Cholera

1. It is night.
2. Listen to the echoing wails
3. rising above the silence in the dark
...
4. the agonized, overflowing grief
5. clashing with the wails.
6. In every heart there is fire,
7. in every silent hut, sorrow,
8. and everywhere, a soul crying in the dark.
...
9. It is dawn.
10. Listen to the footsteps of the passerby,
11. in the silence of the dawn.
12. Listen, look at the mourning processions,
13. ten, twenty, no... countless.
...
14. Everywhere lies a corpse, mourned
15. without a eulogy or a moment of silence.
...
16. Humanity protests against the crimes of death.
...
17. Cholera is the vengeance of death.
...
18. Even the gravedigger has succumbed,
19. the muezzin is dead,
20. and who will eulogize the dead?
...
21. O Egypt, my heart is torn by the ravages of death.

1. Is “night” used as a metaphor for ‘times of darkness’, simply as a part of the story being told, or a combination?
2. “Echoing wails” – hermeneutically, this line seems to be straightforward. Poetically, the choice of words seems to
be intended to exemplify the horror brought about by the disease

3. Silence in the dark – possibly a reference to the dead?
   Rising above the silence could represent the panic of the epidemic taking precedence over mourning of the dead

4/5. Taken together, lines 4 and 5 seem to restate the implication in line 3 that there is a widespread emotional tear amongst the population between grief for the recently deceased and caring for the dying

6/7 “In every heart there is fire .. in every silent hut, sorrow” seems exemplary of the poetic vigor al-Mala’ika is credited with having at the start of the modernist movement (Jayussi, p.10)

8. The key word to line 8 I believe is “everywhere”. The 3rd use of ‘every’ in the stanza, line 8 solidifies the emphasis on the universality of grief felt due to the cholera epidemic – no one in society was left unaffected.

9. Dawn is likely used as a metaphor to represent the waning of the epidemic, as the emotional dust cholera had kicked up in society began to settle

10/11. That footsteps can be heard is to imply that there is very little other noise, likely due to silently mourning the dead

12/13. Lines 12 and 13 again bring emphasis to the large number of dead from the epidemic, but taken with lines 10 and 11, are also an example of “modernity (being) both of time and outside of time” (Adonis 99). While the stanza serves as a part of this particular story being told about Egypt’s cholera epidemic, the scene described could occur
any place, at any time, as human suffering and mass-deaths are universal concepts.

14/15. Another use of ‘every’ to again reinforce the scale of the epidemic in society, while introducing the issue further explained in lines 18-20, on how the epidemic was so widespread and severe that it became impossible to properly honor the dead according to tradition.

16. Could be an analysis of grief itself – that grief is humanity’s way to protest against death, which is it's own crime. Or it may also refer to the additional grief felt during the epidemic for the crime that the dead were not being properly mourned due to the epidemic’s scale. Either way “Humanity protests against the crimes of death” strikes me as the overarching message al-Mala’ika intended to immortalize the Egyptian population’s sentiments regarding the epidemic as the ‘truth’ of the narrative being told in the poem (Culler, p. 92).

17. The use of the word vengeance could be intended to differentiate the scale and emotional effect the large scale of Cholera had on the remaining population relative to a more ‘typical’ death, in times of health.

18/19/20. I believe these 3 lines are used to put in perspective the scale of the epidemic - that so many had perished so quickly, that the normal mourning process for the dead had become logistically impossible

21. Again touching on the themes mentioned in lines 4 and 5, line 21 is a more personal iteration by al-Mala’ika of her grief and sorrow in the midst of the epidemic
Three sources for outside perspective


Biography sources:

