

# Midaq Alley

Naguib Mahfouz, 1947



*Midaq Alley*, like *Cairo Modern* (1945) and *The Beginning and the End* (1950) is about poverty. What is perhaps surprising to readers who are familiar with the reputation that Mahfouz gained based on his later novels, is that the treatment of poor people is disdainful. *Midaq Alley* is a form of satire. The butt of the satire, which is very unlike Mahfouz's later work, is the poor.

Most of the inhabitants of the alley know little about the world beyond it. Even Salim Alwan, the prosperous merchant, is quite simple. *'The trouble was that Salim Alwan scarcely understood anything apart from the world of commerce, and his opinions and beliefs were hardly above those of Abbas, the barber, for example.'* [Chapter 8.] In his remark about 'Abbas the barber' Mahfouz is making assumptions about social superiority, education and an understanding of the world which are condescending to a degree.

Most of the inhabitants of the alley are fatalistic about their situation. Uncle Kamil, the sweet seller, is so poor he cannot even afford a shroud. His friend Abbas, the barber, pretends he has bought him one and teases him. *"So I have bought him a nice shroud as a precaution and put it away in a safe place until the inevitable time comes."* Kamil does not realise he is being teased. *"Is it true what you said, Abbas?"* Kamil is ridiculous. [1.]

A few of the inhabitants are greedy. Mrs Saniya Afify, the landlady of one of the alley's two three-storey houses, is notoriously mean. *'Like all her tenants, Dr Booshy disliked Mrs Saniya Afify and never missed a chance to criticise her miserliness.'* [21.]

Some of the greedy, particularly Hamida - the bad-tempered beauty of the alley - and Hussain Kirsha, the son of the café owner, are aggressive. Hamida is notoriously quarrelsome. *'Her temper had always... been something no-one could ignore.'* [3.] Hussain's aggression finds an outlet through ambition. *'[Hussain] was known for his energy, intelligence and courage, and he could be most aggressive at times.'* [4.]

Hamida and Hussain are in effect foster siblings. Hamida is an orphan. Her adoptive mother, Umm Hamida, had her nursed by Mrs Kirsha, the café owner's wife.

Hamida and Hussein both despise their origins. Hamida engages in sarcastic soliloquy. *"Hello, street of bliss! Long life to you and all your fine inhabitants.... Oh, what a pity, Hamida, what a shame and a waste."* [3.] Hussain is desperate to leave. *'Finally [Hussain]*

*decided to alter his life no matter how much it cost him.... "I must get away from this alley...All my friends live in the modern way. They have become 'gentlemen', as they say in English."* [14.]

Hussein rebels against poverty by working for the British Army. He loves the lifestyle his wages give him. '... [Hussain] *went to work in a British Army camp. His daily wages were now thirty piasters.... He bought new clothes, frequented restaurants, and delighted in eating meat.... He attended cinemas and cabarets and found pleasure in wine and the company of women.*' [4.]

There is no hint of nationalistic sentiment, on the part of any of the alley's inhabitants, about Hussain's employers. The British occupation is something they just seem to accept.

Curiously, Hussein's mentor - the man who lets him into the black market - is called 'Corporal Julian'. This is the name of the English soldier in *Palace Walk*, the first novel in *The Cairo Trilogy*, who makes a pet of Kamal. It is also Julian with whom Maryam flirts. Maryam is the woman Kamal's elder brother Fahmy, the martyr of the rebellion of 1919, is in love with and wishes to marry. In *The Cairo Trilogy*, unlike *Midaq Alley*, nationalism is a fundamental part of the dynamic of the narrative.

Hussein's friend Abbas, the barber, is diametrically opposite to him as a character. Mahfouz had a tendency to construct his novels on the basis of pairs of opposite characters at that time. The brothers Ahmad Akif in *Khan al-Khalili* and Rushdi, his younger brother, are opposites in a similar way. In *Cairo Modern*, Ma'mun Radwan the Islamist and Ali Taha the secularist, both foils for Mahgub Abd al-Da'im, are also opposites.

