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A Kierkegaardian analysis of Emily Brontë's Heathcliff and Najib Mahfouz's Saeed Mehran

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ABSTRACT

The male antiheroes in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (WH) and Najib Mahfouz's *Al-liṣ wal-Kilāb* (AK) offer a relevant example for the dilemma of living in alignment with the Kierkegaardian concept of "anxiety" (or angst) and its "absurd" and "nihilistic" derivatives. One overarching demerit of Heathcliff's and Saeed Mehran's existential dilemmas is their sinful, "hereditary" legacy which consistently throttles their freedom of choice and prompts them to develop their own ethics while undertaking a "leap of faith". Their angst journeys while testing their societies' permissibility is beset with melancholy which progressively alters into an attritional, nihilistic existence. The two men share many elements such as being betrayed by their women, partaking in Kierkegaard's "beyond-faith" shift, experiencing 3-4-year estrangement hiatuses at the end of which they return dramatically changed, undergoing Gothic, graveyard setting, having no normative family units, and being prepossessed by an uncommonly poignant, revenge motif.

KEYWORDS: existentialism, Kierkegaard, Mahfouz, Brontë, comparative literature

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Introduction

Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* (1980) has set as its task the psychological treatment of the concept of "anxiety," but in such a way that it constantly keeps in mind and before its eye the dogma of hereditary sin. Accordingly, it must also, although tacitly so, deal with the concept of sin. Sin, however, is no subject for psychological concern and only by submitting to the service of a misplaced brilliance could it be dealt with psychologically. (Kierkegaard 1980, 14). While defining the mission of his book above, Kierkegaard reveals the correlation between sinned heredity and anxiety. His definition of an individual as one who is shaped by his/her religious inheritance and evolving psychological adaption accurately details the trajectory of Heathcliff's and Saeed's behaviors in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (henceforth WH) and Mahfouz's *Al-liṣ wal-Kilāb* (the thief and the dog; henceforth AK). Demeaning heredity severely hampers Heathcliff's attempts—the alienated "lascar"—and Saeed—the Shia Muslim outcast in that they are unable to assume their full potential and practice their inalienable rights as natives of the countries they grew up in. There is a strong causal relation between the recurring failures the two men encounter and their inherited, disadvantaged past. Even as a young teenager of fourteen, Heathcliff is summoned by Hindley before The Linton and the Earnshaw families (and their entourages) to be subjected to horrid, racist abuse, even though he does not commit any offense except engaging in childish merriment such as scaring the Linton children at night with Catherine. Paradoxically, he is racially profiled and villainized for no known reason while Catherine is disproportionately extolled. Similarly, we are constantly reminded of Saeed's Shia status as the root cause for his repeated failure.

Another Kierkegaardian angst-driven demerit of Brontë's and Mahfouz's antiheroes is engaging in a "leap of faith" or a "beyond-faith" action which though questionable to mainstream ethicalness, yet they regard as moral and appropriate from their "dizzying" subjective reasoning. Their leaps are transacted seamlessly because both get familiar with hypocritical religious figures such as Joseph and Sheikh Juneidy. Consequently, they become ever so determined to keep their distance from a traditional interpretation of religious ethics, preferring to chart their own moral landscape in line with Kierkegaardian thought:

[W]hen speculative philosophy is no longer disinterested, but creates a double confusion, first by overleaping the ethical, and then by proposing a world-historical something as the ethical task for the individuals—then it is due to science itself that something be said about it.... But the ethical is and remains the highest task for every human being. ...[T]he ethical is the very breath of the eternal, and constitutes even in solitude the reconciling fellowship with all men. (Kierkegaard 1968, 135-6)

When a leap of faith is conducted, it must transcend the mainstream ethics, being an integral part of faith; however, since the perception of the ethical is subjective and predicated by one's personal angst, Heathcliff and Saeed are observed putting to practice Kierkegaard's "subjectivity is truth" premise and developing ethics that are if not antithetical, then divorced from normative, Christian and Islamic consensus (1968, 185). Analogously, Heathcliff feels blissful edification as he bribes the Sexton operator to dig up and turn Catherine's coffin so that it faces the prospective pit in which his coffin is to be placed. Saeed also believes he is taking the high moral ground as he leaps away from traditional Shia Islam after ascertains Sheikh Juneidy's averse ill-intentioned conscience. Contemplating his own "beyond [Sheikh Juneidy's] faith" leap, he summons his courage: "You are most important in this life today and you remain so until your soul is dead. You are an icon of dismay and appeal, just like extraordinary, natural phenomena. Those who are suffocated with boredom will pay you homage" (Mahfouz 2016, 85).

