

## ***Absolute vs. Relative***

### ***Introduction***

Is there such thing as an *absolute right* or *absolute wrong* or is distinction between what's *right* and what's *wrong* dependent on circumstance? In reading the assigned literature over this past summer I couldn't help but question my belief in *absolutes*. In each book the protagonist is faced with a different opportunity or trial that leaves him/her feeling forced into a wrong turn or taboo decision. The unusual circumstance pressuring each individual led me to question how concrete any given value can be. It helped open my eyes to the idea that there is always an exception to the rule and everything is based on reason. Maybe sometimes the reason is enough to pardon the criminal.

Who is qualified to decide what is *absolute* and what is *relative*? If God is who creates absolutes and he sees all then why does he allow people to break the laws of his absolute? By definition, an *absolute* truth is always valid regardless of context, circumstance or parameters. In calling a truth *absolute*, we are saying that it is completely true without question and it is an unvarying and permanent truth. Nothing lasts forever and after considering these guidelines it is clear to me that absolutes do not exist. In each of the assigned readings there was a different scenario presenting the question of whether something generally considered *wrong* could be excused by circumstance. The very definition of the word wrong explains it as-- *something that is not in accordance with something that is morally right*. Don't we all have varying morals? There is not a universal set of moral standards everyone is required to accept so it is safe to assume that *right and wrong* are constantly changing variables .

I am a very opinionated person but I operate with an open mind because I am genuinely interested in the opposing view of others and I'm always ready to be challenged with a new way of thinking. I refuse to conform to any named set of religious or political beliefs. It isn't that I have something against a particular establishment, I simply prefer the freedom of thought and feel organizations imply too much necessity to coordinate. I see people conform to the religion or political party as a whole without room for compromise. The 'new kids' drop their current way of thinking to please their peers and feel accepted. They compromise their own view of *right and wrong* for the view of the association. In order to feel accepted in the new organization the person will adjust completely to satisfy the church. Churches like to project a false image that they

are open-minded, accepting and loving but in reality this is where I have seen some of the most perturbing hypocritical conduct. In these religious establishment they often voice the claim that *God is absolute* and anything pertaining to God is *absolute*. I understand the desire to want a hope for the future but I'm amazed by the extent people dedicate their life to a cause they can't be sure of.

Growing up in a religious environment and attending Baptist school where I was required to study scripture I learned a lot not only about the religion but also about what I believe. My *need to know* mentality, not much different from Rachel 's in *The German Mujahid*, got me into a lot of trouble in a program based on *just believing*. I wasn't buying the *just have faith* foundation of religion and I was left with many questions that had no logical answers. I was not going to accept what they were preaching as truth if I still had doubts. Rachel wanted answers and he wasn't going to stop until he had them. When he realized that there was no end to the questions, what was in front of him would always be relative to something else, he gave up. It was this quality in Rachel that in the end drove him over the edge. Rachel was a good man, maybe too good for his own good. He took the burden of his father and let it drown his spirit and burn his soul.

Like the Christians mentioned above, I see Muslims conform completely to Islam silencing any question of faith due to fear of consequence or rejection. Many republicans will accept ALL conservative belief for the sake of supporting their party. Democrats often take an entirely liberal stance in support of their party and so on. Is this total conformation necessary to be accepted in a fellowship or political association? Do we not have minds of our own? Does the common factor that they have the same core beliefs mean that they must sacrifice all personal belief to accommodate their religious or political association? I don't think so. Churches are not as accepting as they like to paint themselves out to be. The proof is in the many subgroups of religion and even separations reflecting lifestyle. As Belhor said in Alan Lightman's *Mr.g* on pg 23 *The mind is its own place*. Albeit, someone may share parallel core beliefs with a party they are associated with but I see unnecessary pressure to reflect the same views on morals, rights and so on.

To back up my argument I will use the example of Christianity and the issue of homosexual relations. I am a heterosexual female but I don't feel it's *right* to judge people based on their sexuality. I believe all people are equal. At the same time I acknowledge that we are all entitled to our own opinion and even though I think it's ok others have the freedom to think otherwise. My problem is not with opinions on the matter, my problem is with the hypocritical view of the church and how they get involved with things that don't concern them. Inconsistency is shown in the churches by picking and choosing of what sins are forgivable and what ones are not. The Bible not only talks about the sin of same-sex sexual activity but also the sin of pre-marital opposite-sex sexual activity and Christians take from these scriptures what they want to. A good number of these Christians are taking part in pre-marital sex while pointing the finger at gays. How can they pick and choose what is right and wrong? Who are Christians and other religious groups for that matter to make the call on what sins are forgivable and what ones are not?

So back to the question... Who is qualified to decide what is *absolute* and what is *relative*? Is it Mr. g and his apathetic attitude? Maybe Belhor catering to his desire for entertaining himself? Why should one get the power over the other? Does leadership grant you the power to decide *right and wrong*? Some may say the husband in *the Patience Stone* because he is a man? Or maybe its the wife, she is the victim after all she has seen her fair share of wrongdoing. How about in *Black Water*, poor little Kelly Kelleher? She is an adult and responsible for herself or could Buffy had told her she was acting out of character and this was a *wrong way to act*? When people question our behavior its insulting and offensive, who was anyone else to tell Kelly she was *wrong*? Then there is the all powerful Mayor of Kafr El Teen who decides the law based on what suits him best. Preferably at the suffering of others. He is the Mayor, does this mean that what he says goes even if it is cruel and serves no purpose? He had to know his day was coming. Lastly we have the judgements thrown around in *The German Mujahid*. Would circumstance really make a difference in the father's duty in Rachel's mind or was he only looking for answers to self inflict more pain? The fact was his father was a war criminal guilty of genocide but did he have a choice? We all seem to think that our way of thinking is the *right way* and therefore differing opinions are *wrong* but how can we be so sure? My purple may be your blue, my warm your cold and my desire your despise.