Abbas is passive. '*Abbas was gentle, good-natured, and inclined to peace.... Abbas had a lazy dislike for change....*' Abbas only takes action when Hussain prompts him. '*Hussain peered at himself carefully in the mirror.... "Women are an extensive study and one doesn't*

*succeed with wavy hair alone.” “I’m just a poor ignorant fellow,” laughed Abbas in reply.... “And Hamida?...Shake off this miserable life, close up your shop, leave this filthy alley behind.... Work for the British Army.” [4.]*

Abbas would neither have become engaged to Hamida or left the alley to work in Tel el-Kebir if it was not for Hussein’s goading. It is of course being engaged to Hamida, and being absent from the alley while working for the British, that lead ultimately to Abbas’s violent death at the hands of the soldiers. [34.] It is difficult not to feel that Abbas is not just quiet and simple. He is also a bit of a fool. Mahfouz does not respect him.

At the time Abbas takes his fateful decisions, and makes the decisive steps, there is no hint of the final outcome. In a realistic novel, this would be a flaw. Mahfouz wishes to retain an element of surprise for his ending. This desire on the author’s part overrides the need to anticipate events. This over-emphasis on surprise is, I think, very typical of melodrama.

Fatalism and aggression are responses to poverty in *Midaq Alley*. Fraud is another. Fraud, in *Midaq Alley*, is rather common.

The nearest the alley has to a professional man, the dentist Dr Booshy, is an impostor. Dr Booshy has no training. *‘Dr Booshy began his professional life as assistant to a dentist in the Gamaliya district.... He charged one piaster for the poor and two for the rich.... He was, perhaps, the very first doctor to receive his title from his patients.’ [1.]*

Dr Booshy’s partner in crime, Zaita, represents the ultimate degradation of poverty. He is simply disgusting. He rents *‘...a grimy little outbuilding smelling of dirt and filth....’* from the bakeress Husniya. [7.]

Zaita has an unusual occupation. *‘It was his profession to create cripples....’* [7.] There is apparently a great deal of faking in this. *“Do you know that making a person appear*

*crippled is a thousand times more difficult than really crippling him?"* [16.] This is another version of fraud.

I am prepared to believe that there were at some period people in Cairo whose business it was to create cripples. I am even prepared to believe it was still happening at the time about which Mahfouz writes. I feel however that the portrayal of Zaita owes more to light literature than to any observation of life.

Radwan Hussainy, despite appearances, is also a fraud. *'Radwan Hussainy was a man of impressive appearance....'* [1.] *'All agreed [Radwan Hussainy] was truly a saintly man of God.'* [11.] Hussainy is not however qualified as a cleric or a jurist. *'He had spent a considerable portion of his life within [al-Azhar's] cloisters and yet had not succeeded in obtaining a degree.'* [1.]

The inhabitants of the alley turn to Hussainy as they might to a qualified man of religion. His interventions fail. Mrs Kirsha seeks Hussainy's help in persuading her husband to give up the boy with whom he is having a homosexual relationship. *"For the last time I am asking you to leave him or let me get rid of him in peace...."* Kirsha refuses. *"All men do many things that are dirty and this is one of them..... What can a man do to control himself?"* [11.]

Umm Hamida seeks Hussainy's approval when Hamida wants to break her engagement to Abbas and marry Salim Alwan, the businessman. 'Umm' is an honorific, meaning 'mother of...'. Umm Hamida is not Hamida's mother. She is her foster mother. Umm Hamida is also a fraud.

Hussainy does not approve. *"[Radwan Hussainy] would not agree at all."* [18.] Hamida and her mother ignore him. *"And the recitation of the Qur'an?" "...I don't give a damn!"* [18.]

Hussainy's ambiguous status and his ineffectuality appear to give his pronouncements an ironic quality. '[Radwan Hussainy] then generously placed some coins in [the poet's] hand and whispered in his ear, "We are all sons of Adam. If poverty descends on you then seek help from your brother. Man's provider is God and it is to God that any excess is due."' [1]

Mahfouz's irony will no doubt amuse the secular. He is however playing a dangerous game. He has already been in minor trouble with the religious authorities over the scandalous content of *Cairo Modern*. [Mehrez, 1993.]

Sheikh Darwish has seen better days. '*In his youth, Sheikh Darwish had been a teacher in one of the religious foundation schools. He had, moreover, been a teacher of the English language..... When the religious foundation schools merged with the Ministry of Education... he became a clerk in the Ministry of Religious Endowments and went down from sixth to eighth grade.... he began a constant rebellion.... He deserted his family, friends and acquaintances and wandered off into the world of God....*' [1.]

