



Reflections of Women in Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* (1947) and *The Cairo Trilogy* (1956)

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Abstract

Naguib Mahfouz was the first Arabic writer to win the Nobel Prize in literature, which he received in 1988. Mahfouz frequently has presented people from the middle class of Egyptian society, and their plights serve as symbols of Egypt's larger social landscape. His influence is felt all over the world, and his works as diverse as pharaonic fiction and postmodern satirical commentary. Mahfouz is among the few great Arabian novelists who have managed to both adapt Western themes and create original Eastern ones. His novels are a fascinating arabesque of deception, love, social injustice, monarchy, and supernatural intervention. This article delves into contrasting perspectives, such as Mahfouz's immediate surroundings and the larger social setting in which he finds himself. Midaq Alley and The Cairo Trilogy are novels that explore the status of women in Egypt and the effect of feminist movements on his invented universe. Portrayal of women in his novels reflects a range of strong and marginalized Egyptian women's voices across generations.

Keywords: Naguib Mahfouz, Hamida, Amina, Jalila, and Women.

Introduction

Egyptian author Najeeb Mahfouz Abdelaziz Ibrahim Ahmed Al-Basha (1911-2006), won the 1988 Nobel Prize in Literature. Along with Taha Hussein, Mahfouz is regarded as one of the first contemporary Arabic authors to investigate existentialism-related topics. He is the only Egyptian to have received the Literature Nobel Prize. Throughout her 70-year career, from the 1930s to 2004, he has authored 35 books, more than 350 short stories, 26 movie scripts, hundreds of essays for Egyptian publications, and seven plays. His novels all take place in Egypt and all refer to the lane, which is equivalent to the world. *Children of Gebelawi* and *The Trilogy* are two of his most well-known works. Many of his novels have been adapted into films in Egypt and other countries. Mahfouz's novels have been adapted for film and television than any other Arab author. (Aboul-Ela 339)

The first author from the Arabic language to receive such an honour was Naguib Mahfouz, who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988. The problems of his characters, many of whom are based on members of middle-class Egyptian society, are indicative of Egypt's larger social perspectives. His work is renowned for its diversity, ranging from



pharaonic fiction to postmodern satirical commentary, as well as for how widely it has been read around the world. One of the rare Arab novelists who have successfully Arabized Western elements while developing Eastern ones is Mahfouz. Through these works, the novelist spins an enjoyable arabesque of deceit, treachery, love, social injustice, monarchy, and the interference of worldly aspects in human existence. (El-Enany 1993)

Hamida in *Midaq Alley*

In *Midaq Alley*, the female protagonist Hamida intriguingly incorporates motifs from all of her works. The emotional ups and downs of a woman straddling two worlds are depicted in the novel *Midaq Alley*. Hamida's character is foreshadowed as an elderly poet who has entertained patrons of a café for decades by retelling the deeds of classic Arab folk heroes, only to have her audience turn away when the cafe gets a radio. As so, a foundational symbolic element is provided upfront: the old and the new cannot coexist. According to Mahfouz, the alley symbolizes the past, therefore a person can only be one or the other. The protagonist Hamida wants to escape her past and the consequences of her actions, therefore she looks forward to a better future. Her disgust and rejection of the alley symbolize her rejection of the conventional conventions long before she decides to entertain the British army as a prostitute. Hamida, as being portrayed by Mahfouz, personifies the resentment and love of Midaq Alley, and she represents everyone in society who thinks back on people from their past. The novelist has presented Hamida as a frustrated woman who acts following her own values and principles:

she knows her fulfilment lies elsewhere. Her leaving the alley and going off to be a whore symbolizes leaving the past and embracing the present. She does not feel the burden of a tug-of-war between her past and her present. Is there a way to escape the fetters of the past except through that man who lit the fire of her imagination? She turned her back on the past and no longer thought of anything but the future. Her body gave in to the feel of the car as it sped away from the whole past. (74).