One of the main things I learned about religion and daily life while attending Baptist school was that everything is open to interpretation. I will always be surrounded differing opinions and I can't do anything about it. Freedom of speech is a great thing when you have something to say but not so great when you don't want to hear what someone else has to say. Still, it isn't fair to just throw someone's opinion out because it is not the same as yours. We all perceive the world around us differently. Nothing is concrete. Nothing is absolute. Even though Christians, Muslims or Jews may declare their beliefs to be truth they have no proof that shows their own to stand supreme.

In the literature read over the past few weeks I was able to see that all of the controversial occurrences illustrated in these literary pieces are in deed open to individual interpretation. We read stories with instances of lying, infidelity, murder, stealing and so on. These taboo actions were all done in circumstance that made me wonder if sometimes these things weren't so *wrong*. On the other hand I am sure that there were also some people in the class who were appalled by these crimes and saw them as downright *wrong*. In the end I concluded that all is relative. One can not determine what is *beautiful or ugly, good or evil, right or wrong*. There is no concrete criteria for what is beautiful, good or right. Opinion differs from person to person and what one may believe to be beautiful someone else may find flawed. One can not call their religion an *absolute* truth because no one really knows how this universe came into existence or who is the greater power and if in fact there is one at all. In terms of religion ,belief is based on faith and faith alone. Who are Christians to argue Christianity, Muslims to argue Islam and the Jews to argue Judaism. They stand firm to their claim

that their God is *absolute* and refuse to acknowledge any other option. They claim that what their religion says is true and there are absolutely no exceptions. I can guarantee these same followers are making some sort of exception to their word when they see fit. They justify their sins with excuses of a changing world that make it impossible to live like they did in the Bible, Qur'an or whatever book they follow. No matter how big or small the exception may be to the book, exceptions are exceptions. Making your own rules while dedicating yourself to a *God* makes you look very confused. It is this kind of contradictory behavior that nullifies their *absolute* faith in the word of God and makes it *relative* to their needs. As a realist I understand that all religions have been rocked by scientific evidence in some way or another. How then can they argue their religion to be the *right* one? Maybe the real creator is a crazy mix of all the *Almighties* or maybe *He* is your grade school principal.

### **Mr.g**

“Ah, you do not believe in absolute principles. We will get along even better than I thought. Your response implies that in some situations you would be willing to accept any price in order to achieve your end, in others not. Depending on the situation. Yes. That is an important thing to know about ones self.” (pg.26)

The above quote is from *Mr. g*, written by Alan Lightman. Mr. g was caught off guard by the presence of someone in the void that he did not create. This short excerpt spoken by Belhor to Mr. g at their initial meeting seems to cause a rise of emotion in Mr. g but he still continues his conversation with this strange. Mr. g was not used to a differing opinion and he didn't seem to know how to treat his discomfort. He was captivated by the curiosity and intellect of Belhor even though he questioned the principles of Mr. g. In this story of creation Mr. g seems to be likened to God and Belhor presents an image of a satanic figure. Though Belhor is what seems to be the devil I didn't hate him and I don't think Mr. g did either. Lightman makes Belhor a very interesting and enlightening character, one you cant help but want to hear more from. Although he may not be the perfect picture of goodness, his curiosity demands interest of both Mr. g and the reader. I appreciate Belhor's concentrated fascination with knowledge and his ability to create thought and wonder in Mr. g without having bad intentions. This helped to prepare Mr. g for the good and the bad he would soon see in his universe.

Early on Belhor is made out to be a dark unwanted force in the void. Belhor causes Mr. g to question his vision of a peaceful universe. He opens Mr. g's mind to the possibility of unwanted disaster and encourages him to just let it be. Despite the fact that Belhor seems dark, he simply generates an interest in Mr. g to explore every possibility for his universe whether it be good or bad. In a way he prepares him. What is

good or bad anyway? Mr. g wasn't looking for good or bad in his creation, he just looked for it to be as it was, but he wasn't even considering the possibility of bad until Belhor came along. Mr. g becomes very upset by the end of this conversation because Belhor brings to his attention the likelihood of his universe ending in tragedy. He orders Belhor to non-existence. Mr. g was unpleasantly surprised to learn that he did not have the power to abolish Belhor. He has never known the feeling of being denied power. For a character who reflecting the image of what the world may know as the devil, Lightman is able to mold Belhor into a genuinely interesting personality and left me wanting to hear more of what Belhor had to say. Belhor's POV helped Mr.g to see that some things may not be able to see as completely *wrong* or completely *right* and circumstance can play a huge part in determination.

Belhor's discovery that Mr. g may not believe in *absolute* principles made me question whether I believe in absolute principles. This was something I had never explored before. Is there anything in this world that is *absolute*? After hours of thinking I could not come up with a single principle that I would say is *absolute*. Here, I came to the conclusion that all is *relative* and nothing in this world is by definition *absolute*. Depending on things such as upbringing, personal taste and knowledge, we are all attracted to different things. It doesn't take a genius to understand that the world is full of differing opinions pertaining to taste and style but what about the more significant opinions? The things like what is considered *right and wrong truth* or *mistruth*?

I wanted to start at the bottom and work my way up. So I started by examining the simple things. I thought about the question of beauty. This is something that there is a likely opinion favoring the models, the colorful, the unique, but if we all had attraction for the same type of woman or man the world would be in a lot of trouble. In all reality the opinions of beauty vary greatly and what or who one may think is beautiful someone else might find as nothing special. The multitude of opinions on beauty rely on things such as culture, religion, environment and personal opinion.

