

# [Religion, media, and nationality in mahfouz’s "the thief and the dogs”](https://assignbuster.com/religion-media-and-nationality-in-mahfouzs-the-thief-and-the-dogs/)

The Thief and The Dogs, an intriguing narrative by Naguib Mahfouz, is the story of a man named Said Mahran who had just got out of prison. He was convicted as a thief and feels betrayed by all whom he was close to. One of his ex-colleagues, Ilish Sidra, ratted on him and then married his wife Nabawiya and took custody of his daughter Sana; Sidra in fact brainwashes her to reject Said. Said also feels betrayed by his previous mentor, Rauf Ilwan, who encouraged his thievery to begin with. Said is now on a mission: seeking revenge. I believe Mahfouz creates internal conflict in the protagonist by use of contrasting influences, the texts trying to guide Said. The motifs of the media and religion in their various forms act as these contrasting influences in Said’s life which makes him feel trapped and gives him hope respectively; through such storytelling, it appears that Mahfouz is highlighting the role of religion and media for the people living in the post-revolutionary Egypt of 1952.

First, it is essential to consider Mahfouz’s use of religion. It is represented throughout the book, it being referenced to as the Sacred Law, The Qur’an and also through the words of the sheik. The latter was a religious figure that Said’s father used to trust and follow as a disciple who Said goes to for shelter after he gets out of jail. We see Said reminisce of the times he spent in the sheikh’s house accompanying father, his father saying “ look and listen, learn and open your heart” (25). Mahfouz paints a very safe, inviting and peaceful picture of the sheik’s house, the door was always open, “ a joy like the joy of paradise”. Looking back on his time in the sheikh’s house in the father he sees it as a place of wisdom and even a sanctuary.

The sheik is a very important representation of religion in the book. He provides answers, but within his cryptic nature they are never straight forward, his answer are also very ideal but they don’t seem to be practical. I believe mahfouz created such a character in order to embody the features of religion. The words of the Sheik are often hard to understand, with every reply or answer in the form of a riddle, in Said’s stream of thought he says “ My father could understand you, but me you turned away from, treating me as if you were turning me out of your house”(28) Showing us that this side of the sheik was not welcoming.

A revealing example of the sheik’s ideal cryptic nature is when he says “ aren’t you ashamed to ask for his good pleasure while you are not pleased with him?”(29). First of, Said believes he was doing what was right (acting as a form of robin hood and supporting militant activity and the revolutionary struggle) and hence cannot see why he was being punished and hence Said is also angry at religion for all his misfortunes. The idea seemed ideal but was not practical. How could one be pleased in the lord after going through great misfortune and how can one’s misfortune be lifted if one is not pleased in the lord. This paradox attempts to give Said hope by showing him the way out of his misfortunes but in a way makes him feel stuck as he doesn’t know what to do and how to do it and the advice doesn’t make the situation any clearer.

Said later goes into a rage, narrating all his ill fortune growing increasingly angry in reply Sheik simply told him to wash himself and read the Qur’an, we then see the Sheik trying to feed him words of hope quoting the Qur’an “ If you love God, then follow me and God will love you’ and ‘ I have chosen thee for myself.’”(32) and then goes on to say seek god with hope and reject the path of vengeance as murder and revenge are considered bad by the Qur’an. Again the advice sounds good but is hard to actually meet. Here we can say Mahfouz trying to make a statement about the ambiguity and the confusing nature of religion and its interpretation but also the importance and purity of its nature.

Next, it is important to take into account Mahfouz’s use of media. Most of the media in the book is presented through newspapers. It seem that Said has more of a passion for the media than for religion. Constantly buy newspapers or asking around about them, even at his lover, Nur’s house. The first thing that Said does after getting out of jail is going to his Ex-mentor Rauf Ilwan for a job as a journalist in his paper to which Rauf reacts in a way that discourages and angers Said, saying “ This is no time for joking. You’ve never been a writer, and you got out of jail only yesterday. This fooling around is wasting my time” (45). This makes Said question his future and possibly return to thievery, which Mahfouz has already shown is in Said’s head by the words “ In my whole life I’ve mastered only one trade” (44). This could be Mahfouz pointing out the negativity of Egypt’s media, to shut down dreamers.

Rauf had used to be a political activist, writing about the class struggle and corruption of Egypt in his papers (revolution of 1952), in which Said acted as a form of robin hood by stealing from the rich. This was a bond between the two of them, a form of common ground. Said feels betrayed by Rauf, now that this common ground had been removed for menial norms. Rauf stopped writing about civil strife and politics, and started following the norm of writing about gossip and fashion. Which could mahfouz making commentary on the state of Egypt’s media. How it has lost focus on important things in order to gain profit via superficial reporting. Such news is constantly shown to feed siads negativity but still remain addicting. After he sets out get his revenge, Said accidentally causes two separate murders to the wrong recipients. The news delivers the bad news bad news telling Said the the outcomes of his actions were the killing of innocents. The first headline is shockingly: “ Dastardly Murder in the Citadel Quarter!” (80). The news also acts as the medium through which Rauf Publicly rejects him in the papers making him want to murder Rauf as well. Him being angry at himself for killing innocents. We can clearly see the news drowning the protagonist in negativity but Said’s interest in the news never wavers.

All these mentions of news and media can be seen as Mahfouz mocking the media through social commentary. One of the most important questions that arise from the book are , on the choices Mahfouz makes for the characterisation of Said. Said is a character that houses a lot of internal conflict, such as him going to the Sheik for refuge and Allah for answers at the same time cursing them both for all his misfortunes. similarly his anger against the news that develops throughout the story, but at the same time his passion for it is constant, reading it even though it angers him; Said, in some respects, is supposed to represent the people of Egypt.

We can say that Mahfouz has designed Said in order to make him embody the defining characteristics of the Egyptian people, and uses Said to point out the relationship of Egypt with media and religion, trying to educate current Egyptians that their blindly following ways are poisonous behaviors; they must learn to question and think about what they hear. The media should move away from the superficial trends and focus on the more important issues, whatever they may be. And religion should be thought about more clearly by the younger generations to avoid the creation of a people who, collectively, think and act like Said.