

The Sheikh As a Moral Voice in the Novel

In the opening scene of *The Thief and the Dogs*, Said Mahran walks out of prison after four years of waiting for the day he will confront the man and woman who betrayed him and ruined his life. Naguib Mahfouz based the character of Said on real-life villain Mahmoud Suleiman, a criminal whose attempt to kill his wife and her lawyer became popular newspaper fodder in Egypt and made him a notorious national celebrity.

Like his real-life counterpart, Said Mahran briefly wins the admiration of a public sympathetic to his fight against personal betrayal and political corruption. But Said's plans fall apart and result in deeper trouble than he'd ever imagined. As Mahfouz scholar Raymond Stock notes, "Said's impulses are selfish, not noble, and his self-absorption twice leads him to kill the wrong person while stalking those who wronged him."

Mahfouz portrays Said as a man desperate to find meaning in a world he feels is completely corrupt. Said believes the guilty prosper while the innocent fail. "A world without morals is like a universe without gravity," he laments. He seeks the company of his late father's spiritual advisor, Sheikh Ali al-Junaydi, a Sufi Muslim.

Sufism, a sect of Islam, combines mysticism and quietism in order to approach God (Allah) in a state of serene reflection. Many are familiar with Sufism through the poetry of Jalalud'din Rumi, a revered mystical poet born in 1207. Sufi principles consist of dedication to worship and to God, disregard for material possessions, and abstinence from vice, wealth, and worldly prestige. Sufis are known for the peaceful, meditative nature of their religion.

Sheikh Ali al-Junaydi's first words to Said are "peace and God's compassion be upon you," yet he recognizes that Said's concern is an immediate need for food and shelter, not dedication to God. "You seek a roof, not an answer," the Sheikh admonishes. "Take a copy of the Koran and read. . . . Also repeat the words: 'Love is acceptance, which means obeying His commands and refraining from what He has prohibited and contentment with what He decrees and ordains.'"

The cleric's soothing influence is repeated throughout the novel, but Said is unable to accept the sheikh's guidance. After accidentally killing a man at the door of Ilish Sidra's old apartment, Said visits al-Junaydi again. This time Said ignores the morning prayers of the sheikh's followers and falls asleep for many hours. When he wakes the cryptic sheikh observes, "You've had a long sleep, but you know no rest. . . . Your burning heart yearns for shade, yet continues forward under the fire of the sun."

Said cannot comprehend the sheikh's simple wisdom. After the pointless shootings outside Ilish's apartment and Rauf Ilwan's villa, the public sympathy Said once enjoyed erodes. His inability to accept the sheikh's offer of redemption through religion results in tragic consequences. "I am alone with my freedom," Said laments, "or rather I'm in the company of the Sheikh, who is lost in heaven, repeating words that cannot be understood by someone approaching hell."