Even the *rights and wrongs* that at first glance may seem *absolutely right* or *absolutely wrong* are questionable under conditions. After slight observation something that seems completely unsound could have room for debate. Look at murder for example. Though the word murder generally carries a brutal and negative connotation there are times when I see excused, due to circumstance of course. What if someone has a gun drawn at an officer? Would it be a punishable crime if a fellow official takes out the gunman? What if someone is being robbed at gunpoint? Would it be *wrong* for the victim to pull and fire a weapon in defense? These are the types of things I think about when I question whether murder is an *absolute wrong*. The question of murder brings me back to the issue of religion. Is it possible to call yourself a Christian--whose

word *absolutely* states murder as *wrong* and as sin-- but to support the execution of the death penalty on someone who took the life of a child? Is it possible to be a Christian and be in favor of war? Is it possible for someone to live in *absolute* dedication to their faith and abide by all of its laws and commandments or is this world full of exceptions and hypocritical behavior?

It is a generally agreed upon belief in different genres of religion that there is a higher power and he is who determines what is *right or wrong*. This is an absent higher power and his determination of what is *right and wrong* is mysteriously sent down through the writings of prophets. The story of who *he* is varies greatly from religion to religion. How can one say that their own religion is the truth? Does the fact that millions of others in the world believe in a different truth not cause them to question their own and if so how can they argue theirs to be true if there is the tiniest glimpse of doubt? The general foundation of religion seems to be concurrent in that religion encompasses faith in god, unity, goodness, hope and healing but all of these elements are compromised in all religions based on the situation at hand.

### ***The Patience Stone***

Now lets examine a passage from *the Patience Stone* that shows the doubt a woman is beginning to have in her faith and her God. She is compromising a fundamental pillar or belief of Islam-- that one must have a heart full of faith in God and not only announce it but also genuinely believe it at all times.

*...She looks up. Gazes through her tears in the same uncertain direction as the man. 'Bring him back to life, God!' Her voice drops. 'After all, he fought in your name for so long. For jihad!' She stops, then starts again: 'and you are leaving him in this state? What about his children? And me? You can't, you can't, you've no right to leave us like this without a man.' Her left hand holding the prayer beads pulls the Koran towards her. Her rage seeks expression in her voice. 'Prove that you exist, bring him back to life!' (pg 21)*

In this passage the wife is doubting the existence of God by demanding that he prove himself. She is enraged by not only the life of oppression she has been leading for as long as she has known but by the frustration of nursing her husband back to

health while trying to care for their children. She is living with a kindred spirit because of the way her husband treats her when he is conscious. Would it be so surprising if she just let him die? After all of the terrible things she said he has done to her I don't think it's out of the question. But she doesn't. She caters to his every sickly need and cares for him as she would a child. This brutal man who treated her worse than an animal, she kept alive. She seems scared to be left alone and scared of what the future would hold without him. Her dependence on her husband holds her back. All of her revelations to her sang-e saboor paint a brutal picture of what it may be like for a woman in Afghanistan. It makes me think that she should take this opportunity to run. Who am I to say this is a better option for her when I do not know what would happen to her if she ran? Would her country find her and punish her? Where would she go and is this something seen as unacceptable to her country and culture? Once again this is open to interpretation based on personal opinion.

In *the Patience Stone*, as in many of the other books read thus far, the use of repetition captures the audience into the the same dreadful routine as the woman. This creates a feeling of closeness to the woman. I eventually began to feel the pain of the woman and came to hate the man she was caring for as much as she did. While in his coma his wife goes on to reveal all of her deepest and darkest secrets. After the woman is able to get her secrets out and share things with her husband that she had been holding in for a long time, she was able to feel some sort of love for her husband. In his coma he was not the same hateful man. The author lists out what the woman does to care for her husband using parallel construction to intensify the monotonous repetition of this woman's everyday life. As well as with the counting of the eye drops, *One, two; one, two*. This drab repetition gives the audience feeling. The desolate tone helps me relate to her state of mind. The more she was able to yell at him and vent out all of her aggression she was actually able to let the anger go and see the love she felt for him.

The unnamed wife was confessing to her husband all of the awful things she had done in her life and in their marriage. Unsure if he could hear her or not. She felt she had to get her secrets out because the silence was driving her crazy. She was telling the truth which would seem to be *right* behavior but was she doing it for the *right* reasons? Was she telling him all of this out of hatred and anger or was she indeed using him as her precious sang-e saboor? She admits to her husband that as a child she killed her father's quail. She explained to her sang-e saboor that she did this with good reason. Could the murder of this quail be seen as necessary so she would not be traded by her father? After all she had seen him do it to her little sister? She had no other option, she was saving herself. Is that not enough to make this okay? She then informs her husband of the lies she told to his mother when claiming to be dropped off for doctor's visits. His mother was giving her a hard time because she believed her to be barren and she was constantly telling her how worthless she was. All the while his mother thought she was taking his wife to a fertility doctor she was in actuality dropping her off with another man. This was not just any man, it was the wife's aunt's pimp. She knew what she was doing was wrong but she felt she had no alternative. She became pregnant and they all thought it was a miracle. The real secret was that he was the one who was infertile and his daughters weren't biologically his. Was the hurtful ways of

abuse of her mother in law and fear of being abandoned enough to make this ok? There is no *absolute* answer here. Her husband would have seen this as an unforgivable act. His mother would have seen this as disgraceful and disgusting act. I on the other hand support her decision. Yes she had extramarital affairs in order to conceive but what other options did she have?

In the *Secrets, Shame and Lies* portion of *The Patience Stone Forum*, Dr. Keefer asks the class whether or not they think that this woman is telling the truth. I was shocked to see such varying opinions in the forum. There was not a doubt in my mind that she was telling the truth. Elizabeth Gail explained that she felt that as the story went on it was her assumption that the woman was telling lies to her husband in order to, "Shock her husband back to life." If this was the woman's plan it did not seem to work in her favor at the end. I stick to my observation that the woman was not lying. I believe that the woman had reached her boiling point filled with grief, anger and torment and she needed this out lashing as an outlet. She couldn't be sure whether her husband could hear her or if he would even wake up. Looking him in the face when he could not do or say anything back to her gave her great satisfaction.

