

A Deconstructive Reading of Naguib Mahfouz's *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth*

Asst. Prof Dr. Maha Qahtan Sulaiman

College of Education for Women

University of Baghdad

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Summary:

This study adopts deconstruction as a way of reading a text to challenge the traditional notion of reaching a final and undeniable truth. The theory enhances our critical reading of literary texts, and makes us more conscious of ideology implied in discourse. The study examines the identity of Akhenaten in Naguib Mahfouz's *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth*. This historical novel about pharaonic Egypt presents multiple versions of Akhenaten's personality based on the ideology of each speaker. Accordingly, through the lenses of deconstruction, the identity of the pharaoh never reaches a final authentic reality as the novel unfolds. The text of the novel continues to defer the meaning, and the pharaoh's identity remains unstable.

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Deconstruction stems out of Roland Barthes' structuralism. It is a response to the certainty of the latter. Deconstruction, like structuralism, examines the characteristics of the text; unlike structuralism, addresses the rhetorical—not the grammatical—characteristics. In this regard deconstruction finds a constant confusion and contradiction in the meaning of a text. The search for a final meaning, hence, becomes unfeasible. Deconstruction perceives the text as a constantly shifting material, yielding a different meaning every time. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes in the preface of her translation of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976) that "if the assumption of responsibility for one's discourse leads to the conclusion that all conclusions are genuinely provisional and therefore inconclusive,

that all origins are similarly unoriginal, that responsibility itself must cohabit with frivolity, this need not be cause for gloom.” (Derrida, P. XIII). Derrida claims that language has two main features: signifiers constantly delaying meaning— *deferral*; and the meaning acquired in consequence to differences by which we differentiate one signifier from the other. Derrida write in *Of Grammatology* (1976),

We could thus take up all the coupled oppositions on which philosophy is constructed, and from which our language lives, not in order to see opposition vanish but to see the emergence of a necessity such that one of the terms appears as the *differance* of the other, the other as "differed" within the systematic ordering [1' *economie*] of the same. (p. XXIX)

Thus, deconstruction examines the different meanings hidden in a text. It considers neither text, nor meaning to be more privileged or authentic than the other. This provides different critical approaches to a text.

Deconstruction defies *logocentrism*; the belief that written language possesses an unaltered meaning, validated by the traditional canon. “It would demythologize literature and thus remove the privilege it has enjoyed in academe” (Guerin et al., 2011, p. 177). Knowledge, thus, is driven from the text, not verified by any academic discipline. This indicates that there is no fixed truth. What is referred to as reality is a temporary concept formulated out of competing discourses.

The study aims to show that there is no absolute truth regarding Akhenaten’s character in Naguib Mahfouz’s *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth*. This historical novel was a “product of the growing interest in the glorious past of Egypt and the Pharaohs; an increasingly important element in nationalist propaganda of the time” (Moussa-Mahmoud, 1989, p. 157). However, the pharaoh’s image continues to shift and remains unclear. Akhenaten takes different identities in the imagination of each speaker. People surrounding the pharaoh judge him according to the principles they embrace to make sense of the world—in what Derrida refers to as *logocentric*. Nevertheless, the process of scrutinizing Akhenaten shifting image

—in relation to the speakers' *discourse*— expands our consciousness with multiple interpretations that human character and attitude may yield.

Meriamun, the narrator of the novel, embarks on a quest journey to know the true story of Akhenaten. The pharaoh is already dead as the novel opens, but his contemporaries are still alive. Meriamun starts by asking his father, who seems to be a senior executive in the palace, about Akhenaten. The father refers to him as the heretic. Meriamun then recalls old rumors about the youthful pharaoh who has repudiated his forefathers' traditions and defied the priests. The narrator remembers the hushed voices, talking about the new religion which Akhenaten has introduced, and the bafflement of the people: whether to embrace the pharaoh's religion, or keep their old faith. Meriamun, then, asks his father to introduce him to Akhenaten's close circle of relatives and friends, and who are his father's acquaintances. The father agrees, he further advises his son "to be careful not to provoke the powerful, or gloat over the misfortune of those who have fallen into oblivion. Be like history, impartial and open to every witness. Then deliver a truth that is free of bias for those who wish to contemplate it" (Mahfouz, 1998, p. 6).