In their ceaseless struggle to be assimilated within their societies, Heathcliff and Saeed run the exploratory gamut of Kierkegaard's angst potentiality and its absurd and nihilistic associations. While taking their "beyond faith" leaps, they put to practice their amoral angst utilizing their full subjectivity since "subjectivity is truth" and explore options that prove to be detrimental and hostile. The routes they adopt lead to worsening existential crises marked by abandonment of traditional morality and gradual self-annihilation. Catherine's decision to exclude Heathcliff from a matrimonial with her, choosing the "culture and civilization" of Edgar Linton instead compels the broken-hearted dupe to leave WH to attain what she left him for and elevate his socio-economic station (Shlaka 2026, 1539); however, his attempt to regain her heart after his financial and social promotion proves absurd and elusive. Analogously, no sooner is Mahfouz's Saeed released from prison than he is shown

eager to take revenge. While in prison, he becomes aware that his wife, Nabawiya, unbeknownst to him, was granted divorce and has moved in with Ellish Sedra--her new husband, and Saeed's former employee--into Saeed's own, repossessed apartment. Yet his varied attempts to exact revenge on them proves disastrous. After reflecting on their subjective choices and realizing the absurdity of their vain revenge attempts, the anti-heroes are abandoned by everyone who once cared for them: Saeed dies in a cemetery ditch while on the run from the police during a firearm exchange and Heathcliff starves himself to death. In a rare, self-conscious moment before his suicide, Heathcliff adumbrates his existentialist abyss to Nelly: "It is a poor conclusion is it not?" he observed... 'an absurd termination to my violent exertions?' (Brontë 1996, 184). After achieving the zenith of his material ambition, making his mark as a dignified aristocrat, and taking revenge on his persecutors, he is stopped short from enjoying the fruits of his victory, even though he has either outlived or exacted punishment against a long list of victims such as Hindley Earnshaw and his son Hareton and Edgar Linton and Catherine Earnshaw through Isabella and Catherine Linton. Even after gaining ownership of both WH and Thrushcross Grange, he realizes the absurdity of his accomplishments without Catherine. Similarly, without Nabawiya, who divorced Saeed for Ellish, the former feels the acute pointlessness of his existence. Although his revenge motif is inherently different from Heathcliff's, Saeed's is warped in more depravity and homicidal score settling. He is adamant about slaying his wife and her husband, lending no thought to innocent people who are caught in the crossfire. Like Heathcliff, however, his inability to carry out his schemes render him disillusioned and in despair, as the narrator streams to us his consciousness: "The bastards survived and your life is meaningless" (Mahfouz 2016, 100).

There is a plethora of instances in Emily's and Mahfouz's works that indicates adoption of Kierkegaard's ideas, as this paper attempts to prove. As for Mahfouz, he read Western fiction and criticism extensively. His main interest in high school was philosophy, which he pursued as a Bachelor's degree and graduated from Cairo University in 1934 (Moussa-Mahmoud 2007, 153). He took to writing novels after his stories were very well received (Moosa 1995, 224). Mahfouz was highly educated and keenly admired Western philosophical, economic, and religious education, so much so that he believed in the unity of religions "... Both our culture and that of the West belong in fact to one family" (El-Enany, 1995). Concerning the pervasive European influence on him, Mahfouz pays tribute to its magnanimity unequivocally "I believe that there is no escape from the supremacy of the more efficient culture" (El-Enany, 1995). In his acceptance speech at the 1988 Nobel Prize for literature, Mahfouz also praises Western thinkers and lauds one of his major inspirations, Immanuel Kant, concerning the prevailing of virtue on earth (Dec. 8).

Scholars have spared no effort to probe obvious influences on Emily that permeate *WH*, such as Romantic, eco-critical, class struggle, Gothic, "Feminist," as well as Shakespearean motifs, etc., yet research that investigates Emily's adoption of Kierkegaard's ideas is critically lacking, despite ample evidentiary instances in *WH* (Al-Erjan 2023, 1314). Furthermore, her sister Charlotte's adoption of Kierkegaard's ideas, notably in *Jane Eyre* (1847) which was published in the same year as Emily's *WH* provides further proof. In *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* (1853) Jane reacts with "stoicism" to her angst while Lucy reacts with despair and lack of "spirit" to her existential crisis (Reiff 2018, 36). The Brontës who travelled to Brussels to manage the Heger Pensionnat boarding school in February 1842 and learn French stayed there for many months and undoubtedly heard of Kierkegaard. Emily who felt "homesick" returned in October 1843 to Haworth village after a nine-month stay in Brussels (Austin 2002, 573), but Charlotte stayed there for about two years (from February 1842 till January 1844) and must have discussed Kierkegaard's existential concepts with Emily. The siblings published *their novels* in November 1847, well over four years after the appearance of Kierkegaard's representative works such as *The Concept of Anxiety*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, *Either/Or*. It would be inconceivable for Emily not to have been well acquainted with Kierkegaard's philosophy whose fame spread across Denmark and Germany since early 1843.

