

Maat vs. Isfet: A Study of Moral Dichotomy in Naguib Mahfouz's "Evil Adored"

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse Naguib Mahfouz's short story, "Evil Adored" from an ethical perspective. The story hints at a dichotomy where, human beings often make a choice between the philosophical and spiritual aspects of life on the one hand, and the physical, on the other. The narrative represents these twin aspects of life through the concepts of faith, and fear and chaos. Maat, the goddess of justice personifies faith and all positive aspects of life, whereas Isfet personifies chaos, and a strong sense of fear that arises because of it. Mahfouz hints at the fact that while faith offers scope for a Utopian society, fear is often suggestive of a dystopian set up. The significance of the narrative rests mainly on the way in which these two concepts vie with each other and how one finally manages to establish supremacy over the other in the end. Overall, the short story raises pertinent questions on the very foundations of morals in society. The crux of the story rests on the belief that whatever was created out of Chaos will eventually return to it in due course of time. What is remarkable about the story is that Mahfouz never mentions any god or goddess in particular. His approach to the twin concepts of good and evil is more philosophical and spiritual like that of the stranger in the story.

Key words: good, virtue, guardians, evil, Maat, Isfet, chaos, Utopia, dystopia

THE TELLER AND THE TALE

Naguib Mahfouz is a name that the literary world often associates with versatility and subtlety. His works cover a whole gamut of themes and concepts, and present people from all walks of society in as natural a manner as possible. “Evil Adored” first appeared in Arabic in 1936, and later in 1939 in its revised form. It is undoubtedly one of the most popular and widely read short stories of Naguib Mahfouz. At the surface level, the story is a satire on the sham and hypocrisy that exists in society. However, a closer reading reveals that there is more to it than meets the eye.

HARD TIMES

Khnum is a microcosm of any society where power speaks more than words. The very name of the territory is suggestive of the fact that it stems from the name of the Egyptian God of creation, Khnum. Just as the God Khnum represents fertility and life, the territory represents fertility in terms of soil and population. “Yet its fate was cruelly wrought by hardships and woes, for while the opulent lived in sin, the peasants went without food. As the wicked dwelt on the land in wanton corruption, disease and pestilence claimed the wretched and the weak” (*Evil Adored* 3). One clearly sees a contrast between the fertility of the land and the sterility of the human mind in terms of virtue. At the very outset, Mahfouz hints at the idea of moral and natural evil in the story although the focus is more on the former. According to the *Cambridge History of Philosophy*,

The problem of evil is generally accepted as the strongest objection to theism. Two kinds of evil can be distinguished. *Moral evil* inheres in the wicked actions of moral agents and the bad consequences they produce...When evil actions are considered theologically as offenses against God, they are regarded as sins. *Natural evils* are bad consequences that

apparently derive entirely from the operations of impersonal natural forces. (Audi 699, 1999)

The narrative hints at a situation where extremity reigns supreme and gives rise to a dystopian set up. Another interesting point to note is that a person’s social status is proportionate to his moral depravity. Those who belong to the upper strata and who have more money are more depraved, while those belong to the lower strata have neither health nor wealth, but are better off at morals simply because they do not have the money to indulge in such lasciviousness.

THE GUARDIANS OF VIRTUE

The exposition where Mahfouz introduces the mood and the ‘guardians of virtue’ is brief. In his article “Guardians of Chaos,” Daniel L. Selden aptly remarks, “... the challenge that confronted each new claimant to the throne was that the order of the world might degenerate into lawlessness, or political and moral confusion, which it was the pharaoh’s duty through cult, right governance, and war, perennially to stave off” (Selden 123, 2011). The role of the guardians of justice is to assist the sovereign in upholding the rule of Maat and in curbing the rule of Isfet or chaos. While there has always been ambiguity about the use of the term ‘sovereign,’ it is clear in this story that it refers to the king, because the narrative is set in Pharonic Egypt.

MAAT AND ISFET

The terms Maat (also spelt Ma’at) and Isfet unravel a whole range of interpretations related to the pre-Islamic Egyptian religion and philosophy. Egyptians considered Maat the mother of all creation and the original Godhead or Cosmic Divine. Right from the very beginning,

... the idea of rightness or correctness was at the heart of the idea of Maat from the very beginning. Humans could understand that when water in a glass was level or a line was straight or the ears of a deer were even that a certain form of order existed. Thus, Maat became identified with truth, righteousness, justice, order, balance, harmony and reciprocity. (Asante 49, 2011)

Although Isfet has always been associated with chaos, it was from the fifth dynasty onwards that people started referring to the concept of *dw* or evil, and consequently, Isfet became synonymous with evil. As Erik Hornung points out,