In the end with the revelation that his children are not really his, the husband suddenly comes out of his coma. At this point the wife rejoices that he is alive but without hesitation he attacks her. Did he hear all she was saying? Was this the sang-e saboor finally exploding like she knew it would?

(pg 141) The woman breathes out.  
The man breathes in.

The woman closes her eyes.  
The man's eyes remain wild.

The man--with the khanjar deep in his heart--lies down on his mattress at the foot of the wall, facing his photo.  
The woman is scarlet. Scarlet with her own blood.

Someone comes into the house.

The woman slowly opens her eyes.  
The breeze rises, sending migrating birds into flight over her body.

It is unclear to me whether or not they both died. He rang her neck, and she stabbed him through the heart. It seems to me that the woman dies in her own scarlet



blood and the man possibly lives. If this was the case then I would say she is better off. I would rather be dead than live the life of suffering and loneliness that would be her fate if she were beaten within inches of her life and lived. *In The Patience Stone Forum/Secrets, Shame and Lies*, Professor Keefer brings light to the fact that not all women in Islamic culture are necessarily oppressed and making generalizations may not be accurate in her following post--

*I agree that she is probably telling her husband the truth, as outrageous as her life is. But we have to be careful about making generalizations about the Islamic culture as they are all different. Women have a tremendous amount of freedom in Turkey compared to Afghanistan and even in Afghanistan it depends on where you are and whether you are under Taliban or Karzai's influence. Ironically, Mohammad had great respect for his wife Khadija and treated her better than other men treated their wives at that time.*

Dr. Keefer's response to my post awakened me to the fact that there are most certainly many different circumstances that predetermine the livelihood of Muslim women. The general American stereotype of Muslims demonstrates ignorance and a closed mind-- as stereotypes do in general. It also further backs up my claim that all is relative. The common interpretation of Muslim women over seas is that they are ultimately prisoners in their own home. After doing a little research on the subject matter I came to learn that even though the prominence of oppression in women is still not uncommon-- the rights and treatment of women varies country to country and region to region.

In the same forum discussion, Jenna Salsedo brings to my attention that the husband's wounds never receive mention of any blood. Ironically, blood was an extremely symbolic part of the Muslim culture being linked to pride by men. If blood holds such importance to a man why would the blood of the man's wound not be highlighted as a larger element of the story? Is one's own blood shameful? Was the husband supposed to be recognized as inhuman? Did Atiq Rahimi leave this part out because of the pride linked to blood and men in the Islamic culture and if so, why?

Atiq does not seem to have much of a filter and as a result he has gotten many books banned in many different countries. He shows no sense of regret or remorse for this. Is Rahimi attempting to exploit the Muslim culture? Could this be because he does not declare himself to be Muslim but is a self-proclaimed Buddhist now? In *the German Mujahid*, Rachel makes a comment in his journal about the *Buddhist approach* and it made me think about Atiq. On page 84 Rachel describes this approach as a mindset that the less you say is better. That doesn't seem to be Atiq's preferred method of displaying Buddhism. I am sure that after growing up Muslim and later becoming Buddhist, Atiq would have very strong feelings regarding his experience as a Muslim child. What is considered *right* and *wrong* in the study of Islam? Buddhists' belief emphasizes physical and spiritual discipline as a means of liberation from the physical world and it is nearly opposite of the belief of Islam to commit to Allah. The goal for the

Buddhist is to attain nirvana which is a state of complete peace in which one is free from the distractions of desire and self-consciousness, Islam on the other hand appears full of distractions driven by the desire to secure a place with Allah. In *The Patience Stone* we have witnessed the assumed *wrong* behavior of murder, adultery, lying, prostitution, disrespecting her husband and cursing God. How much of this can be looked at as relatively *right* given the circumstance.

### **Mr.g**

Towards the end of Mr. g there is a story of a young girl who steals meat because her mother told her to--in order to feed her family. This story is used to question Mr. g's belief in what is *wrong* and if there could possibly be an exception to something that seemed in entirety not *right*. This story shed some light on the inevitable suffering in his universe. In this altogether original novella, Lightman implies that God is someone who may have complete control but chooses to allow his creation to be what it is and not tamper with the fate or free will of the created. Mr. g is let down by the presence of suffering in his creatures but refuses to interfere-- due primarily to the influence of Belhor. The young woman who stole the meat was suffering because her family could not afford food. She would have been doing wrong if she disobeyed her mother and surely would have been punished as well as left with the guilt of letting down her family. On the other hand stealing the meat was also a wrongful act so it was a lose-lose situation for her. In the end the girl was heavily burdened with the guilt of stealing and would have to live with that guilt. Even though she wasn't starving or punished, she ended up suffering in a different way. Mr. g couldn't help but think of all the ways he could have helped her but didn't. Mr. g thinks to himself:

*I do not yet understand the life of the young woman who stole food for her family. I have a complete record of every one of her actions and thoughts. But I do not yet understand the interplay of movements, the reasons for each event, those that were accidental and those that were not. I do not yet understand which of her possible decisions would have been the best decisions. That requires the future, but the future does not exist. Should she have disobeyed her mother, taken a chance that her family would starve, in order to uphold a principle of right behavior? Or should she have done as she did, violated her principles and beliefs in order to follow another principle: loyalty to her mother? Either way she will almost certainly be haunted. Not all is logical. (pg 160)*

Here Mr. g is overcome with sadness in accepting his creatures may have no choice but the wrong one at times. At this moment he recognizes that it is possible that sometimes there is no right way to go about a particular situation. It is this moment that Mr. g realizes it was his desire to have everything be *relative* in his universe. He wanted to be the only *absolute* and therefore he felt like he was responsible for the sadness the

young woman felt. He recognizes that without foreseeing the future, it is impossible for even him to decide whether a choice made is the *right* one.