Discussion

Upon first glimpse, the compositions of *WH* and *AK* reveal strong incorporation to Kierkegaardian existentialist notions. Heathcliff and Saeed are depicted in the novels as children of hereditary disadvantage who grow up in emotional privation divested of the nurturing support of a family that would shield them from life's trials and tribulations, especially as they start to operate in solitary. Heathcliff's parents and lineage are unknown. He is an

exotic boy who when first picked up speaks an unrecognized language and whose ancestry and country of birth are oblivious. Nelly Dean narrates that Mr. Earnshaw brought him from an unspecified Liverpool neighborhood on his unaccompanied visit there (Brontë, 1996, 24). Some critics claim that he may have been a foundling or a gypsy. His strange language, “mulatto” appearance, and unknown ancestry single him out as a pariah and create the conditions for othering him as an “outsider” who “can never fit into a decent, white society” (Watson 2001, 469). Emily Brontë’s apparent authorship predilection was to create a stranger whose blood is impure, soul irredeemably diabolic, and race ignominious.

Although there is no textual allusion to Saeed’s family apart from his father, the implicit recognition is that he is either orphaned on his mother’s side or that his parents are separated with custody granted to his father, as is common in Shia child codes. Like Heathcliff, Saeed has no siblings, grandparents, aunts or uncles, or even cousins of any degree. Mimicking Heathcliff’s persona, Mahfouz deliberately creates Saeed’s character as a loner divested of “familial support” support in order to pit him against a cruel (Khoshsafa 2022, 760), capitalistic world, a minority outcast left to his own devices coping with his subjective angst and the “dizziness of freedom” (Kierkegaard 1980, 61; Zuraikat and Mashreqi, 2020 and 2022). Identically with Heathcliff, Saeed treks further and further within his “philosophical battleground” as he considers his options without the cumbersome burden of a conscience (Cropper, Tod, and Browne, Jonathan 2024, 3). When Saeed is released from prison at the outset of the novella upon the completion of his four-year term with no one to receive him, he acutely feels society’s apathy. As he reflects on his social stereotyping and exclusion by his community, he deliberates his next move and decides on revenge against the treacherous world, but, interestingly, he does not blame himself for being a convicted felon. We become aware of his fixation on revenge through his determination to murder his wife and Elish, the man who supplanted himself as father and husband.

We also learn that one major concern is to see Sanaa’, his six-year-old daughter. As he later meets her in the presence of a police officer along with her adoptive father, Saeed is disheartened to see that she does not remember him and is too scared to walk towards him despite his passionate entreaties. When the attending office nudges her forward, Saeed notices her unwillingness which “broke his heart, broke it till there was nothing left in it except for a sense of loss, as though she was not his daughter” (Mahfouz 2016, 11). Despite attempting to overcome his initial disappointment by embracing her, Sanaa’ begins to cry in a frenzy of passion which forces him to let go. The shock of her rejection has a devastating impact on his angst and foreshadows his nihilistic, self-damaging, future acts. Due to his edgy state of angst, Saeed distortedly perceives his one-time mentor, Ra’oof, as a corrupt, mercurial hypocrite who turns his back on their once sacred, working-class ideals when he gets rich, reminiscing: “Have you forgotten your embellished speeches on mansions and shacks. As for me, I certainly don’t” (Mahfouz 2016, 38). Ra’oof is a man who once indoctrinated Saeed into anti-bourgeois ideology and inducted him into the notion that the wealthy are rotten, accumulating their fortunes illegitimately through manipulating the proletariat: “This is Ra’oof Elwaan, the bare truth, a decadent cadaver that soil cannot inter.... You [apostrophizing Ra’oof] create me then you renege. You simply change your ideals after they become ingrained in my soul, so that I find myself lost, without origin, without merit, without hope. Cruel treachery!” (Mahfouz 2016, 37).

In this introspection Saeed gives vent to his pessimistic angst and reveals his skepticism vis-a-vis his hereditary identity, origin, and esteem which sets off his existential dilemma. His myopic, subjective uncertainty goads him to envision his socio-economic circumstances in accordance with his nihilistic worldview. Scrutinizing his disagreement with Ra’oof, one discerns that the cause emanates from the mind of a self-absorbed, envious ingrate who is unappreciative of sincere friendship. If his anxious narcissism was not impaired, he would not have questioned Ra’oof’s loyalty and charitableness, an old friend who takes the risk of offering his own home for Saeed’s leisure despite the latter’s liable circumstances as a newly released ex-convict. Saeed’s backstabbing provides proof that in an amoral, “beyond faith” world, his anxious retributive pursuit degenerates via the Kierkegaardian “subjective-objective,” self-negotiation (Kierkegaard 1980, 56). Such psyche leads him to plan to rob Ra’oof’s villa and slay him there as well.