Meriamun goes to Thebes, the capital of the empire, to visit the temple of Amun and meet the high priest. The priest is a vigorous old man, whose head is shaved. He wears a long skirt, and a white scarf wrapped around his shoulders and breast. He sits on an ebony chair with armrests made of pure gold. After asking him about the story of Akhenaten, the priest immediately refers to false inscriptions on walls which they have demolished. This implies that the high priest considers Akhenaten as deceptive and fake. The high priest mentions that he desires only the truth to be recorded. He then states what he considers to be the absolute truth: Amun is the only authentic master of all deities, and who has protected Egypt, endowed with power its devoted pharaohs, and extended the empire.

The higher priest mentions that Akhenaten had a feminine nature that did not befit politics. He also mentions that the pharaoh never loved any woman as he

loved his mother, the Great Queen Tiye. Consequently, he was influenced by her notion of including other deities, besides Amun, to expand religious knowledge. The Queen was especially interested in Aten, the god of sun, who shines for all. Yet, the high priest suspects that she wanted to curb and weaken his authority and power. Akhenaten, to the surprise of all, even to his mother, believed that Aten was the only deity with no other rival. Things even get worse, according to the high priest, and who believes that Akhenaten was gone mad, as the pharaoh claims the existence of One, and Only God—revealing himself to Akhenaten through a voice; a god beyond planets, stars, and idols.

The high priest further elaborates on Akhenaten's character and physical appearance. He mentions that the pharaoh had a disgusting outward form; he was neither a man, nor a woman. Upon this aspect of Akhenaten's physical appearance, the high priest builds his other assumptions about the pharaoh and which he considers to be true. He believes that because Akhenaten was deformed, he was irritated by all sturdy men, powerful priests, and mighty deities. He, therefore, "conceived of a god similar to himself in weakness and femininity, both father and mother, with no other purpose but love. A god worshiped with rituals of dance and song" (Mahfouz, 1998, pp. 13-14). Consequently, the high priest resumes, Akhenaten abandoned his duties towards his empire, the country was destroyed by its enemies, people starved, and the temples were deserted. Finally, Akhenaten was abandoned by the people and his youngest brother Tutankhamun took charge of the empire. He, the high priest concludes, became serious ill and died alone.

Meriamun next destination is to Ay, the previous counselor to Akhenaten and the father of his wife Nefertiti. Ay has a withered face, reflecting his old age. He receives the narrator at his palace, next to the Nile, in south Thebes. Ay inspires Meriamun with awe at his dignified figure. He begins telling Akhenaten's story by stating that "life, Meriamun, is a wonder It is a sky laden with clouds of contradictions" (Mahfouz, 1998, p. 27). Ay mentions that he was entrusted to

educate the two sons of Amenhotep III: Tuthmosis and Amenhotep— aged seven and six years old, respectively. (The latter is Akhenaten himself, before conversion and changing his name). Tuthmosis was the stronger and handsomer of the two, while Amenhotep was taller, darker, and with womanish features. The older brother died in childhood, while the younger survived. Ay mentions that Akhenaten was shocked by his brother's death, and would thereafter incessantly discuss life and death with him. Ay also expresses his admiration of Akhenaten's wisdom and interest in religion and mysticism, his intelligence in algebra, his quick mastery of reading and writing.

Queen Tiye, Akhenaten's mother, was powerful and wise, explains Ay. She planned to teach her son to embrace all religions. She aimed to make of religion a tool for political gain, and ensure the unity of the empire. Yet, Akhenaten "believed in the means, not the end. He devoted himself to his religious calling, jeopardizing the country, the empire, and the throne" (Mahfouz, 1998, pp. 29-30). Akhenaten further accused Thebe's priests of deceiving people with superstition, and under the pretext of which, taking poor people's money and seducing women. Akhenaten, who began worshipping Aten, would soon tell Ay that he had abandoned the latter to worship God, who is above Aten and all other deities, and who is the One and Only. Akhenaten claimed that God was revealed to him through a voice.

Yet, according to Ay, Akhenaten had one great disadvantage. He rejected training in the army because of his physical weakness, and thus proving that he did not fit to be the future pharaoh after his father Amenhotep III. The father, accordingly, decided to send his son on a tour of the empire. He thought that this would provide him with experience and better knowledge of his subjects. However, the people— who were eagerly waiting to see their future ruler— were disappointed by the fact that he humbly joined them on their plantations, inviting them to abandon Amun, embrace the new religion, and believe in love, peace, and equality. Significantly,

in Mahfouz's world individual morality and social morality are indivisible; they are the two sides of the one coin. Thus an individual who is solely concerned with his own personal salvation, showing no regret for other individuals in his immediate environment and in society at large, is an accused self-seeker who can hope for no place in Mahfouz's heaven. (El-Enany, 1988, p. 21).

