

Assignment Prompt:

Write a 1500-word argument (about 4-5 pages double-spaced) about how you know that something is true.

Final Paper:

Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth

In Naguib Mahfouz's *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth*, fourteen different stories of the heretic king Akhenaten are told. Some praise the king and his beliefs, some condemn him as a plague to Egypt, but all of the stories are unique in their detail and perspective. From Akhenaten's teacher Ay, to his doctor Bento, to his wife Nefertiti, each character presents new and different details about Akhenaten's life. In order to determine the truth about Akhenaten, each character's statements must be considered closely, keeping in mind the biases and ulterior motivations that may exist. The full history of Akhenaten can only be found after examining his life through all fourteen perspectives.

Some characteristics of Akhenaten are described similarly by nearly all of the characters in the novel. The agreement serves as reason to deem these things matters of fact. The characters agreed that Akhenaten was an effeminate-looking man, that he developed a belief in the One and Only God, that he claimed to have heard the voice of the One God, and that he preached a policy of absolute non-violence when he became pharaoh. Because so many of the details of Akhenaten's life are unclear in the novel, these basic truths can be used to determine the truthfulness of certain characters. For example, the High Priest of Amun described Akhenaten as "a man of questionable birth, effeminate and grotesque (13)." Ay, on the other hand, describes Akhenaten as, "dark, tall, and slender, with small, feminine features (28)." Based on these descriptions, it is clear that the High Priest did not like Akhenaten and that Ay

was more sympathetic. Though these descriptions do not provide details into Akhenaten's life and rule, they display the biases of the story tellers, which serves as a reference when considering the validity of the character's stories.

Though all of the characters that Meriamun speaks to provide some insight into the history of Akhenaten, some are more helpful than others. The relationship between the characters and Akhenaten is an important detail when determining which characters to believe and which to doubt. Those who remained loyal to Akhenaten will likely tell a much different story than those who did not. As Kahane writes, "it is part of human nature to find it easy or natural to believe what everyone else in our society believes and foolish to believe what others find foolish (120)." Since most people in Egypt believed that Akhenaten was insane, those who agree with this sentiment may have been influenced by the established cultural idea. In the novel, these characters include the High Priest of Amun, Haremhab, Toto, Mutnedjmet and Mae. Though their testimonies still yield important information, it is less valuable because of its cultural context. On the other hand, loyalty can also lead to an unrealistically positive view of Akhenaten. Kahane writes, "Loyalty tends to make us see our own leaders as a good deal more intelligent, informed, and honest than in fact they are (122)." Therefore, the stories told by Akhenaten's allies, such as Bek, Meri-Ra and Bento must also be examined skeptically. The most useful stories of Akhenaten's life came from the characters that held no allegiances and could provide the most balanced account possible.

Every character in the novel has a bias of some kind, but some are less significant than others. Because of the nature of Egyptian society, women had little social mobility. As a result, women in the novel are the least affected by self-interest. Mutnedjnet's jealousy of Nefertiti and dislike for Akhenaten made her the least credible of the women. Tadukhipa provides the only

non-Egyptian perspective in the novel, which makes her testimony valuable because it is the least influenced by cultural norms. However, because Akhenaten did not pay attention to her in his harem, she, too, grew jealous and the details of her stories about Nefertiti and Akhenaten reflect this bias. The other two women, Nefertiti and Tey, provide some of the most truthful and useful commentary in the novel. Tey had no blood relationship to Nefertiti or Akhenaten, nor did she gain from the downfall of Akhenaten's empire. Also, since she was Mutnedjmet's mother and only a stepmother to Nefertiti, one would expect that she would prefer her birth daughter, but that was not true. In one instance, Tey said, "Nefertiti was always in the right (88)." Tey's love for Nefertiti showed her impartiality; she favored Nefertiti even though she was not her true daughter. This impartiality is crucial to an accurate history, and Tey maintains her unbiased perspective throughout her dialogue with Meriamun. Though most of the information related to Nefertiti, it was consistent with the accounts of other characters and helpful in constructing the full history of Akhenaten's life and reign.

The other influential female character in the novel is Nefertiti. Though she experiences an epic fall when Akhenaten's reign comes to an end, Nefertiti provides the most important account of the life and times of the king. She, like Tey, stands to gain or lose nothing from her testimony. Also, the fact that she left Akhenaten makes the influence of bias less likely; even though she loved Akhenaten, she reasoned based on what she thought was best and was not blinded by her love. Nefertiti's story also matched closely with Tey's. For example, Tey said, "I am certain that she left with the intention of returning to him after all the others had gone (93)." Nefertiti's testimony confirmed this belief when she said, "When I wished to return to his palace to see him and talk with him, the guards stopped me (166)." Nefertiti also provided the most complete story, tracing the life of Akhenaten from her early childhood until his death. She talks

of his love for his daughters, his relations with his wife, his relations with his parents, his feelings about the state and his mindset as trouble set in. She knew her husband better than any of the other characters in the novel. Because of her wealth of knowledge, her capability as queen, her predicament in Akhetaten and the value that she placed on truth, Nefertiti's testimony is the most truthful and important of all.

Though Nefertiti's testimony is the most important, another perspective is vital to develop an accurate history of Akhenaten. Nakht, who served as a minister in Akhenaten's chamber, provides the second most useful account. Meriamun describes Nakht, writing, "He was strikingly composed, more so than any other person I have met....He did not occupy a position in the new era, but he was summoned occasionally for his expertise (122)." This demonstrates that his wisdom and opinion are considered valuable by people other than Meriamun and that he is comfortable telling the story of Akhenaten. He, too, knew Akhenaten from boyhood and provides a full account of his entire life. Nakht also acknowledges Akhenaten's positive attributes and his negative ones. He says, "Certainly Akhenaten had his flaws. ... But when it came to mystical questions of life and death, he was very ambitious (124)." Because Nakht maintained close ties to Akhenaten without befriendng him too closely, he was capable of providing a fair and balance account of Akhenaten's life.

Though all of the stories differ in some ways, taking the consistencies from the stories and relying on the least biased sources provides the reader with the fullest story. Based on the testimonies of all of the characters, but with focused placed on Nefertiti, Nakht and Tey, reasonable conclusions can be reached. Akhenaten refused to abide by traditional wisdom. He was not crazy, but his desire to find the truth and break out of the traditions of old made him lose sight of reason. He was not fit to be a king, but rather a priest because of his love for the One

God. Even during his reign, the well-being of the state was irrelevant; all that mattered to him was the quest to find the truth of the One God. He was not impotent, but did not share the carnal desires of many of his fellows. He loved his daughters, his wife and his family, but he loved no one more than his One God. As Nefertiti says, "That was his real purpose, that everyone should dwell in truth (163)." Though Akhenaten's idea of truth differed from most in Egypt, it was his quest to spread the light and love of truth that caused his demise. Through the testimony of Meriamun's fourteen sources, these conclusions seem to form the most likely story of the life and reign of Akhenaten.