However, analysis of Saeed’s and Heathcliff’s actions resonate with betrayal-based trauma. Their lovers’/ wives’ treacheries set them on self-damaging trajectories in which they ponder existential questions concerning the significance of their worlds and experience a “skepticism of inherent meaning, values, and purpose in life” (Cropper and Browne 2024, 2). Heathcliff and Saeed’s betrayal travails are similar for both grow as shunned,

abandoned children and as they mature, they are spurned by their lovers. Heathcliff is dumped by Catherine, his childhood sweetheart, who abandons him in favor of the aristocratic Edgar Linton, matrimony to whom offers her financial security and sustained social eliteness. Her betrayal wounds Heathcliff bitterly, erodes his self-esteem, and the miniscule remainder of philanthropy which Catherine nurtured in him as they grew up together, setting him up on an adverse quest for revenge. In a similar vein, Nabawiya, Saeed's lover in the adolescent days in their Abbasiya, Cairo neighborhood setting, dumps him for Ellish Sedra, a travesty that prompts score-quaring on his part; however, he adversely succumbs to his betrayal trauma using it as an alibi to justify his wicked deeds against friend and foe.

As Saeed reflects on Nabawiya's treacherous "soul," he divulges his altered, misogynistic view: "Damn the men who fall for the lullaby of a woman" (Mahfouz 2016, 10). Although in the narrative Mahfouz opts to be textually economic, he does allude to the history of Nabawiya's and Saeed's relationship, as the latter reflects on their passionate love: "Nabawiya shook the heart till she plucked it from its roots" (Mahfouz 2016, 29), and touches on the cause of his dejection: "The tongue that often said to me 'I love you, you the finest of men' ceased". It is logical, therefore, to assume that theirs was a normal, loving marriage and that Nabawiya whimsically decided to destroy her family in favor of pursuing her carnal desires while Saeed was away in prison. After Saeed's failing attempt to burglarize Ra'oof's house, the latter understandably turns against him. Driven by angst, Saeed changes into a loose cannon and attempts to killing Ra'oof simply because the latter reneges against their earlier Marxist beliefs, abandons Robin Hood chivalric mentality, and gains wealth through a legitimate business. Saeed's anxiety is grounded in impetuosity, so much so that he kills two people by mistake, first a random man who was renting Saeed's old apartment where Saeed thought Ellish would be present, and the second is Ra'oof's gate keeper who Saeed deemed to be Ra'oof. His failed domestic relationship with Nabawiya is funneled into making ill-advised decisions that cause the loss of innocent lives.

On her return from TG, Catherine flaunts upper-class mannerisms, wearing a luxurious silk frock, white trousers, and brandished shoes while displaying upper-class affectation and making a racist juxtaposition between Heathcliff's black complexion and grime against the Linton children's dainty whiteness: "Why, how very black and cross you look! and how—how funny and grim! But that's because I'm used to Edgar and Isabella Linton" (Brontë 1996, 32). Heathcliff internalizes that Catherine's pristine, innocent soul, which shares with him the passion to be adventurous, oblivious to people's judgement, seeking harmless fun running barefoot on the grass. Yet Heathcliff's more intense, existential trauma occurs at Catherine's death, and his suffering is adversely proportionate to the vehement bond he forged with her in childhood. These early impressions of Catherine were imprinted on Heathcliff's mind, and so were his, as Catherine definitively articulates: "I AM Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being" (Brontë 1996, 49). Driven by Kierkegaardian subjectivity, which he believes is truth (1968, 185), Heathcliff's trauma takes an arcane form that is too intricate to decipher. Catherine's death does not bring an end to his anxious dilemma but symbolizes its commencement. As he learns of her passing, the impact of her loss is too overwhelming to bear, intensified by a new phase of misery and nihilistic nadir: "only DO not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you!" (Brontë 1996, 97). While heaping curses at her, Heathcliff imparts to Nelly her betrayal and the trauma she had caused him, "Why, she's a liar to the end!" (Brontë 1996, 97). The shock at being left in the world without her projects itself through his violent, bloody reaction and ushers in his psychosis. Nelly narrates: "He dashed his head against the knotted trunk; and, lifting up his eyes, howled, not like a man, but like a savage beast being goaded to death with knives and spears. I observed several splashes of blood about the bark of the tree, and his hand and forehead were both stained" (Brontë 1996, 97).

Levy suggests that Heathcliff's and Catherine's stress is brought on by their unconsummated relationship due to their fantasized notion of love. He expounds that by insisting on an idealized notion of love, they miss out on its sensational aspect: "The need for fantasy requires that the waking awareness of the subject it controls focus regularly on the pain of loneliness and the memory of loss" (1996, 160). Such recognition of unfulfilled, betrayed affection that results in heartache and loneliness developing into a disinterest in life is detected in Heathcliff's actions. His angst over feeling abandoned leads him to inflict self-harm. His nearly two-decade-long, existential trauma—from when Catherine married Edgar Linton till his death—is prompted by his existential loneliness. He rightly elaborates that Heathcliff, having been subject to the abuse and debasement in the Earnshaw household, experiences "unlove" (Levy 1996, 160, 159). His protracted degradation, corporeal punishment, and exclusionary

