders without thinking and reflecting upon them. It has become a mechanical process of receiving orders and automatically carrying them out, similar to my previous claims concerning the act of praying, which - as I have argued - has become self-evident and mechanical amongst many Muslims. Both situations illustrate and emphasize the difference between being and becoming, between imitation and reflection. Prior to his encounter with the genie, Gamasa was never obliged to question his behavior, which is why his replies to the genie's reproaches appear to be rather contradictory and mechanical. However, he is aware of the correctness and the accuracy of the genie's arguments, hence leading him to feel destabilized: "Gamasa was in a tight corner. The warnings fell upon him [...]" (Ibid.). The violence in the novel is therefore not only the result of a deliberate manipulation of religion for political purposes, but it is also the result of a *misunderstanding* of religion. Due to Gamasa's compliance with the government's orders, he is complicit in exploiting religion for the sake of politics by "regarding anything as permissible in defense of his authority" (Ibid. 40), yet at the same time he merely reproduces the orders he is given, thus indicating his lack of reflection and therefore his misunderstanding of religion.

In the next chapter, Gamasa has been reincarnated in Abdullah the porter. By accepting the responsibility of interpretation, he is finally reflecting upon his past mischiefs:

Nonetheless, his work often led him to the houses of his former friends and to the mansions of those with influence and positions of power: the world of outward piety and latent corruption. All that brought him back to thinking about himself and the circumstances of people, and it spoiled the serenity of his spiritual peace (Mahfouz 54).

By reassessing and reexamining his past life, Gamasa (Abdullah) explicitly recognizes the corrupted government's ruthless exploitation of religion to manipulate the community. He has finally started his journey towards inner peace, which is a journey

towards the purification of the self, and more specifically, one towards spirituality. Accordingly, the starting point of finding inner peace is an openness to self-criticism and an abandonment of blind imitation. As such, Gamasa has started thinking and reevaluating his own self, hence becoming overcome with deep remorse for his past hypocrisy. In this regard, showing repentance is necessary due to the fact that he will not find inner peace if he does not look at himself the way he is. His process of reflection activates the dialectical process between asking questions and receiving answers that is needed to find peace. Furthermore, he is said to be “brought [...] back to thinking about himself” (Ibid.), which corresponds to Ramadan’s claim that “[finding peace] has to do with getting back to ourselves, trying to understand what drives us, the way we function, our blocks, needs, expectations and wounds, and analysing them so that we may master them” (“The Quest for Meaning” 374). It is a journey towards *imân*, which represents a state of peace and well-being rather than the literal idea of ‘faith’ (Ibid. 41). Ramadan further argues that the process of returning to the self is the first and last stage of all human knowledge and experience: “the reflections of the ‘I’, of the ego, of consciousness and the unconscious, of the emotions and the mind mirror the adult’s questions about freedom, meaning and truth” (Ibid. 35). Gamasa’s ‘I’ is a construct, as opposed to a fixed, unchangeable subject. By critically engaging with himself, he is instigating his own process of becoming a more intellectually responsible being.

In addition, the government is criticized for protecting criminals and attacking “honorable people of sound opinion and judgment” (Mahfouz 42). Among these “honorable people” (Ibid.) are the Shiites and the Kharijites, who are Muslims that have accepted another truth. This passage exemplifies and emphasizes the restriction of individual freedom in the Muslim community: the characters who dare to accept and acknowledge another truth are being imprisoned and tortured in the name of Islam. In other words, the tyrannical sultan and his corrupt government are exploiting Islam to suit their own ends, hence putting their own profit above the well-being of the community. Accordingly, the government’s persecution of “people of sound opinion”

(Ibid.) implicitly implies the rulers' own benightedness and their ignorance towards religion. As Ramadan puts it: "Every situation in which justice succumbs to tyranny, mercy to cruelty, goodness to corruption, wisdom to foolishness, has nothing in common with the [Islamic principles]" ("Western Muslims" 42). The whole purpose of religion is finding inner peace, it is about developing and strengthening a strong personal and spiritual relationship with the Divine. Mahfouz defends religion by arguing it has a revolutionary function: one of combatting ignorance, fundamentalism and corruption, and most importantly it encourages people's well-being by directing them to knowledge and values (Najjar 162), which is what I have been continuously arguing throughout this thesis. For a believer, the spiritual journey to inner peace and well-being implies a submission to God, which in turn entails a submission to knowledge and reflection, making hermeneutics a never-ending project.