The most iconic character in Mahfouz's novel is Hamida, a whore and a woman who rejects her past and her traditions. She stands in for the past and the present, as well as for tradition and modernity, as well as for religion and secularism. Hamida is a representation of many paradoxical behaviours and outcomes of a changing culture and serves as a metaphor for the changes taking place in Egypt. At this moment, she signifies the desire for prosperity and the loss of a home and identity that represents a move away from the traditional but more importantly the old. She is not literally both traditional and modern. By selling her soul, her honour, and her morality, she can widen the gap between tradition and modernity. Her independence, sexlessness, lack of sentimentality, secularism, and even atheism are examples of modern and Western influences. She chose to become a whore for the British in exchange for money and power, which serves as symbolism. This illustration shows Egypt's propensity to decry colonialism.

Despite being strong, Mahfouz's female protagonist is sensitive to the Egyptian political and social atmosphere. While Hamida rejects the alley and attempts to leave it,



others go there but return, and others who are content with their existence there choose to remain. The alley becomes the primary point of characters' actions, and their judgments of its quality of life are formed by their interactions with it. The alley and its history cannot be destroyed by the rise of a few residents, nor can the introduction of cutting-edge technologies and ideas alter its essence. In the meantime, its citizens continue to live normal lives. Through them, Mahfouz can convey the wants of common people who are unable to exit the alley without abandoning their traditional values and way of life.

Women give a voice to Egyptian Muslim women who are multifarious to men and culture around them and represent several different things simultaneously. The difference between the novel's depiction of respectable women and sexually attractive or disreputable women, as well as their relationship to one another, provides the framework for Mahfouz's varied depiction of women. The depiction of Egyptian Muslim women in his novel encompasses their relationships with their families, husbands, fathers, and communities, as well as the profound transformations they undergo. Nonetheless, his writings depict women as powerful not only in the outward realms of politics or society, but also in the inner community that represents and continues to define values, morals, and Islam. In addition to defining patriarchy, the roles that his female characters assume provide an alternative perspective on internal or external traditional Egyptian behaviours that may be based on historical rather than religious precepts. Islamic communities' integration of women does not necessarily indicate that his women are passive and dependent. Their characters who intrude into the public arena are doomed to remain there. (Pollard 2003)

According to Miriam Cooke: "Mahfouz's female characters who trespass into the public sphere are condemned to stay there. They become identified with the prostitute who is no longer the symbol of salvation..." (72). Women's bounds are established in this remark, but a closer examination of Mahfouz's characters demonstrates how religious and societal factors also influence how strong women are in Egyptian society. In addition to raising issues of power for women, Hamida in particular raises issues of what it means to be an Egyptian woman in a time of political unrest brought on by colonial rule.

The status of women continues to be a highly problematic topic in many Muslim countries; nonetheless, Mahfouz's many depictions of women highlight the diversity of Egyptian women. Mahfouz works throughout generations, and women characters in his novels evolve. Yared argues that the advent of women in literature was concurrent with the increase of women in political and social roles.:

Regardless of the writer's views of women's status, all agreed that it was closely linked to the nation's standard of civilization, and that progress of a nation (Egypt) depended, to a large extent, on women's conditions (95).

All secular writers, to varying degrees, were aware that the situation of women was part of the greater social, national, and religious concerns since they felt the need to reinterpret Islam and critique the tired Ulama. The term 'ulama' is used to describe the learned community of Muslim scholars who specialize in different areas of Islamic law. Mahfouz's works include examples of the overt and covert roles played by Egyptian Muslim



women, as well as the symbolic meaning and changes that have occurred in Egypt as a result of historical and political events. Women's accounts of the shifts in their social and religious contexts are especially noteworthy.

Women in Mahfouz's novel *Midaq Alley* are a reflection of Egyptian Muslim society. Many of the generational shifts that Mahfouz describes in his work occur within families, and gives a more direct portrayal of those relationships. *Midaq Alley* highlights the individuality and resilience of Egyptian women over period. Women are shown to have a variety of roles and to be a public voice that confronts patriarchy and culture through the narrative's depiction of their interactions with male characters. In his novel, female protagonists show the inner workings of Egyptian households, as well as family and communal dynamics.

Women characters represent extremes like steadiness, tranquility, yearning, and significance. The contrast between the inside and the exterior, or between calm and disorder, might be interpreted as the construction of flat symbols. In his novels other than those that are set in ancient Egypt, Miriam Cooke has stated that "most women belong to the private domain, and they are reduced in literature to flat figures or symbols" (75).