Terms contrasting with Maat are *isfet*, a word whose root meaning is unclear, but which connotes “injustice, disorder, unreason” (de Buck proposed to render the word outright as “chaos”); in addition, *gereg*, “lie,” and *khab*, “the crooked”. Alongside these terms of opposition, Maat takes on the meaning “truth, justice, authenticity, correctness, order, and straightness.” It is the norm that should govern all action, the standard against which everything is to be measured. From the sixth dynasty, philosophers and thinkers began to see good and evil, or *nfr* and *dw*, as polar opposites. Based on this, writers prescribed to people on how to be a good human being and what qualities constitute a virtuous individual. (Hornung 136, 1992)

SON OF MAAT

With the arrival of the central character, a clean-shaven old man, Mahfouz’s description is more elaborate. His depiction is extremely dextrous as it leads readers into a kind of snare, and makes them believe that the old man was probably a troublemaker who was aggravating the already pestilence-stricken situation in Khnum.

He would talk to husbands about their wives and to wives about their husbands, to fathers about their sons, and to sons about their fathers, engaging in argument with the lords and

the nobles. He also spoke with the servants and the slaves, leaving in his wake a deep and powerful influence that stirred defiant revolt in their souls, around which disputation and mutual hostility grew ever stronger. (Evil Adored 4)

Nevertheless, this snare is not the one that keeps the reader away from the truth that unfolds only towards the end. It lasts for a very short while considering the fact that this is a short story where the narrative elements are also subject to brevity as much as its length. In fact, the snare in this story is two-fold. The first snare that we encounter is the depiction of Sumer, Ram and Toheb that makes one feel that they really are paragons of virtue.

The old man, whom the ‘guardians of virtue’ see as an odd man, looks like the traditional Egyptian priest, but claims to have no name. He represents the philosophers of ancient times who never had a specific name. Like most philosophers, his words smack of wisdom. Unlike Sumer, Ram, and Toheb, who attempt at curing evil rather than preventing it, the stranger prefers to prevent evil by attacking its very base – the stomach. It is interesting to note that Mahfouz uses this synecdoche to emphasise the dichotomy of spirit vs. flesh or virtue vs. vice. “I found many that could not fill its gaping emptiness, so that they howl from hunger. At the same time, others are not only not empty, but also consume greedily all that they wish. And from the mutual attraction and revulsion of these two stomachs comes looting, pillage and murder” (Evil Adored 7). In other words, the stranger decides to uphold the spirit by stabilizing the craving of the flesh.

Sumer the magistrate tries to defend his role by saying that there are others in Khnum who try to cure this evil and in addition, the stranger can do nothing about it. However, the stranger’s response silences Sumer and the constable Ram. “...they lack something crucial to Our Lord: that is, faith in Him, the belief in Virtue. They do not have the proper faith in

goodness. They struggle for its sake using passive tools that have no feeling, and labor for wages, status, and glory” (Evil Adored 7). This is a direct attack against the work that the ‘guardians of virtue’ gloat about, and a clear indication that the stranger is all out to fortify the spirit of mankind at least in the province of Khnum.

The pivotal point here is the contrast that Mahfouz presents between faith and fear. Maat and Isfet represent these twin qualities. While faith rejuvenates and lends beauty to the soul thereby dispelling all doubts and apprehensions and ushering in a sense of equality, fear stems from indulgence in wantonness or other immoral deeds or even lack of faith, and eventually breeds doubt and insecurity. Fear often fosters a certain hierarchy of power and glory. In other words, the one who occupies a higher position of power considers it his right to instil fear in the hearts of those who submit to his superiority and position.

Sumer the magistrate fails to see what the raving stranger can achieve by way of words. He is a man of action who thinks that the stranger’s words will prove futile in the midst of the wanton rich and the wretched poor. But one cannot be right always and the stranger proves him wrong.

THE TABLES TURNED

The nameless, clean-shaven stranger (referred to as the old man from now onwards) proves everyone wrong. He, who sowed seeds of dissent and revolution initially in the minds of people through discussion and debate, succeeds in making the masses understand the power of beauty and moderation. Beauty here is the beauty of the spirit that wisdom brings about. Once an individual comprehends the meaning of moderation in life, then the revelation dawns on him in the ‘Keatsian’ sense that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.”