Ay mentions that he warned that this would encourage strife and rebellion, yet Akhenaten replied that he is a dweller in truth. After the death of his father, Akhenaten became Amenhotep IV, and he allowed only those who joined his religion to hold important positions in his empire. The pharaoh also lowered taxes and cancelled punitive measures. He believed that he can build a great empire by the miracles of compassion and love. Ultimately, he decided to build a new capital, away from Thebe, the city of Amun, changed his name to Akhenaten, closed the temples, and erased the names of all the deities. From his city, he toured with Nefertiti across Egypt, spreading the new religion and—Ay believes—people loved them.

Yet, Ay mention, Akhenaten's empire of love started to gradually collapse. First, Meketaten, the pharaoh's most loved and beautiful daughter died. Akhenaten shed tears on her death more than he had shed in boyhood, after the death of his brother Tuthmosis. Ay asserts that Akhenaten raised his hands to the sky and screamed "why?" Ay, then, suspected that the pharaoh would abandon his religion. Akhenaten's design of ruling by love and compassion had totally failed: corruption grew, people starved and revolted against the pharaoh, the borders of the empire were attacked by foreign forces, and courageous commanders were killed defending the empire. "We must eradicate all the elements of corruption, and send the army to defend our borders," ... [Ay] urged [Akhenaten] desperately. 'Love is my arms and my armor, Ay,' [the pharaoh] said, unwaveringly" (Mahfouz, 1998, p. 41). Akhenaten's trusted men of the government advised him to permit the freedom of worship, and send armed forces to protect the borders. He considered the first

advice as a retreat to heathenism, and the second as violence against the teachings of his religion. He asked his men to leave in peace. However, Thebes celebrated Tutankhamun as Egypt's pharaoh, and everyone in Akhenaten's city gradually returned back to Thebe, telling Akhenaten that they are not abandoning him, but choosing the unity of Egypt. Ultimately, Akhenaten fell ill and died. Ay concludes concerning the identity of Akhenaten: "He was neither mad nor sane like the rest of us. He was something in between. I could never understand him" (Mahfouz, 1998, p. 42). Significantly, Ay believes that only the deity of eternal life, Osiris, can judge the truth concerning Akhenaten. So, while the high priest considers Akhenaten a mere weak man, who sought revenge against manliness; Ay believes him to be weak but also unfathomable. So, in relation to deconstruction, the ideologies of both the high priest and Ay "overlap or aren't really opposed" (Tyson, 2015, p. 248).

After documenting the witness statement of Ay, Meriamun's next witness is Haremhab, the chief of security during both Akhenaten's and Tutankhamun's rule. Haremhab is bulky, tall, and with an honest demeanor. He came from a well-known religious family in Memphis. He is regarded as a hero because of the crucial role he played during the transitional period from Akhenaten's to Tutankhamun's government: eradicating corruption and restoring peace. Haremhab received Meriamun in the visitor's chamber, adjacent to the garden of the palace.

Haremhab mentions that he was acquainted with Akhenaten since childhood, and that the latter was always interested in religion. Haremhab showed Akhenaten due respect because he was the crown prince, but in reality he despised his feminine features and tender manners. However, by time, Haremhab became Akhenaten's true friend. The chief of security believes that Akhenaten had a marvelous capacity to win people's hearts, that his subjects applauded him even when he asked them to abandon their traditional religion. Haremhab elaborates on Akhenaten's character, that he would never accept to go with the former on hunting trips. The pharaoh would even advise Haremhab to "beware and do not defile the

loving heart of nature" (Mahfouz, 1998, p. 50). Akhenaten even disliked military, and once asked his friend: "Is it not strange that decent people like yourself are trained to become professional executioners?" (Mahfouz, 1998, p. 50). Haremhab also mentions that Akhenaten criticized his great-grand father Tuthmosis III, believing him to be bloodthirsty, building his pyramid at the expense of the lives of the poor workers, and offering human sacrifices to Amun. Haremhab, consequently, considered his friend, the crown prince, unsuitable for the throne. Therefore, Haremhab reveals that he often had the desire to kill his friend Akhenaten to prevent the destruction that he predicted for his country once the crown prince becomes the pharaoh. However, once Akhenaten ascended the throne, Haremhab was obliged to announce following the new faith, believing in the One and Only God. He considered this as part of his duty in serving the pharaoh. Akhenaten assured him, nevertheless, that he would gradually cherish the truth which his new religion embodied.