othering throughout his life most acutely by Hindley and compounded by Catherine's demeaning, class-based estrangement from her "soulmate" help create the conditions for Heathcliff's neuropathy (Constance, Barbara et. al. 2021, 185). Not unlike Saeed's, Heathcliff's revenge degenerates progressively into a diffused psychosis, a quest for random punishment against kin and friends alike, even against those who had no role in his unfulfilled, capsized dream with Catherine which turns into a nightmare. Due to his psychopathic angst, he reroutes his anger on those who care about him but paradoxically stand as unintuitive prey. Since Catherine is indeed Heathcliff's "double," as many critics purport (Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar 1984, 298), she complements his thoughts and allows him to read hers. Too jealous and too repelled by Isabella's infatuation to him, she tells him the specific terms of a convenient revenge plan, which he adopts verbatim: "Quarrel with Edgar, if you please, Heathcliff, and deceive his sister: you'll hit on exactly the most efficient method of revenging yourself on me" (Brontë 1996, 66). This Catherine-indoctrinated, vengeful marriage to Isabella is the first step in Heathcliff's journey to nihilistic, self-sabotage and is a projection of Catherine's own regret for marrying Edgar and sidestepping her rapport to Heathcliff, as Watson argues (1949, p. 93).

Heathcliff and Saeed share being estranged from their milieu for 3-4 years, after which they reappear substantially altered. Heathcliff leaves after being jeered at before a large crowd which includes The Linton and The Earnshaw families who meet on Catherine's return to WH from TG where she stays to convalesce for five weeks from a dog's bite. While waiting for her, the sixteen-year-old, orphaned adolescent gets demeaned beyond recognition by a host of adults as well as a suddenly changed Catherine with a barrage of sadistic, racial abuse. Mrs. Linton senior who unleashes the harassment upon arrival demands that Heathcliff be kept far from her daughter "darlings" and who basks at Heathcliff's grimy, disheveled appearance (Brontë 1996, 33). Further abuse is orchestrated by Hindley who orders the boy to wait in line with the servants to greet Catherine upon her arrival, instructing him to only "shake hands... once in a way" with her (Bronte 1996, 32). As he does so, Catherine derides his dirty appearance but sugarcoats her bizarre, untoward candor with an affected apology: "I did not mean to laugh at you" she said; "I could not hinder myself: Heathcliff, shake hands at least! What are you sulky for? It was only that you looked odd. If you wash your face and brush your hair, it will be all right: but you are so dirty!" (Brontë 1996, 32). Observing that the setting in which she asks him to clean himself is public and thus disingenuously tendentious, he "dash[es] headforemost out of the room" in a fit of anger. Although Catherine attempts to make amends in the garret where Hindley confines him to, Heathcliff is not placated and leaves the next day on his three-year hiatus journey. With this harsh abuse of a defenseless orphan, the author builds the case for Heathcliff's neuropathic revenge, forcing him to leave on a get-rich mission and return on a vengeance quest.

When Heathcliff returns after his three-year absence, he is a completely changed man. He has obtained wealth, upgraded his social status, boosted his ego, and matured physically. He has several meetings with Catherine during which she accords him much more importance than she ever did prior to his estrangement period. She actually changes her outlook towards her husband and prefers Heathcliff over him, whom she meets in secret without Edgar's knowledge. In the iconic scene when Edgar barges in on them in the guest room, she excoriates him for threatening Heathcliff and accuses him of being a coward. To add insult to injury, she takes the door key and throws it into the hearth's cinders to prevent Edgar's escape and provide Heathcliff with the opportunity to beat him. Similarly, Saeed leaves on a four-year hiatus to prison for the thefts he undertakes. Although no information is provided within the text's concision on how his crimes were discovered or whether someone notified the authorities, his revenge mission is overpowering and constantly preoccupies his mind. First thing he ponders is to know where his wife and her new husband are so that he can kill them. Finding out that this plan is not easily executed as the couple go into hiding, he gets more dejected and initiates ill-advised acts such as killing innocent individuals who are caught in the crossfire. As he realizes that all his friends, family, and religious mentor abandon him, including his one-time faithful lover, Noor, and his own young daughter Sanaa', he embarks on a suicidal mission and gets involved in a shootout with the police who, it is implied, terminate his life.

The authorial creation of the anti-heroes' personae is designed in such a way as to underscore their skepticism to mainstream religious ethics in addition to promoting the counter-cultural archetypes of their regions. Nineteenth-century colonialist, "patriarchal" England contended with serious moral issues that reflexively projected themselves as a backlash to the inhuman colonial agency that devastated the African

continent and the contemporary world then (Vieco 2025, 970). Like England a century earlier, mid twentieth-century Egypt was undergoing a transitional era coping with its own identity in the aftermath of the 1952 military revolution in rebellion against British occupation, in which Abd Alnaser unseated the monarchy of King Farouq I, rendering Egyptians dubious about their future. This uncertainty is compounded when considering that within less than half a century Egyptians were subject to the control of two magnanimous empires including the British which expelled the Ottomans since the outbreak of World War I. The country was in search of a new religious and cultural identity disparate from a universal nation of Islam and from Western, Colonial inhumanity, while addressing religious minorities' rights including Shia, Christians, Jews, etc. Yet although the contemporary Egyptian rhetoric during Mahfouz's time was decidedly anti-colonialist, paradoxically local and regional writers were significantly influenced by the enlightening philosophical writings of the West among whom was Mahfouz, the voracious reader.

