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- 4 In what ways is ~~the~~ the reader reduced or comforted by the ideas in the works studied and in what ways challenged or alienated?

Readers often look into books for inspirations or answers for life, hoping to fish out any traces of ideals or ~~philos~~ philosophy left behind by the writer. ~~however, not only~~ ~~books do not only contain the good side of things, and a search~~ into ~~the~~ book for inspiration might leave the reader full of new ideas and revelation. These ideas could be reductive and confirming, or challenging and alienating. In ~~both~~ Naguib Mahfouz's "Midag Alley" and Katherine Boo's "Behind the Beautiful Forevers", both authors present ideas and themes that challenge and comfort the reader.

Although ~~it seems like~~ comfort and challenge seem like two opposing ~~idea~~, feelings, ideas in books can often be both confirming and challenging depending on the specific reader. Mahfouz fully realizes this phenomenon and presents the idea that traditions never die in "Midag Alley", opening it up for debate for readers who ~~might have~~ felt comforted by it and those who felt challenged by it. Mahfouz ~~sets up~~ places Midag Alley in a very traditional setting right at the beginning. "Its walls decorated with multicoloured ~~or~~ arabesques, giving off strong odours ~~of~~ from the medicine of olden times, now the smells of spice and folk cures of today and tomorrow." Through the colour and smell imagery, it shows that Midag Alley is inseparable from its traditions and the past, regardless of its physical appearance or habits. However, Mahfouz also immediately juxtaposes its traditional setting with the alley's transition into a newer, more modern place, as the storyteller in the cafe is replaced by a radio. This is where the reader could ~~either~~ be feel



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challenged ~~or comforted~~ by the idea of never dying traditions. ~~One~~ ~~with~~ ~~the~~ Midag Alley's growth and transition has eliminated the need for the traditional storyteller, and the reader would feel challenged <sup>about the viability</sup> that traditions can ~~stay~~ remain forever as society gradually modernise. ~~On the other hand~~ it would also present the moral ~~to~~ and cultural dilemma of replacing traditions to the reader, challenging the reader to think of its implications. Towards the end of the novel, Mahfuz uses the analogy of a book to describe the alley: "the alley turned another page of its monotonous life". Although the transition ~~at~~ of old to new at the beginning might seem warring, the closure gives a sense of serenity ~~and~~ ~~is~~. The analogy of comparing the alley to a book demonstrates how all the pages and life in the alley will forever be connected, just like how sentences flow from the previous page into the next, and how the plot follows from all the previous pages. In a way, it is almost reassuring as there is, no matter how monotonous, always something to refer back to. The idea of never dying traditions can serve as a comfort to readers, of being able to link back to some part that could determine your identity.

Although traditions could both challenge and comfort the reader, the same could not be said for the idea of ~~per~~ secret perversions, clearly an idea that Mahfuz wants to challenge the reader with. Mahfuz uses a light and dark motif to demonstrate how many of the alley's inhabitants have secret desires and perversions. The alley's inhabitants set out to perform all their twisted acts during the night, such as the bakeress hitting her husband, ~~and~~ ~~the~~ Zaita amputating beggars, and most notably, the cafe owner Kimcha going on nightly ventures to look for young boys to bring back to his cafe. ~~Then~~ Kimcha was described as "wearing a dark



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cloak", utilizing the darkness motif. His ~~appear~~ physical appearance clearly indicates that Mahfuz considers his secret perversion undesirable. The presentation of all the characters with secret perversions challenges the reader to consider if it is right to ~~denote~~ <sup>indulge</sup> in such acts, and also challenges the reader to admit to his or her own secret perversions. ~~One of the main arguments for such perversions by the alley's inhabitants is their~~ In admitting their perversions, the alley's inhabitants often use religion and God as a shield. Krishna says, "It's God's will" when asked about his nightly excursions, while Dr. Boshky says "The night is a veil, and God ordained that veil!" The use of Dr. Boshky's metaphor clearly shows that night is considered an appropriate time for secret perversions, and is even justified with the fact that God had allowed the phenomenon of night and must therefore allow acts of perversions. The religious arguments used by the alley's inhabitants challenge the reader on his or her own faith and belief, and the value <sup>and purpose</sup> that society places on religion.