Without absolute *rights and wrongs* varying opinions set a stage for individuality. What kind of world would it be if we all had the same beliefs, followed all the rules, dressed the same? It would be a boring and bland one lacking excitement and adventure. What would the point be? Mr. g knows this to be true but he wasn't prepared for the suffering that came along with individualism. Sometimes you have to take the good with the bad, even when you are Mr. g. The problem here was that Mr. g was not creating a universe for his own entertainment like Belhor, he saw no necessity for suffering.

Mr. g raises an interesting point regarding the rational and irrational while talking to Belhor in answering another one of his taunting questions. When deciding how the universe would be composed Belhor asks Mr. g whether he thinks a thing and its opposite can both be true or exist in the same place. Mr. g claims he does not believe this to be possible in a rational system of thoughts. He goes on to explain that rational thoughts lead to rational thoughts and irrational thoughts lead to new experiences. What would his universe be without new experiences? In a round about way Mr. g admits that he knows this to be true. Essentially, both good and evil can exist in the same place. Mr. g accepts that an irrational way of thinking will be present in this new universe. A world full of things and their opposite. Good and evil lurking. Right and wrong argued. Beautiful and ugly surrounding.

Sometimes for the sake of adventure and new experience it is necessary to think outside the box and rather irrationally. Even though Belhor is likened to an evil entity he never fails to bring up compelling questions that make it clear that nothing can be defined as good or bad, ugly or beautiful, right or wrong. Sometimes I don't want to know the outcome of my actions before I go through with them because its the not knowing that brings me excitement. Having no *absolute* beliefs allows me to act freely and make my own decisions without having to follow the rules of rationality. Belhor brings Mr. g to recognize the principle that rational thinking is boring and in order to feel that they have a purpose his creatures should be able to have their own way of thinking and each mind should be its own place. Mr. g seems to actually appreciate Belhor's conversation and company. He is not used to such intelligence and curiosity.

## **God Dies by the Nile**

The belief that murder is *absolutely wrong* is challenged in *God Dies by the Nile*. Of all so called *absolute* beliefs, the belief that murder is *wrong* carries the most weight. To take the life of another is something that cannot be forgiven or reversed. It is something that is forever.

The belief that murder is *wrong* is universal to nearly all religions through the written word yet constantly accepted due to circumstance in all religions as well. For example, earlier in this analysis I brought up what the bible has to say about murder and some of the exceptions Christians will make in accepting killing as ok. As they are judging each situation individually they hold strong to the belief that only God has the authority to pass judgement. Though the bible plainly states that under no circumstance should one kill they are quickly able to justify the crime. Why do some feel that they have the authority to stray from the word that is the foundation of all they believe? In the same way the Qu'ran has some very contradictory statements. It is said in the Qu'ran that if a person kills an innocent person it is like killing all of humanity. It also states that it is wrong to kill a Muslim but it is ok and an act deserving of a reward to kill a nonbeliever. How does this make any sense?

*Zakeya continues to squat at the entrance to her house with her eyes wide open, staring steadily into the night. Now she never slept, or even closed her eyes. They pierced the darkness to the other side of the lane where rose the huge iron gate of the Mayor's hous. She did not know exactly what she was waiting for. But as soon as she saw the blue eyes appear between the iron bars she stood up. She did not know why she stood up instead of continuing to squat, nor what she would do after that. But she walked to the stable and pushed the door open. In one of the corners she noticed the hoe. Her tall, thin body approached and bet over it. Her hand was rough and big with coarse skin, and it held the hoe in a firm grip as her big, flat feet walked out of the door. She paused for a moment then crossed the lane to the iron gate. The Mayor saw her come toward him. 'One of the peasant women who work on my farm,' he thought. When he came close he saw her arm rise high up in the air holding the hoe. He did not feel the hoe land on his head and crush it at one blow. For a moment before, he had looked into her eyes, just once. And from that moment he was destined never to see, or feel, or know anything more. (Page 172)*

In the above passage from the book a picture of the murder is painted in a nonchalant way. It is established that Zakeya is driven into a state of mental illness previously in the book but is able to snap out of it upon the return of her son.

1. She continued to stare at him with her black eyes. She could not tell whether they  
[.....statement.....symbolic.....]
2. were open or closed, whether this was real or a dream. She stretched out her hand  
[.....hyperbole.....hyperbole.....]
3. to touch him. Whenever she used to grope for him in the night, his face would seem  
[...alliteration.....remembrance.....]
4. to fade away, and her fingers would clutch at a dark nothingness. But this time what  
[illusion.....sadness.....linking the feelings]
5. she held was flesh and blood, a big warm hand just like Galal's. She brought it close  
[.....hyperbole.....excitement.....simile but it actually is Galal's.....]
6. to her face. It had the same smell as her breast, the same smell as her milk before it  
[.....alliteration.....simile.....alliteration....simile.....]
7. dried up. It was the smell of his hand, there was no doubt about that.  
[memories.....statement.....statement.....]  
(pg 153)

When he is taken off to gaol it is insinuated that the demons have come back and her mental capacity is compromised once again. In the above passage, she seems to know exactly what she is doing. Right before the murder takes place Zakeya is laying on the mat with Zeinab and she nudges Zeinab violently with crazy in her eyes and confesses to her niece that she 'knows who it is' and that, 'It's Allah". She then snaps at Zeinab in anger and frustration exclaiming that Zeinab knows nothing of the suffering and the only one who really knows in Zakeya herself. Maybe she feels that Allah is telling her to kill the Mayor. Maybe she feels that Allah is who is causing all of this hardship. It is still unclear to me whether Zakeya was ever really crazy or just petrified by the perpetual loss she had suffered. Does that make someone crazy? If I had experienced what Zakeya had experienced I would imagine I would not be able to eat, sleep and barely sleep as well.