Brontë's and Mahfouz's protagonists project valid skepticism about their worlds in diverse ways. Operating within their personalized conditions and discovering the limitation and irrelevance of faith to their existential anxiety, they experience Kierkegaardian "beyond-faith" disillusionment (Kierkegaard *F&T*, Prelude PDF 3). Aside from the socio-religious and political circumstances of their nations and their associated personal conditions, both undergo an absurdist, existential dilemma and a nihilistic, religious disillusionment. Their attempts to find edifying, spiritual answers from traditional mainstream religious philosophy for their betrayed conditions and validations for their existential crises prove non-availing, which to some critics lead them to develop "no moral dimension" (Barnard 2013, 113). Due to their trauma and fixation on exacting revenge, the antiheroes persist in adopting headlong decisions prompted by their anxieties' unbridled potentialities and watch them transpire to their destructive ends; consequently, we behold them probing choices to fulfill their areligious schemes in line with Kierkegaard's emphatic recommendation: "one must go further [than the traditional confines of religion], one must go further" (De Silentio, 1843, PDF 64). Heathcliff thus has no moral or religious boundaries that would halt him from desecrating the religious sanctity of Catherine's coffin and examining her facial features eighteen years post death for verification: "it is hers yet" (Brontë 1996, 65). Nor does he have scruples to check his nefarious, absurd plan against the next generation by having his son control their destinies and treat them like slaves.

Just as Heathcliff who does not subscribe to common Christian tenets and believes in the righteousness of his action to move Catherine's coffin, Saeed appears to overturn cohabiting with Noor, a night-club worker and a prostitute after having discovered his wife who was supposed to be virtuous cheat on him with his subordinate man who worked for him. Interestingly, his wife's namesake, Nabawiya ironically means prophet-emulating, which is shown to be false. Conversely, Noor-the-prostitute whose namesake denotes "light" is privileged with loyalty, devotion, and an unambiguous moral code. His union with Noor manifests his going "further and further" from traditional morality and taking a leap into a faith that is self-fashioned and void of corrupting vestige. Mahfouz's configuration of his antihero's persona does project his non-committal to orthodox Islam but a beyond-faith predilection in conformity with Kierkegaard's dogma. After having given religion a chance and having dealt with uninspiring, putative role models of holiness such as Sheikh Juniedy, Nelly, and Joseph, Heathcliff and Saeed come to the realization that they need to chart their own beyond-faith, areligious awakening. Not only are Juneidy and Joseph dismissive of the protagonists, but they have a cunning aversion to them, for good reason: as a boy, Heathcliff always owned a defiant, aggressive character that resisted complaisance to any form of abuse, especially forced, psychological inculcation. As a child listening to Joseph's sermons along with Catherine, he clearly shows his aversion to religion, especially the repellent version that hateful, sadistic Joseph represents, who according to Tytler is a "pernicious," misanthrope (2007, 42). During their bible lessons from Joseph, instead of getting inspired, the duo cast the holy books aside, which makes Joseph instruct Hindley to beat Heathcliff and Catherine for their action.

Understandably, Heathcliff's spiritual interests are quite remote from traditional Christianity. To his traumatized mind, instead of embracing forgiveness and turning the other cheek to wrongdoers, he feels revenge has a therapeutic, pacifying effect: "... God won't have the satisfaction that I shall... I only wish I knew the best way! Let me alone, and I'll plan it out: while I'm thinking of that I don't feel pain" (Brontë 1996, 36). Despite Heathcliff's disadvantageous background, his "devil's spies" eyes, unknown ancestry, different language, and dark color, he holds "high notions" of himself as though his father was an "emperor of China" and his mother

an “Indian queen” (Brontë 1996, 34), which vindicates his unbreakable resolve insofar as neither imprisonment nor starvation are able to break his spirit. Even though Hindley starves him for one full day before he allows him to greet Catherine upon her return from TG, clearly Heathcliff’s preoccupation is not in food, for he “could eat little” (Brontë 1996, 36) but with the preservation of his dignity. When Linton seconds Hindley’s negative quip about Heathcliff’s dangling locks, the latter throws the hot porridge in Linton’s face. Despite his starvation, he does not allow hunger to compromise his dignity, waging open threats in the presence of Nelly and Catherine against his chief bully: “I’m trying to settle how I shall pay Hindley back. I don’t care how long I wait, if I can only do it at last. I hope he will not die before I do!” (Brontë 1996, 36). His passion for retribution is poignant enough that the ambition of settling scores has a soothing effect on him, awkwardly energizing him with dark energy. Consequently, after he succeeds in usurping WH proprietorship from Hindley through gambling, he beats him severely and sadistically denies him medical assistance as he lies prostrate, bleeding on the floor which results in his death.