In terms of religion as an excuse, there is also evidence in "Behind the Beautiful Forevers". Asha, a ~~representative~~ appointed representative from a political party in the slums, uses religion as an excuse to her fellow slum dwellers in order to keep funds to herself. But more importantly, Boo challenges the idea of corruption by having a negative connotation through looking at the lives of the slum dwellers. "Asha tells 'It's corruption, all corruption.' Asha told her children. She spread out her hands like birds taking flight." ~~Corruption~~ Through the action of Asha and symbolism of birds flying to freedom, corruption is clearly seen as a way of living and also freedom out of the slums to the slum dwellers. Boo also occasionally breaks the fourth wall and provide social commentaries on corruption: "In the western world, where



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Corruption has a negative connotation, it is seen as ~~a~~ an obstacle to India becoming a global city. But in a place where corruption deprives the poor of almost all opportunities, corruption is one of the genuine opportunities that remain." ~~It is~~ The contrast and comparison of corruption between perhaps what is usually thought of by the reader and the experience within the slums challenges the concept of corruption within the reader's mind. It is not seen as an obstacle but rather a survival tool. It also challenges the reader on ~~whether~~ who has a narrower view of the world. Is it the slum dwellers who cannot see the ~~of~~ possible growth that the economy might have if corruption is eliminated? Or is it the westerners ~~as~~ and most possibly the reader too who cannot see past the paper theory and principles and see the true ~~for~~ ~~function~~ mechanism of corruption within poor communities? The idea that corruption is so multi-dimensional and is valued differently by people in other circumstances is what challenges the reader most.

Despite majority of the book being about the constant corruption taking place within the slums, she does provide some comfort to the reader through the ~~repeated~~ importance of moral values to a few characters. Naniya once ~~described~~ <sup>repeated</sup> that her girls in her college had described ~~a person~~ meeting a person in terms of economic value: "What is the profit? What is the use?" The use of economic division ~~in~~ slums shows how indifferent people have become to relationships, painting a grim picture of interactions based on gains and ~~the~~ losses. However, this is contrasted with the moral ideals of Shril, who did not consider life worthwhile in economic terms, but rather moral terms. "On the most profitable day in his life, Junil had failed to reach the state of exhilaration that the other boys ~~called~~ called the "full enjoy"."



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Instead, he contemplated ~~but~~ the moral reasoning behind a mere he saw that day. Besides from Sunil, Abdul is also another character that ~~has~~ places very strong values in morals. He decided that no matter what age he was at, it ~~was~~ still wouldn't be too late to resist corruption in the world, a clear contrast to ~~to~~ the corruptive character Acha. He ~~said~~ "thought that ice was better than the water that it was made of. He wanted to be better than what ~~it~~<sup>he</sup> was made of. In Mumbai's dirty waters he wanted to be better than what he lived in. He ~~wanted~~ wanted a verdict of ice." The reader is faced by a character who struggles against ~~social~~ the norms of society in order to be a better person. Ice and water acts as a symbolism for the ~~moral~~<sup>corruption</sup> values of the people, with ice being less dense than water, floating on top of it, signifying that Abdul wants to be separated from the corrupted waters. Ice also gives the image as crystal clear with no impurities, whereas the "Mumbai ~~waters~~ dirty waters" are murky and polluted. Boo uses the water motif to show how the constant flooding of Mumbai seem to have gathered all these people and corruption into one large pool of dirty water, but Abdul wants to rise above that and not be part of the corrupted water. It is extremely comforting ~~to~~ the reader to find characters who place such high values on morals in a society where corruption is normal. It gives the readers <sup>and encouragement</sup> hope that even in the most desperate times, there is still human capacity to be morally aware and righteous.

One idea that was explored in both books is the theme of appearance ~~vs~~ versus reality. It could be both comforting and challenging, in the sense that <sup>comforting because</sup> beauty and appearance can be manipulated <sup>to gain advantages</sup> and challenging in terms



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of the loss of identity when appearance is heavily manipulated. In "Behind the Beautiful Forevers", one of the chapters was named "the Marquee effect", depicting how Asha and Manju attempt to change their appearances in order to look like the upper class. The "Marquee effect" is a technical term for photoshop, and symbolises how Asha and Manju tries to "edit" their appearance in order to gain a higher status in society. In "Midway Alley", Mrs. Afffy, who is desperate for marriage, also changes her teeth, hair, and clothes in order to look more attractive. The idea that manipulations of appearance can change someone's fortune is only comforting to a certain extent for a reader, as it has the ability to change <sup>turn</sup> the characters for the better, but could ultimately be seen as ~~de~~ a deception. However, the more challenging aspect is the fact that characters lose their identity. In "Midway Alley", Hamida's name gets changed to "Titi" to be more appealing to foreign soldiers, which means that she has changed her identity for others. In "Behind the Beautiful Forevers", Manju puts on Fair and Lovely cream, so that she can "maintain her status on the marriage market". She effectively objectified herself, measuring her own worth in ~~terms~~ of the eyes of others. The reader therefore feels challenged by the extent that the characters' identities change.

In conclusion, both Mahfouz and Boo have presented multiple ideas that challenge or comfort the reader. ~~It is important to keep in mind however~~ It is important to remember that just like ideas in books, life is both comforting and challenging and

only through careful evaluation could we be certain.