Haremhab, however, admits that despite Akhenaten's apparent physical weakness, he was a very strong man. He challenged the powerful priests, fought black magic, and demolished all ancient deities which have been worshiped in Egypt for centuries. But Haremhab also doubted that harmony and order could pervade the country by the power of love only. The chief of security mentions that Nefertiti read his thoughts and assured him that Akhenaten was guided by God's inspiration, and therefore he would triumph. Yet chaos spread over the country, which was divided by mutiny. Haremhab again experienced the desire to kill Akhenaten, but it was out of love and loyalty the second time. He concluded that what he thought to be Akhenaten's power, was actually a dangerous sort of madness. Haremhab finally abandoned Akhenaten, mentioning that he had done so to protect him after taking a promise from his enemies that they would not harm him. The chief of security believes that Akhenaten died of illness caused by his shock that his God had abandoned him. So, unlike the high priest and Ay, Haremhab does not associate

Akhenaten's avoidance of all sorts of physical violence to his feeble body, but rather to his spiritual outlook towards life. Also unlike them, Haremhab attributes Akhenaten's final failure to his madness. As Derrida (1988) writes that "context is essential to ...[the] concept of difference" (p. 136), so deconstruction is also applicable on a different level through the disillusion Haremhab as he realized that Akhenaten's defiance of the priests and Egypt's traditions is not strength, but mere madness.

The other important figure that Meriamun decides to take the witness of is Bek, the sculptor. He lives in isolation, on a small island, south of Thebes. Bek receives Meriamun in his neat house, located in the center of his simple farm. Bek is known to be the best sculptor in Egypt, but when Thebes was rebuilt after wars, he was not allowed to participate in the process. Bek is known for his fidelity to Akhenaten and his faith in the One and Only God. The sculptor is a tall, dark, slim man, of about forty years old. He has a lively spirit, but his eyes are cast with sadness. Bek mentions that he knew Akhenaten since boyhood, and that harmony and beauty have vanished with his passing away. The sculptor points out that Akhenaten knew no evil, and that that was his tragedy. He reflects that even in art, Akhenaten was searching for truth.

Bek tells the narrator that he owes Akhenaten everything: his religion and his art. Once Akhenaten told Bek,

do not let the teachings of the dead shackle your hands when you work. Let your stone be a harbor for truth. It is God who created everything, so be loyal to him in your representations. Do not allow fear or greed to influence your work. When you make a sculpture of me, let it show every flaw on my face and body so that the beauty of your work will be in its honesty. (Mahfouz, 1998, p. 66)

Bek believes that this piece of advice explains Akhenaten's character; he rejected tradition and was interested with originality. Akhenaten condemned the multiple deities and excelled in truth. Consequently, when Akhenaten became the king, Bek

was in charge of eighty thousand builders, to construct Akhetaten, the city of light and faith. The sculptor also adds that Akhenaten was himself an artist—he painted, recited poetry, and even carved stones. Akhenaten made a brilliant sculpture of Nefertiti. When the latter finally abandoned him, he took off one of the eyes, and left the other as a symbol of eternal love. Bek concludes that Akhenaten had listened to the voice of God whispering to him, and after which he could listen to no other voice or advice, unlike what seekers of truth should do. Bek was forced to leave Akhenaten alone in the city; the high priest promised not to harm him on the condition that everyone leaves him. The sculptor believes, however, that they killed Akhenaten by sorcery or any other means. So, Bek, unlike the others above, presents a new aspect of Akhenaten which could explain his delicate nature, his unique message to his community, and probably mad genius. Akhenaten is a multitalented artist.

Meriamun visits other characters, whose account does not dissent from the stories above, according to each one's stance in relation to Akhenaten. However, Meriamun's final important witness about the truth is Nefertiti, the pharaoh's wife. The narrator enters the city of Akhetaten after obtaining a special permission from General Haremhab. He finds the city in ruins. The Queen's palace, however, is situated in the mid of a vibrant garden. Nefertiti receives him in a small room, with elegant furniture and sacred texts inscribed on the walls. She is charming, straight-backed, and weary. She promises to tell Meriamun the entire truth. Nefertiti mentions that she had a passion for knowledge since childhood and, like Akhenaten, she believed in Aten whose rays cover the entire world. Nefertiti first met Akenaten at the Sed festival, in the palace. She was eager to see him, having heard a lot about his religion from her father. She imagined his perfect physic, yet was soon disappointed when she saw his small, delicate body. When she accepted his proposal for marriage, she was quite aware that his mystical power would not compensate for his lack of physical attractiveness. Significantly, she mentions that

she had paid costly for glory: "His spirit engulfed me and filled me with so much light that I expected God might speak to me as he spoke to him. As for my body, it convulsed silently every time he came near me" (Mahfouz, 1998, p. 152). But ultimately, Nefertiti loved Akhenaten as a husband.