Aminain *The Cairo Trilogy*

In *The Cairo Trilogy*, the transition from one generation to the next serves to highlight the changing position of Egyptian women over time. Mahfouz tries to show his women characters to represent the historical and spiritual shifts in Egyptian society. He shows how Egyptian women go back and forth between being societal icons and rebelling against the patriarchy. Women in Egypt are committed to Islam and vital to the development of Egyptian Islam, even though their roles in society are seen as changing. Muslim's self-conception, which vacillates between *Dunya and Din (The World and Religion)* is reflected in depictions of women (Mondal 1993). Amina, a powerful woman character in *The Cairo Trilogy*, is a glaring example. Her husband, as well as her sons and daughters, who represent a different generation, impact her life. In addition to facing death, loss, and abandonment, she is the most important female character in Mahfouz's writings and has lived through two generations of change in Egypt. Clarifying how Muslim women have been perceived by the West as docile, hidden, and unable to negotiate their narratives is the purpose of talking about women. As Leila Ahmed writes:

I have been through many revolutions in my understanding of my father, my mother, and my consciousness- understanding them now this way, now that, convinced me at one moment that they are this and at another that they are that (25).

Mahfouz demonstrates that Amina is more steady and less traditional than her husband, even though she is listless, and bored, and is never permitted to do what men do. Men set the standards for women, and they must abide by them; yet, because it seems more enjoyable to them as individuals than religious prescriptions and male ideals, women characters in *The Cairo Trilogy* can break the rules and trespass on their structures. Amina has her moments of pleasure as she awaits her husband's return from his night of carousing with his friends and ladies, but she often wonders how she could receive such pleasure from an immoral or



forbidden state like drunkenness:

Paradoxically, by keeping him company at this hour, she reaped a chattiness and in his conversation she could rarely gain when he was completely sober. She well remembered how distressed she had been when she first noticed he was coming home drunk from his evening escapades. To her mind, the wine had suggested brutality and craziness and, most shocking of all, an offence against religion ... she grew to enjoy his company and stopped worrying, although she never forgot to implore God to pardon his sin and forgive him (23).

Amina is confused; as she has accepted a certain paradoxical character accepting her husband's intoxicated state versus his sober state:

She was torn for a long time between her hatred for it, based on her religious training, and the comfort and peace she gained from it. She buried her thoughts deep inside her, however, and concealed them as though unable even to admit them to herself (9-10).

Amina has strong religious convictions, but she is also deeply philosophical and open to other interpretations of Islamic law. In contrast, Mahfouz's masculine protagonists are searching for both sinful and saintly role models. Amina's husband is the head of the household, but he is also a womanizer who does not spend much time with his wife and children and stays out all night every day. Mahfouz depicts Al-Jawad, a male character, as immoral, and it is through Amina that he connects the emotions of societal obligation and ethics. Rather than presenting a religious world, Mahfouz depicts one that is ethical and socially responsible. In addition, he uses the behaviours of his characters to set out the idea that women and men may accommodate contemporary and religious ideas in equal manner. As Leila Ahmed describes, she keeps a picture of the women in her family, which at first looked passive but ultimately became the bedrock of her worldview:

I too saw those women, and above all my mother, as people who did nothing, and I took their endless talk as idleness, gossip, as doing nothing. In a world where doing- doing, not being- was everything. Men did things, were something or somebody, and Western women too, at least Western women in books and films, could be something or someone, compared with women around me in childhood, who just were. In the fabric of my consciousness the women among whom I lived and most of all my mother were everything that I did not want to be. The only escape from this, the only way out, I must have concluded at some level, would be for me to grow up to become either a man or a Westerner (194).