The old man’s philosophy clearly echoes the ancient philosophy of Maat that people considered their guiding principle. Miriam Lichtheim in her book *Moral Values in Ancient Egypt* describes the tenets that writers of the Middle Kingdom put forth:

1. Justice is the cardinal requirement of good government.
2. Loyalty of the people toward the king and loyalty of inferiors to superiors are the essential attitudes that enable the society to function coherently and peaceably.
3. The fellowship of friendliness must govern interpersonal relations.
4. Superiors who oppress inferiors are enemies of the people. To mistreat the peasants and serfs who work the land brings ruin to all.
5. Quarrelsomeness is everyone's enemy, and so is calumny.
6. Greed is the inclusive vice that engenders dishonesty and violence. (Lichtheim 27, 1997)

The old man conforms to all the tenets mentioned above. He never emphasises the need for equality. He only tries to neutralise avarice to a point of moderation. As a result, peace, contentment, and happiness finally reign in Khnum. The kingdom of Maat becomes reality and not a mere ideal. “The results were breathtaking, dazzling the seers and wise men alike. They wiped out crime, put evil to flight, and remedied all ills” (Evil Adored 8).

CREATING UTOPIA

The old man eventually succeeds in ushering Utopianism in Khnum. Utopia, according to Thomas More (who is credited with the coining of the word), is a dream or fantasy regarding a perfect land or society that is in contrast to one’s own land or country. However, at present, the term has expanded in meaning and scope than being a mere fantasy. As the *Routledge Shorter Encyclopedia of Philosophy* aptly states, “In some cases it is intended as a direction to be followed in social reform, or

even, in a few instances, as a possible goal to be achieved” (Sargent 1039, 2005).

The man proves that Utopia exists within oneself and all one needs to do is to discover to recreate it through adherence to faith. The visible change that one sees is a result of moderation. It is interesting to note that this virtue stems from faith in oneself that whatever resources one has, are sufficient to bring peace and contentment, irrespective of one’s status or class in society. Here, the focus is on introspection of one’s self and the purgation of greed and wantonness – the twin vices that ravaged Khnum. The very purgation of these vices paves way for a Utopian set up. According to *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, “...utopianism is limited neither to a literary genre nor to specific conceptions of the good life. It rather plays a genuine role in relation to possible or intended change in existing social conditions (Honderich 939, 2005).

The old man succeeds in proving that faith creates Utopia while fear results in dystopia. However, the “guardians of virtue,” who, in reality, are guardians of fear and who achieve their goals by instilling fear in people, are unhappy. They feel their days of glory have faded into oblivion. They realize that the old man has taught people the lesson of faith that shakes their very foundations of fear. People no longer fear the constable or magistrate, as they have not indulged in any sin or crime of any kind.

DARKNESS RISES

The administrators or guardians of virtue, instead of celebrating the peace and quiet of the land, are distressed. They feel that the sovereign may consider them redundant and that they can stay in power only if they have enough work. This is possible only when crime rampages the province. In other words, only dystopia can lead people towards the dream for Utopia. The irony is that fear is necessary to create a sense of

faith – not in the Almighty, but in the guardians of virtue. Therefore, it would be most appropriate to refer to them henceforth as the ‘sons of Isfet.’

The sons of Isfet hold a meeting to discuss their present status of faded glory, and to restore physical power and its resultant fear to their former state. While constable Ram stirs everyone to voice his thoughts vociferously, the magistrate Sumer sits quietly gazing into the horizon as if nothing had ever happened. In fact, he is the most cunning of all. He lets everyone scheme and plot in his presence while he sits quiet and lofty, as if to say that he is beyond such conspiracies. “...Ram whispered to them in embarrassment, ‘Don’t worry about Sumer – his heart is with us. It’s just that his tongue, which is used to speaking about Justice, will not obey him in pursuing our purpose here.’ And so they all agreed about what to do...” (11).

It is evident that the sons of Isfet have gathered to hatch a plan to kill the old man who represents the power of the spirit in its truest sense. Ultimately, the sons of Isfet succeed in their attempt.

SORROW AND DETERMINATION

Soon after, the people of Khnum realize that their messiah is missing and feel lost and forlorn. The sons of Isfet consider this a welcome sign. They wait for the first sign of crime and corruption to take place to assure themselves that everything will be as before. However, the people respect their leader so much and have firm faith in him. Therefore, they no longer require the presence of any other physical entity to sustain their hope and faith. The values that the old man inculcated in the residents of Khnum turn out to be deep-seated even in his absence.

FLESH IS WEAK

Yet, one must bear in mind the fact that evil can be as persevering as virtue. Ram, being the sharpest of the lot, realizes that lack of temptation is the greatest hurdle in their path to success. Therefore, he manages to bring a dancer from Ptah who succeeds in tempting the people of Khnum, particularly the affluent. Here again, the reader sees woman as the archetypal temptress who brings about the downfall of Khnum just as Eve was believed to have brought about the fall of humanity. Chanakya, the great Indian philosopher, rightly remarked, “The world’s biggest power is the youth and beauty of a woman” (*BrainyQuote*)

As expected, the old man’s utopian empire crumbles bit by bit, receding into its dystopian outlook, much to the devilish glee of the guardians. By sowing seeds of evil and by allowing evil to thrive and flourish, they succeed in justifying their position as the guardians of virtue.

KHNUM AND EDEN: A SHARP CONTRAST

The whole scenario in “Evil Adored” presents a perfect contrast to the Garden of Eden scene. It would be clearer if the whole thing were to be presented diagrammatically.

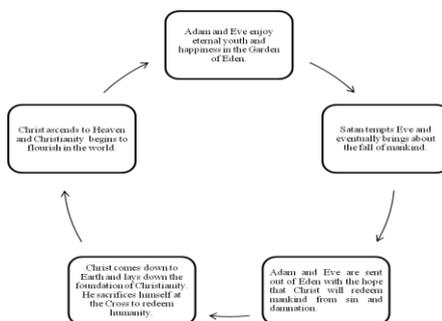


Fig. 1. The Garden of Eden: Virtuous Cycle.

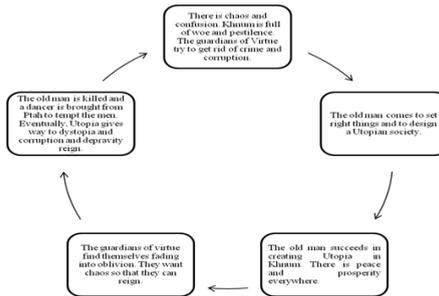


Fig. 2. The Province of Khnum: Vicious Cycle.

The two figures illustrated above clearly indicate the difference between the story and the Garden of Eden episode. The first sees Christianity thrive and signals hope for humanity through faith in Christ, while the second figure points to a state of regression where things return to a chaotic state once again.

What is interesting to note is that unlike Maat, Isfet does not occur in most Egyptian iconography. However, she is associated with Apep, whom early Egyptians considered an embodiment of Isfet. Apep is portrayed as a giant serpent that represents chaos and all forms of evil. This is akin to Lucifer being portrayed as the serpent that tempts Eve into transgression.

Religions like Christianity also believe in the days of rampant evil and corruption that serve as menacing harbingers to the Day of Last Judgement. Nevertheless, such days of formidable iniquity and immorality are part of a distant future, likely to prevail thousands of years later. In contrast, “Evil Adored” deals with a society that relapses rather too quickly into its former state of corruption and ribaldry.

FROM CHAOS TO CHAOS

Mahfouz’ idea in the story is not only to hint at pessimism, but also to suggest the popular Egyptian belief that all that rises from Chaos or Isfet will return to it in the end. Here, the very idea that chaos has returned to Khnum suggests the end of real

virtue in that province. There is no more hope hinted at unless yet another stranger makes his way to Khnum to attempt at creating another Utopia.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

Matters do not end here for that would mean interpreting the story from a restricted perspective. A Nobel laureate like Mahfouz is sure to have more implied meanings and as mentioned in the beginning, there is more to it than meets the eye. Various theories of philosophy argue that the idea of introducing evil could be to highlight the significance of virtue in the world. To quote *The Cambridge History of Philosophy*,

Recent philosophical discussion has often focused on the claim that the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good being is logically inconsistent with the existence of evil and of a certain quantity of evil. This is the logical problem of evil, and the most successful response to it has been the *free will defense*. Unlike a theodicy, this defense does not speculate about God’s reasons for permitting evil but merely argues that God’s existence is consistent with the existence of evil....God could not have created a world containing moral good but no moral evil. (Audi 699-700, 1999)

This is but a drop in the ocean of philosophy that one often finds argumentative and extremely ambiguous. Jacqueline Taylor strengthens this argument further by quoting Thomas Hobbes who “argued that since good and evil are naturally relative to each individual’s private appetites, and man’s nature is predominantly selfish, then morality must be grounded in human conventions” (Taylor 2005, 712).

A reader with similar views can interpret “Evil Adored” from the viewpoint that evil is necessary for humanity to decipher the essence of goodness and virtue. The sham and hypocrisy of the “Manufacturers of Virtue” (Evil Adored 10) is not acceptable. At the same time, the idealistic rule of Maat

where virtue and justice thrive without any trace of evil is improbable in every sense of the word for a modern reader. Evil must exist since (if one were to go by recent arguments in philosophy and theodicy), its sustenance is what keeps virtue and justice on top of the scale.

CONCLUSION

Whatever side the reader or critic chooses to take, one cannot ignore the dexterity and irony that Mahfouz employs in the story. He stirs the readers’ minds to the stark reality of life, to the fact that the events in the story are not confined to ancient Egypt. Maat and Isfet are not mere mythological deities or representations, an integral part of the present societal framework, In short, it is not surprising that this story is one of the most popular writings of the Nobel laureate.

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