I don't think that Zakeya killed the Mayor because she was insane but I think she did it for revenge and fear for the future of her niece. I feel for Zakeya. I understand her actions because of the crude ways of the Mayor and the hostility inflicted upon Zakeya's loved ones. It seems that Saadawi excuses Zakeya of her actions because of reasons of insanity. Escaping the suffering and setting the others free from the Mayor's crookedness is more of a valid reason in my eye's. Even in the U.S under judicial law murder is pardoned for reasons of insanity. Knowing that someone killing to protect their family is seen as more of a crime than someone who is just simply crazy is something I cant comprehend.

The argument of whether Zakeya's murder in *God dies by the Nile* was justified was brought to question in the forum *Zakeya as Protagonist*. The class seemed to agree that though the murder may not be justified, the Mayor brought it upon himself. It is hard to look at the act of murder and call it *right* behavior but--like the young woman in *Mr. g* who stole the meat--sometimes there is no *right* action to take. In the forum discussion Corey Moore Harris states an interesting observation that the mayor was drunk on his own power, and in the end got what was coming to him. Corey also likens the actions of Zakeya to the wife in *the Patience Stone* because women in an oppressive culture can only take so much until they explode. I agree with Corey in part. I agree that the Mayor took advantage of his position and the people under his rule but I think that Zakeya's snapping and killing the Mayor has nothing to do with her being a woman. I could have seen Galal doing the same thing given the chance.

Another interesting point is brought up in the above forum discussion by Joshua Friedrich. Through life experiences in the Army, Josh has seen more than his fair share of tragedy. He brings to the attention of the class that people are capable of a lot more than they think in times of desperation. This observation made me think about Malrich and Rachel's father in *the German Mujahid*. As an audience, we never really got to know the character of their father except through his sons findings. Did he feel he had no other option than to participate in the Holocaust because he knew if he didn't he would be killed? Was desperation for life what forced him into killing all of these innocent people? This was a question that stuck in my mind throughout the whole book and really made me feel for him. It made me wonder what my boundaries are and if there could be circumstance that causes me to loose sight of all humility, compassion and values.

Like in *Mr.g* when Lightman portrays Mr. g as a godlike entity, in *God Dies by the Nile* there are many symbolic suggestions that liken the Mayor to a godlike figure as well. The people of Kafr El Teen fear the Mayor as they fear God. Zakeya was religiously squatting on the porch staring at the iron gates that protected the Mayors house. She would just sit there and think. Saadawi was able to set forth a sense of wonder in me of what it was the Zakeya was thinking and what all went on beyond

these gates. It's my interpretation that Zakeya was constantly confusing the Mayor with God. Her anger, hatred and blame seemed to link the two as one. She would sit and stare at the gates with a heavy spirit lacking purpose. It was only a matter of time before the corrupt ways of the Mayor would finally cause her to say enough was enough.

The repetition in this story through different points of view really helped to emphasize the suffering of all members of the community and not just Zakeya. The prominence of this suffering led me to view a murder, which I generally see as an *absolute wrong* not so *wrong* and excused by circumstance.

Zakeya as well as many others in the village had lived years of suffering because the Mayor of Kafr El Teen cared only about his own happiness. He felt that the only way to achieve complete happiness was to suppress those under his rule and make them feel helpless. If the citizens of Kafr El Teen believed themselves to be weak and unable to take a stand against the Mayor he could do as he wished without any fear of consequence. The matter of consequence is brought up in *Mr. g* (pg.5-6). Mr. g speaks of the void at that point having no such thing as time and therefore no such thing a consequence. He explains that they are currently unaccountable for their actions (Mr. g, Aunt Penelope and Uncle Deva) because without time there is no reaction to their actions and therefore no consequence. In the same way as the people stuck in Kafr El Teen, the woman in the *Patience Stone* seemed stuck in her miserable marriage. In both instances they knew nothing better and they feared for the worst if they were to leave. They were helpless.

Zakeya watched as the Mayor took advantage of her young niece since she was a child forcing her into his home against her will. The wrath of the Mayor was something she felt directly. He constantly brought harm to her family. She saw her brother sent to gaol for a crime he did not commit. Zakeya lived in a slave like state alongside the other villagers living in fear of the Mayor. After many years of Zakeya living in his corrupt rule the Mayor finally pushed her over the edge when he sent her son to gaol for a crime he was framed for. After living with the corruption and abuse for so long Zakeya accepts killing the Mayor as the only way to ensure that her niece Zeinab would be protected from his exploitation. Zakeyas taking it upon herself to make sure that he was gone for good was something she could live with. After all the pain he had brought her she could kill him without hesitation or remorse. In her mind even if she were to go to gaol for the murder of the Mayor she could sleep soundly knowing he could not hurt Zeinab. Zakeya's execution of the mayor was something that not only granted Zeinab protection but also gave Zakeya satisfaction that he got what he deserved.

### ***Black Water***

In *Black Water*, written by Joyce Carol Oates a different type of belief comes into question. The previous books take something that is generally *wrong* and throw in extraordinary circumstance to make the act seen as *right*. In *Black Water*, the question of *right or wrong* regard a more politically correct view concerning morals. Kelly is made out to be a good girl. She is smart, pretty and accomplished. Kelly is described as the less worldly of her and her best friend Buffy. When Buffy invited Kelly to a barbecue one weekend they had no idea what a life changing and life ending day this would be.