Nefertiti asserts that when Akhenaten became the pharaoh, they have lived very happily. Yet, one day Akhenaten returned from the temple of the One Creator with a portentous look. He told her that God had commanded prohibiting polytheism. Therefore, he had to close the temples of the other deities, seize their funding, and distribute the money to the poor—on the condition that they worship the One and Only God. Nefertiti warned him of the reaction of the priests by defying their authority and cutting their revenue. However, both were confident that God would support and help them. Akhenaten and Nefertiti had also defied the ancient custom of distancing the royalty from the common people. They mingled with their subjects and would often recognize them lovingly. Nefertiti would then tell Mariamun some interesting points about Akhenaten; like neglecting the chief of police warning about the priests' attempts to undermine the pharaoh's image among his subjects; that the pharaoh was always absorbed in worship; and that Nefertiti was the one who supervised the governmental and economic affairs of the empire. Nefertiti declares that Akhenaten's true purpose was to spread faith in the One God among people and to live in truth. Finally, when the empire's enemies crossed its borders and a civil war was on the verge of erupting, Akhenaten offered no solution other than submitting to the providence of God. Even his mother, Tiye, and the senior officials in his government failed to convince him that he should act as a true king and protect his country. Haremhab advised Nefertiti to save her husband, otherwise; his men would rebel against him and kill him. She decided to abandon him so that, she believed, his faith would be shaken and he would act according to reason to protect his throne and country. But Akhenaten remained committed to the teachings of God even after everyone had deserted him, Nefertiti concludes. She was prevented from

returning to him, till the guards came to tell her that Akhenaten fell sick and died. Nefertiti tells Meriamun that she believes Akhenaten was killed. She still believes in Akhenaten's God, and waiting for her death so she can join Akhenaten's soul in eternity. This shows that examining the novel in relation to deconstruction clearly manifests "Derrida's ideas on textuality and on the decentred, rather than self-determining, coherent human subject has been to deny the reality of material reference in the world and a conception of human agency necessary to an engaged ethical or political project" (Selden et al., 2005, p. 169). As Nefertiti is the final witness, and as she reveals that Akhenaten was dwelling in truth, the text of the novel provides no closure, i.e., it provides no final version of the pharaoh's identity. The text continues to contradict and finally destroy itself.

In conclusion, deconstruction reveals the work of ideology in shaping Akhenaten's identity. The characters of the novel stand for competitive ideologies and Akhenaten's identity is invented anew by each character according to what that character chooses to believe. The novel presents a fluid and obscure notion of the pharaoh's merit. Studying the text in the lenses of deconstruction expands the readers' awareness of the different agendas that formulate Akhenaten's character. The pharaoh's final image is left to the reader. This implies a decentralization of the author's, critic's, and historian's judgments. Deconstruction also provides an insight into the working of human mind, where thinking consists of continuous fleeting meanings. There is a constant *deferral*, or delay, in meaning.

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قراءة تفكيكية لرواية نجيب محفوظ أخناتون: العائش في الحقيقة

أ.م.د. مها قحطان سليمان

كلية التربية للبنات - جامعة بغداد

mehaqahtan@yahoo.com

الكلمات المفتاحية: الادب الانكليزي. نجيب محفوظ. أخناتون

الملخص:

تبنى هذه الدراسة التفكيكية كوسيلة لقراءة النص و لتحدي الفكرة التقليدية المتمثلة في الوصول إلى الحقيقة النهائية التي لا يمكن إنكارها. وتعزز النظرية قراءتنا النقدية للنصوص الأدبية، وتجعلنا أكثر وعياً بالأيديولوجية المتضمنة في الخطاب. تبحث الدراسة في هوية أخناتون في رواية نجيب محفوظ "أخناتون: الساكن في الحقيقة". تقدم هذه الرواية التاريخية عن مصر الفرعونية نسخاً متعددة من شخصية أخناتون بناءً على أيديولوجية كل متحدث. وعليه، ومن خلال التفكيكية، فإن هوية الفرعون لا تصل أبداً إلى واقع أصيل نهائي كما تتكشف الرواية. ويستمر نص الرواية في تأجيل المعنى، وتبقى هوية الفرعون غامضة