The veil made it clear that women of the upper and middle classes in Egypt belonged to their male guardians. Because of this, most middle-class and upper-class Egyptian women did not freely wear the veil, nor did the veil's internal religious significance have much of an impact. Contrarily, the majority of peasant and working-class Egyptian women were not segregated and did not always wear the veil. This was not the outcome of rural women receiving a lower status than upper-class women in cities. The differences between the upper and middle classes had everything to do with social etiquette and appearances, as well as the role the veil



played in upholding these standards. Because Amina represents the male honour of her family, any assault on her was seen as an assault on her male members. This was made possible by her mobility on the predominantly male city street. The persona of Amina represents the stereotypical Egyptian woman from the middle class at the beginning of the 20th-century. Throughout the novel, her husband, al-Sayyid Ahmad, keeps an eye on and regulates her every action. Amina hardly ever leaves her house unless there is an urgent reason to do so. She wears the full veil, a long, black cloth that was customarily worn during this period, covering her head, face, and entire body on few occasions that she is allowed to leave the house.

The Islamic term for conflict or disorder in society, *fitna*, relates to the practices of seclusion and veiling. A gorgeous woman is also referred to as *fitna* historically. Both isolation and veiling are control strategies used to avoid the appearance of a beautiful woman in public from triggering a *fitna*-like condition. However, as modernization processes took hold in the 1930s and 1940s in urban Egypt, seclusion became less practical and more challenging for the police. From an economic perspective, civilizations first need to exist and create offspring. In this view, the aristocratic classes of Egypt began to find that the costs of isolation outweighed the advantages. A form of the class system based on titles that were the foundation for riches and prestige was maintained and strengthened by seclusion in the middle of the 20th-century. In the 1930s and 1940s, as this structure started to break down, seclusion started to cost money. Women were pushed to leave their home due to the post-colonial socialist agenda that was implemented and the consequent collapse of Egypt's urban economy. In Egypt, the tradition of isolation came to an end when women were given access to schools starting in the 1930s and to outside-the-home employment options starting in the 1950s. The implementation of women's education was done in part to show Egypt's Western invaders its ingenuity and aptitude for modernity. With this small change, women's active participation in public life became the norm. Women educated during this period and those who enrolled in universities under Nasser's presidency provided the additional labour required to carry out Nasser's national socialist agenda throughout the 1960s and 1970s when many men were mobilized to fight in the Arab-Israeli battlefield.

Mahfouz's representations of Amina and Jalila, the pious woman in contrast to the prostitute, are extremely significant. Both of them are entangled in the web of patriarchal exploitation that is the living hell for Egyptian women. In Amina, one can encounter the typical female archetype, the meek and submissive wife who awaits her husband's return each night while he flirts. Jalila contains the typical prostitute and mistress. Both depictions are limited to a very cursory appraisal of the social state of women during this period, as opposed to a more profound understanding of their sorrow. In all circumstances, however, a female subaltern identity that was thought to be lost is reborn at the same time. Jalila, on the other hand, ends up playing a crucial role in *The Palace Walk*. By rejecting the religious and cultural roles that have been allocated to women, she challenges the system that has pushed her to the fringes of society. Understanding the power dynamics between sex groups is crucial to the unspoken agreement between female entertainers like Jalila and their male



customers. Since Talila and Zaubā, al-Sayyid Ahmad's current mistress, do not threaten the established female power disparity, they are afforded greater independence and economic opportunities. Therefore, Jalila is a revolutionary figure in both the Arabic literary canon and the Mahfouz canon, even though her words may not be able to change the gender disparities or even her predicament. She is just as attractive as a man and just as smart. In this concern, Jalila mocks their leader, al-Sayyid Ahmad, with their help. In social and sexual economy, however, readers recognize that despite Jalila's rebellion, she is nothing more than a whore to the very power she seeks to undermine. It was at this time of political and social upheaval in Egypt that the veil was seen more as an impediment to women's autonomy than as a relic of ancient Egyptian tradition.

Conclusion

While examining Mahfouz's novels, including *Midaq Alley* and *The Cairo Trilogy*, it seems that women are portrayed as powerful figures of change, contributors to culture, and strong, stable persons. His portrayal of women give light on gender politics, feminism in Egypt, and the place of women in the ancient, pre-Islamic Arab world as well as in modern, Islamic Egypt. Investigating how Mahfouz portrays women reveals that secondary feminist writers have criticized his women characters as being sexist clichés. But if we read attentively, we can find examples of strong women in history, traditional Islamic and Arabic women who were bound by the veil, as well as women who had achieved freedom. Mahfouz has presented his women to foster social picture of his age.

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