Buffy had been hurt or had seemed so. With Buffy, so much was display, you never knew. Saying to Kelly Kelleher, Yes but why leave *now*, can't you leave a little later?--and Kelly Kelleher mumbled something vague and embarrassed unable to say, Because he wants me to: he insists.

Unable to say because if I don't do as he asks there wont be any *later*. You know that. (pg7.)

Buffy sees this to be completely out of character for Kelly. She wouldn't in a million years imagine Kelly to be acting in this promiscuous manner and leaving with an older unfamiliar man and ditching her barbecue. It is not only the fact that the Senator has many years on Kelly that worries Buffy but there is a lot more to the scenario. It is obvious from his behavior throughout the day that he is looking to have sex with Kelly and that's about all he wants. Kelly seems to play into this desire of his. She is generally known to be very sheepish with sex but not on this occasion. Who is anyone else to judge Kelly's sexual behavior? She isn't doing anything illegal. She isn't harming anyone. So why would it be fair for anyone to judge her and say it's wrong if she is going to have sex with the Senator?

Something about being so infatuated for so long with this man makes the danger inviting to Kelly and she is drawn to the rush. It almost seems to be a dream come true for her. Buffy knows this is unlike Kelly but she also recognizes that she would do the same thing given the chance. Buffy knows the history of Kelly's obsession with the Senator and she knows there would be no changing her mind. So she lets her go. Why shouldn't she have? Kelly is a big girl and responsible for her own decisions. It is obvious by the above dialogue that Kelly is well aware that the Senator is only looking for one thing and Kelly is okay with that.

Kelly knew this was not something she would normally do but she felt it was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Notice the line in the above passage--



Unable to say because if I don't do as he asks there wont be any *later*. You know that

Kelly's words *wont be any later* give the impression that this is not something Kelly really wanted to do but she felt the pressure of the moment. Many people may judge her for her choice to go with the Senator but they can keep their opinion's to themselves. Kelly is a grown woman. This opportunity is enough for Kelly to throw all her morals out the window and jump in the car to ride off with the Senator.

Moral conflict between *right and wrong* is something that occurs on a more regular basis for me. It is something that makes me question a number of my actions and brings me worry of what others may think. I am beginning to accept that what others think doesn't matter. At the end of the day I have to live with myself so my choices should only matter to me. I'm not saying that if I was Kelly I would have gotten in that car, what I am saying is that we all need to make our own decisions on what we think is best for us. If this was what Kelly thought was best for her then why should what anyone else thinks matter? Buffy was cautious of her friend but would never pass judgement. Buffy didn't think it was so wrong to try and stop Kelly. Kelly was unsure of whether it was *right or wrong*. Many would soon pass judgement on Kelly's decision to go with the Senator but who were they to judge? Kelly knew her parents and grandparents would die if they heard the news but why does she always feel the need to be their little girl? She was a grown woman now. Anyways, how would they ever find out? In the end who really has the authority to make the call of whether Kelly made the right choice but her? No one.

If the black water filled her lungs, and she died, and the news came to her parents and grandparents, they would die, too.  
Oh God no, oh no. That cant be.  
They loved Kelly so, they would die, too.  
Kelly was such a good girl.

Thoughts filled her mind. Oates repeats many of the same worries running through Kelly's mind as she wonders if she will live or die. She was a good girl. Or was she a good girl? Kelly was going to do something bad and she knew it. Does because she was doing something bad make it *wrong*? Kelly lived a life of always trying to please her mother and father. Would the disappointment really be enough to kill them? Her parents might live on with the thought that she was always their good little girl. Or they might find out that even their good little girl felt the need to rebel at times.

The looseness Lightman uses in describing Mr. g as Creator is something I got entertainment out of but I could see some people finding disrespectful. The light satirical mood of Mr. g seems to make a parody out of the belief in Gods existance. I like the way Lightman takes infinite control and knowledge away from Mr. g, omnipotence

leaves too many questions. The far fetched belief that there is a God who knows all and sees all is something hard to grasp for an individual that can only see what's in front of them. How can one entity have complete control over the fate of all and remain a silent partner in doing so? Lightman creates a more logical concept that this creator simply creates and watches as his creation grows and evolves into everything it is or is able to be without interference.

In Lightman's attempt to liken Mr. g to God he also creates his equal (or opposite) Belhor as a satanic figure. I don't see Lightman creating these characters because he truly believes that this is who created the universe, I see him using the characters to make light of what some call creation. Lightman takes what many believe as truth and adds complex math and science to make a fun and easy read exploring another possibility of creation.

Mr. g's explanation of time is something that really made me recognize my claim that all is *relative*. Yes time is something that happens for a certain number of hours/minutes/seconds per day but the actual interpretation of speed of time is something that is relative to situation and perception. This was also a point brought up in *The German Mujahid* by both brothers. Rachel talks about the passing of time when he is riding home on the train and again Malrich brings it up when he returns back to the estate after being in Algeria for a couple weeks. Malrich says, "Time to those waiting on a platform passes at a different rate relative to those on the train." Both brothers emphasize the ability for time to drag on when you are in torturous conditions or awaiting death and its ability to race when your time is occupied and mind is busy. Time can fly or time can drag but in the end its the same number of hours in a day. A persons perception of time differs greatly depending on what that time is spent doing. When Mr g would sleep for decades at a time it would feel like no time at all but when Malrich was locked in the hanger in Algeria a half hour seemed like eternity. There is one thing to be said of time and that is that it will always be moving forward. Like Mr.g says-- *time does not have the ability to stand still.*

## ***The German Mujahid***

Lastly I am going to review the issue of relativity observed in *The German Mujahid*. In this tragic novel young Malrich's world is turned upside down when he discovers secrets of his family shortly after his older brother's suicide. Malrich is challenged with the hardship of being a young man on an estate that is quickly becoming saturated with terrorists and develops a desire to make a difference on the estate. Following his brother Rachel's suicide, his former wife asks Malrich to watch the house and naturally he snoops around. Malrich learns that Rachel found out that their parents were murdered in a brutal attack in Algeria and he kept this information from him. While snooping through Rachel's tool shed Malrich also finds that his father was a SS Officer during the Holocaust and Rachel knew and kept this secret as well. The book is a blend of both brother's journals as they receive and process all the catastrophic news.