## 6. CONCLUSION

We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.

— Marcel Proust

Mahfouz' literary rewriting of the *Arabian Nights* has proven to be successful in fulfilling its implicit objective of reawakening the hermeneutic imperative at the heart of Islam. Through the author's retelling of the original tales and by refocusing on the theme of the central text of Arabic literature, he has succeeded in drawing the reader and the characters' attention to the importance of reflection and reassessment. In essence, his characters' stories have encouraged the community, as well as the reader, to reflect on the present in order to *improve* the future, and this aim has eventually been accomplished given that the majority of the characters have recognized the significance of knowledge and reflection by the end of the book - obviously with the help of the good genies.

It is, as a matter of fact, undeniable that the extension of the intellect generates the development of a deeper and a more spiritual relationship with the Divine. In order to stimulate said relationship, one must read the Text in its historical context in order to extract the principles and implement them into a new context. Accordingly, by continuously aiming to increase knowledge, the characters were inclined to merge and assimilate their understanding with their own experiences, hence embodying the Text and putting an end to their former habit of blind imitation. As such, their level of understanding - which is now no longer static - has shown an upward progression: it has finally been established on the level of experience. In addition, it has been argued that the Prophet - who serves as a prototype for all Muslims - accepted the hermeneutic



responsibility God bestowed upon humankind, which implies that his followers must follow his example of interpreting the Text rather than mimetically copy his behavior. In turn, this correlates to Mahfouz' unwillingness to imitate the *Nights*, which I described as a refusal to submit to blind faith.

Furthermore, the Islamic nature of the novel has initiated a discussion on one's intrinsic inability to master the Text. Also, the fact that one can only have access to the parts is the reason why one makes contextually motivated interpretations. Essentially, it is undeniably the case that human finitude will always be a mediating factor in one's relation with the Divine, which indicates that human beings are always only getting a fraction of the full experience, thus implying their inability to gain access to the whole. Moreover, the Islamic theme has also grounded my argument concerning Mahfouz' adaptation, which I believe served as a demand - or even as an imperative - to reevaluate Islam, and to emphasize the Islamic necessity of interpretation without committing blasphemy.

Additionally, the importance of narration has continuously been put forward. It was evident that Mahfouz did not randomly choose to start at night 1002, after Shahrzad's storytelling came to an end. The reason he took the decision to discard her process of narration was to keep the community and the reader's hopes alive. He eventually succeeded in doing so by creating characters that have become capable readers by the end of the novel, yet most importantly his characters eventually recognize the prominence of Islamic hermeneutics. Correspondingly, the characters have finally realized how important reinterpretation and reevaluation is, especially so since they have thus moved from a state of being a Muslim - which potentially implies a sense of fulfillment or completion - to one of becoming, where one embodies and accepts the infinite responsibility of interpretation. Through the growing reliance on knowledge in their search for inner peace, and their continuous reflections on their own sense of self, they have been able to transform themselves into becoming the Muslims they already

were. Most importantly, they have finally converted their understanding of the Text by reforming their minds, which arguably was the novel's aim from the very beginning.

Finally, the violence in the novel has not only proven to be the result of a misunderstanding of religion, but it was also the consequence of a manipulation of religion for political purposes. Yet, by accepting the responsibility of perpetual and never-ending interpretation, the formerly corrupt rulers have managed to reestablish a just, and more inclusive government.

To conclude, Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* has achieved its aim of drawing the reader's attention to the importance of reflection, knowledge, and taking action with the purpose of reaching and feeling the spirituality at the essence of religion. Accordingly, Immanuel Kant once said: "To be is to do," yet it is now for me to say: To do is to *become*.

## 7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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