Franz Kafka and Nagib Mahfuz meet within the context of twentieth century existentialism. They attempt to analyze man’s existence. Because they are scrupulous in this attempt, cultural precedent is not admitted into their inquiries. They limit themselves to a deductive process on mankind. Lacking a historical or conventional point of departure, the two writers have decided on the same starting point: the idea of order. Each is committed to an ordered world, where order reflects the inherent good of the universe. This position separates Kafka and Mahfuz from those existentialists whose premise is atheism, nihilism or an established religious faith, such as Christianity, Judaism or Islam.

The idea of order is inevitably fixed on the point of authority. Someone or something must establish and perpetuate a system of order. It is the enforcing power of an authority that allows one order to prevail, as opposed to another. This enforcing agent can be chaos, in a de facto and negative way; it can be God, as an omnipotent being; it can be man, competing for power. The point is that the world as we see it involves the struggle for power. Whether, in the final analysis, the true power is random, or rests with God, or is under the limited control of man is the question which Kafka and Mahfuz ask themselves. In the seventeenth century, John Milton attempted to justify the ways of God; in the twentieth, Kafka and Mahfuz have continued the pursuit for the idea of order.

Several points are important in the formulation of this paper. The study is committed to the literature of ideas. It is the thinking of the two writers that draws the attention of this paper. In particular, their thinking on certain issues is central. Authority, with meaning and order as attendant matters, represents the thematic core. All of this is surrounded by existentialism, partly as a method, but mostly as a category for the literary product of Kafka and Mahfuz. In any case, existentialism is a loose classification, where thought is a necessary adjunct to pathos; and it is in this vein that the writings of Kafka and Mahfuz are examined here.

The individual who reaches disturbing conclusions is to be found in the more recent works of Nagib Mahfuz. Trevor Le Gassick describes Mahfuz's principal subject as "lost and unhappy, unsure of himself and unaware of what course to follow."1 Predictably, this quasi-desperado

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character throws out everything, holding nothing as sacred. Ibrahim Fathi puts it this way: "The intellectual level of Nagib Mahfuz’s narratives assumes that the deep-rooted foundations which were fixed in the past have gone, never to return, and with them has gone the narrative of blind faith." (my translation). The universe and the powers that run it are subject to reexamination.

When Kafka looks at the discrepancy of existence, he calls it absurd. His writings are patient portrayals of the absurd. All authority is either an embarrassment to itself or is playing the role of an absolute fool. His discussion of the theme is strong; Maja Goth refers to Albert Camus’s comparison of Kafka and Dostoyevsky as "the only writers who dared envisage the problem of the absurd." The characters of Kafka’s fiction are agitated beings whose very presence begs the existential question. Like Mahfuz’s characters, they are pawns. Something is very wrong in their lives, and the question is both what and why.

The authority—power—in the universe is not the object of scorn for either Kafka or Mahfuz. Rather, it is the object of confusion. The problem is one of reconciliation. Unable to solve the metaphysical question of evil, the two writers willingly suspend judgment. If there is reason to believe that evil is not contrived, then Kafka and Mahfuz will accept it. The rationale, though, for evil and absurdity, is hard to find. So, the ordered universe is a difficult proposition; and Kafka and Mahfuz cannot begin by endorsing it. They are not, however, writers of diatribe or condemnation. Their quest is open-ended.

There is something in these writers. That element is hope. It is not contradictory for fundamentally existentialist writings to find cause for hope. Camus, as spokesman, defends such a point of view: "... existential thought ... contrary to the common opinion, is shaped by an enormous hope—the very same which, with primitive Christianity and the announcement of good tidings, raised the ancient world." Perhaps there is more to Kafka and Mahfuz than the pessimism that dominates the surface. A certain religiousness actually hides in the works of both writers. Quite apart from despair, they suggest possibilities, by contrast, beyond their scenarios. Theirs is an ironic quixotism.

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