As for Nelly, she displays no interest in engaging Heathcliff in his younger days with inspirational Christian anecdotes or promoting the heavenly rewards of the virtuous, which is in conformity with her being a Christian by name rather than one who lives in the spirit of the holy word. Although she is the kindest person to him in comparison to other characters, yet she does not attempt to pass herself as a God-fearing person. On the contrary, she projects herself as a self-engrossed, judgmental person who protects the implicit colonialist agency at work to denigrate a black child’s dignity. There are also many incidences that expose Nelly engaging in “deceit and deception” regarding Edgar Linton, whom she should have acquainted with Heathcliff’s secret visits to Catherine inside his house; therefore, Nelly does not represent a suitable role model for Christian ethics to Heathcliff (Tytler 2007, 43).

Joseph’s behavior is reminiscent of Saeed’s father who was in the habit of dumping his son at Sheikh Juneidy’s leaving him fending for himself instead of personally spending time with him and filling the emotional void in his heart. Such flaws in these self-proclaimed religious enthusiasts shape Heathcliff’s and Saeed’s nascent, anti-religion worldviews, which rightly had been “depicted in drab colours” that are inextricably nonsensical and irreconcilably contradictory (Tytler 2007, 43). In his first meeting with Sheikh Juneidy after his four-year prison hiatus, Saeed is acutely reminded of the double-faced, hypocritical side of religion that the sheikh symbolizes. After recognizing his old student, he does not attempt to show warmth or even affected courtesy and acts as though Saeed’s long estrangement was of no consequence. Instead of greeting his one-time apprentice at his praising-Allah gatherings, Sheikh Juneidy completely ignores him, offensively shedding his once role-model status. Wary of the sheikh’s odd behavior, Saeed meaningfully asks him about his time-honored recitals of God’s hymns: “‘Do you still recite the hymns here,’ to which he did not answer. Then suspicion crept on him so he reiterated: ‘Are you not going to welcome me?’ The sheikh opened his eyes saying: ‘The requester and the requested are enfeebled’” (Mahfouz 2016, 85). The sheikh’s purposely discursive, curt answer disheartens Saeed. At this point, Saeed realizes he must seek answers for his existential crisis far from the sheikh and his decadent spirituality. After the encounter with the sheikh, Mahfouz’s narrator reveals to us the stream of Saeed’s consciousness concerning exploring options that transcend religion, “I have a long night before me. It is the first of my freedom nights. I alone with freedom, or with a sheikh absent in the realm of the heavenly, a repeater of terms a person about to enter hellfire cannot possibly comprehend. But is there another refuge I can resort to?” (Mahfouz 2016, 85)”. Saeed’s disillusionment and weariness of the sheikh and his hollow religious rhetoric is clear. At this stage in the plot, he decides to move on beyond religion in pursuit of his dented anxiety’s possibilities.

Left to their own subjective, sociopathic angst without assistance, the antiheroes take one bad decision after another which seals their fates. Having had their revenge quest morph into absurd pits, the antiheroes become conspicuously nihilistic as they realize the futility of their endeavors. Heathcliff fathoms the defeat of his purpose and the triviality of exacting punishment on the second generation of The Earnshaws after the death of Hindley, the old Earnshaws, and his treacherous lover, Catherine. He is left completely abandoned without anyone to care for him as Cathy Linton reminds him: “You ARE miserable, are you not? Lonely, like the devil, and envious like him? NOBODY loves you NOBODY will cry for you when you die!” (Brontë 1996, 164). Similarly, after having killed two random men accidentally and after he becomes a fugitive with police scouring the city in his trails, Saeed realizes his inability to have retribution against the people who wronged him. He

alters so that he is too deranged to be reasoned with, even for Noor who supports and hosts him till his final discretionary angst becomes too bizarre that she realizes he cannot be saved.

Catherine Linton, who has a grudge against Heathcliff for kidnapping and forcibly marrying her to Linton, provokes a fight, which stems from using a flowerbed that Joseph originally plants with his own flowers. Displeased, Joseph vociferously complains to the master about it. As Heathcliff enquires from Hareton and Catherine about the issue, Catherine's answer which is couched in overpowering, pent-up anger stomps Heathcliff: "You shouldn't grudge a few yards of earth for me to ornament, when you have taken all my land!" (Brontë 1996, 182). Expectedly, he raves, waxes "pale," and calls her an "insolent slut". As he rises from his seat menacingly, she confidently warns him of her new alliance: "If you strike me, Hareton will strike you," she said; "so you may as well sit down". Irrate, he grabs her hair before Hareton steps in between them to stop the conflict from escalating. Seeing Hareton in front of him, Heathcliff lets go of her hair and his ancient vengeance motif as well. Just as neurotically but also emblematic of his changed mental condition, when Heathcliff later notices Catherine not sitting at the dinner table after this dramatic incident, Nelly narrates: "I had counselled Catherine to dine up-stairs; but, as soon as he perceived her vacant seat, he sent me to call her" (Brontë 1996, 183). For Heathcliff to ask for Catherine's company means that he did not get offended by Catherine's argument because of its veracity. It also represents an indirect apology for his chauvinistic, abusive behavior and his symbolic capitulation, now that his discernment of the absurdity of his mission is finally realized.