When Rachel learns of his parent's death he takes it upon himself to keep it from his brother. He felt he was protecting Malrich with the thought that he wouldn't know how to handle this type of information. I think that Rachel's decision to keep this from Malrich was without purpose and very selfish. Rachel robbed his brother of knowledge he had a right to and also robbed himself of the only person who could relate to what he was going through. Malrich could have been there every step of the way.

Upon receiving the news of their death Rachel decides to visit his parent's graves in Algeria. This decision to go was both out of respect and to try and get some answers. His parents were listed in the death count under aliases and Rachel wanted to know why. In his old family home Rachel comes across proof uncovering his father as an SS Officer in the Holocaust. Both brothers didn't have much of a relationship with their parents but this information hit Rachel hard. One thing that I don't understand is why Rachel feels such a closeness to his father after so many years of absence. He holds himself responsible for the crime of his father when he hadn't even been raised by his father. On page 225 Rachel claims to know his father *as good as any child could* and I don't understand how he could feel that way with that relationship pretty much non-existent. Maybe Rachel was a bit of a drama queen.

For most of the book Rachel is pretty much a head case. His emotions are all over the place and he is on a quest to get more information on his father's dark past but with each bit of information Rachel loses a little more of himself. It's pretty hypocritical that Rachel is so angry with his father for keeping this secret, all the while Rachel is not sharing any of this with anybody, not even his brother. Why does Rachel think it's okay for him to keep the death of his parent's and his father's past from his brother but he feels the right to be angry with their father for his secrets? Is allowing everything to be *relative* just another way for us all to be hypocrites? They two seem to come hand in hand.

On page 131 Rachel says “Everything is relative and therefore, equally unimportant.” This really struck a cord with me. Does just because something depends on something else make it unimportant? Rachel thought so. It wasn’t long after finding out about his parents that Rachel sabotaged his relationship and job in order to satisfy his fascination with knowing more about the matter, he was alone. He wanted to know everything. He retraced his father’s footsteps but it seemed more torturous than informative. It was never enough information for him and I think he realized that there would never be enough facts to put him at ease. He was too far in to erase the horror from his memory and now completely submerged in Holocaust and grief. The above thought of Rachel’s strikes me as so depressing and it makes me wonder if my claim that all is *relative* is sullen or just realistic? I know that religious people often refer to God as absolute. It does give them hope and something that they can always believe in but is that enough for someone to dedicate their life to a system of belief with guarantee?

**Page 61**

***You who live secure***

***In your warm houses***

***Who return at evening to find***

***Hot food and friendly faces:***

***Consider whether this is a man,***

***Who labours in the mud***

***Who knows no peace***

***Who fights for a crust of bread***

***Who dies at a yes or no.***

***Consider whether this is a woman,***

***Without hair or name***

***With no more strength to remember***

***Eyes empty and womb cold***

***As a frog in winter.***

***Consider that this has been:***

***I commend these words to you.***

***Engrave them on your hearts***

***When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,***

***When you go to bed, when you rise.***

***Repeat them to your children.***

***Or may your house crumble,***

***Disease render you powerless,***

***Your offspring avert their faces from you.***

***Primo Levi***

**To this poem Rachel added a verse:**

**Your offspring do not know;  
They live, they play, they love.  
And when what was appears to them;  
The tragedies bequeathed by their parents;  
They are faced with strange questions,  
Glacial silences,  
Nameless shadows.  
My house has crumbled, grief has made me powerless;  
And I do not know why.  
My father never told me.**

The above passage from the book is a piece Malrich found in Rachel's diary. It consists of a poem written by Primo Levi (a concentration camp survivor), followed by an additional verse Rachel added to the poem. Rachel writes his as if it was addressed to his father. He is really struggling here. He is feeling sorry for himself but no one can help him because no one knows what he is dealing with. The poem written by Primo Levi is deep and dark. His poem told me that he wants people to know about what happened to him. He doesn't seem hostile or angry I get the underlying message that he just wants people to be aware of the crime.

On page 208 light is brought to the mystery of the survivor. Rachel can't comprehend the outrageous idea that the survivors of the concentration camps show no anger, hatred or need for revenge. Rachel is suffering because his father was a monster in this mess. The people who came out beaten within inches of their life are grateful for a new life. Rachel should have taken some tips on life's lessons from one of these guys and maybe he could have picked himself off the ground.

In the end I feel pretty bad for the character of the father in *the German Mujahid*. I don't feel that he was given a fair chance by his son's, Rachel especially. It's hard to say whether I would want to search for details like Rachel did or turn my back at first sight of this news. I am stuck between thinking their father was a monster who took pride in what he did and thinking he simply did what he was forced to do and then lived the rest of his life in regret trying to escape it.

## **Closing**

Rachel answers my thesis question in his final chapter on page 225.

*Nothing is ever absolutely black and it is rarer still that things are white as snow.*

Life is not something we choose and even after it is given to us we are faced with a life full of chance and circumstance. There are a lot of things we can not control and the things we can control will always be relative to something we can't. Good people do bad things. Bad people do good things. Without having the same exact experience it is impossible for one person to know the exact mindset and motive of another while making a decision. There are exceptions to every opinion of *right and wrong* and nothing in this world is absolute.

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