For Saeed as a fugitive who kills two innocent victims (Ra'oof's gate keeper and the tenant who was wrongly in Ellish Sedra's place) and whose thefts get discussed in the local newspapers, the noose around him gets tighter. He realizes then that he cannot sustain his absurd killing spree. As he reads the newspapers that describe him as a dangerous madman and a megalomaniac with excessive pride who has changed into a bloodthirsty hound, he reflects on his description and realizes he cannot win (Mahfouz 2016, 85). Saeed attempts to get out of his solitary, nihilistic situation by frantically searching for Noor who, as it were, Noor who has bailed due to perceiving the neurotic case of his angst. After having had everyone abandon him, Noor was the last-ditch option and the mainstay of his existence, the one who truly loved him unconditionally and offered her apartment as refuge. With her absence, he clearly realizes his listless, meaningless life. Instead of killing the people who he thinks have done him wrong, he ends the life of two innocent people and realizes that the only consequence of these murders is either prison, execution, or suicide. He continues to frantically search for Noor as if his life depended on seeing her. After he returns to her apartment several times to check and concludes she has eloped, he begins to despair: "he wondered in an audible, distressed voice: "Noor! Where are you?" (Mahfouz, 1996, 91).¹ Then in a stream of conscience method, the narrator informs us about Saeed's addled mind due to Noor's absence: "It is impossible that she is well. Did the police arrest her? Have some bastards assaulted her? She is not alright at any event." Afterwards, the narrator shifts to the third person: "He believes in his heart and instinct, that he will never see Noor ever again. Despair suffocated him with a deluge of excessively painful dolor... because he lost a heart, sense of compassion, and solace" (Mahfouz 1996, 91). As the police force close in at the end of the novella, he escapes to a cemetery. Deliberately suicidal, Saeed engages the police in a shootout before he is, the narrator implies, mortally wounded: "He ceased firing involuntarily, and silence crept on the entire universe... then surrendered indifferently" (Mahfouz 1996, 101). As he is deemed hopelessly wounded before he loses consciousness, the narrator informs us of his thoughts, "darkness intensified so that nothing was visible, not even graveyard apparitions. Nothing wants to be seen. He dived into an abyss without end. He did not see for him any status, situation, or aim and struggled with all his might to control anything, giving a last-ditch effort to win in vain an elusive memory. Finally, he found no solution but to surrender, so he gave up callously... callously..." (Mahfouz, 1996, 101).

Conclusion

Mahfouz designs his novel to emulate Brontë's time-honored masterpiece with specific reference to her anti-hero's character and her infusion of Kierkegaardian philosophy which she was acquainted with having travelled on the continent with her sister Charlotte in 1842. Mahfouz's adoption of Kierkegaard's notions as evinced in

1 For a better understanding of the existential definition of despair, see Malek Zuraikat, Mona Malkawi, and Sara Mashreqi, "Optimistic Meditations on Sartre's Existentialism", *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 11: 1013222. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101322>

WH is emulated in *AK* by a host of similarities such as the protagonists' marginalized "heredity," traumatizing betrayals, several-years, estrangement hiatuses, solitary existence after society's abandonment, headlong behavioral patterns, "high experimentation" of their anxieties (Seigneurie 2021, 8), traversal further than faith, a staunch revenge motif, and a nihilistic, degenerative demise. The two works base their motifs on an areligious reality. Most importantly, the rejection and betrayal by their loved ones create a negative, nihilistic discomfort from which they cannot extricate themselves and which profoundly impacts the rectitude and wisdom of their choices. Their escapist, angst choices fit well with Kierkegaardian description as "egoist but stupid," as they persist in acting juvenily in lieu of deploying reason, responsible action, and normative behavior (De Silentio 1843. PDF 36). Although their lovers cruelly abandon them, their unresolved differences are kept as dormant hurdles that are responsible in time for reconfiguring plot action into an existentialist impasse that severely hampers the scope of their anxiety, rendering them exceptionally listless. Due to the betrayal and injustice Heathcliff and Saeed are subject to, they make choices that are in complete agreement with Kierkegaard's anxiety in all its strains and derivatives. Although their choices are often unrealistic, one discerns that their sense of reasoning is predicated on the injustices they incur while young and, as they mature, on the hands of their lovers. The maltreatment they suffer from in their young days by their (factual or common-law) family members and their communities shape their sociopathic mindsets. These indelible, traumatizing experiences cast a pall over their psyches from which they establish the existential anxiety they recognize the world in and from which they cannot escape.

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