Sheikh Darwish is harmless. He is also absurd. He is given to making pronouncements. They are vacuous in content and portentous in form. "*The poet has gone and the radio has come. This is the way of God in His creation. Long ago it was told in tarikh, which in English means 'history' and is spelt h-i-s-t-o-r-y.*" [1.]

The ladies of the Alley are often described as behaving aggressively. It is a lack of feminine refinement that betrays their inferior status.

We have already mentioned Hamida's verbal aggression. Mrs Kirsha, in a splendidly lurid scene, is physically aggressive. She mounts a public attack on her husband's paramour in the café. '[Mrs Kirsha] fell upon the boy, punching and slapping him forcefully.' [12.]

The 'bakeress' Husniya - as the translator calls her - does not need a special occasion. She

beats her husband regularly. Zaita spies on them. *'He... would sit cross-legged, eating or smoking or amusing himself by spying on the baker and his wife.... watching [Husniya] beating her husband, morning and night.'* [7.] Zaita is disgusting. This makes his voyeurism particularly offensive.

*Midaq Alley* is also about prostitution. Hamida, the central figure, becomes a prostitute. The steps by which Hamida evolves from a poor girl in an alley to a successful prostitute constitute the main story of the novel.

Prostitution is seen, although not entirely, as a response to poverty. Hamida is presented, when we first meet her in the novel, simultaneously in terms of her beauty and the degrading effects of poverty. *'...Hamida came in combing her black hair, which gave off a strong smell of kerosene.... Her mother gazed at her dark and shining hair.... "What a pity! Imagine letting lice live in that hair!"* [3.] The contrast between beautiful hair and the infestation of lice would, I imagine, have been rather shocking for some of Mahfouz's middle class readers.

Hamida is very conscious of her poverty. This is very often expressed by an embarrassment about her shabby clothes. *'She was well aware of her attire; a faded cotton dress, an old cloak and shoes with timeworn soles.'* [5.]

Hamida is vividly conscious of the limitations of the life that the alley offers her. *'...she asked herself what her life would be like under [Abbas's] protection.... He was poor.... She would only have sweeping, cooking, washing, and feeding children to look forward to.'* [10.]

Hamida has an intense desire for finery. *"What's the point of living if one can't have new clothes?"* [3.] She is intensely interested in the clothes that the factory girls can afford, and very critical. *'This girl's frock, for instance, was too short and immodest, while that one's was simply in bad taste.'* [5.]

Hamida's choice of occupation, however, is not simply determined by poverty. Mahfouz makes clear that it is also her character. Hamida lacks many if not most of the traditional virtues of femininity as they are understood in Muslim culture.

Hamida behaves seductively. *'Nevertheless, she draped her cloak in such a way that it emphasised her ample hips and her full and rounded breasts. The cloak revealed her trim ankles, on which she wore a bangle....'* [5.] Hamida lacks modesty.

Hamida picks quarrels. *'She was constantly beset by a desire to fight and conquer.'* [5.] Hamida is domineering rather than traditionally submissive.

Hamida's desire to dominate is strongly associated with a desire for money. *'Anyone could have told her that her yearning for power centred on her love for money.... she dreamed constantly of wealth....'* [5.] Hamida is ambitious.

Hamida is rejected by other women. They see through her. *'...all [the women of the alley] hated her and said unkind things about her.'* [5.]

In particular the other women notice what is to them a fundamentally unfeminine trait. *'Perhaps the most commonly said thing about her was that she hated children and that this unnatural trait made her wild and totally lacking in the virtues of femininity.'* [5.] Hamida is not motherly.

Seductive, vain, domineering, ambitious, lacking in maternal instinct; it is a caricature. The highly traditional view of women that is implied by this particular portrayal may not represent Mahfouz's general view. Nevertheless it is how he chooses to portray the protagonist of this novel.

Mahfouz only shows sympathy for the character he has created when he portrays her

behaving, atypically perhaps, in a traditionally feminine way. There is an example when she becomes engaged to Abbas Hilu. *'For this one brief period in her life, she brimmed with emotion and affection, feeling that her life was forever bound to his.'* [14.]

Hamida's chosen occupation, prostitution, is something that interests Mahfouz a great deal. Prostitution, in the exact sense, also occurs in *The Beginning and the End* (1950). The portrayal of prostitution in *The Beginning and the End* is socially and psychologically more nuanced, and to that extent more sympathetic. Prostitution in *The Beginning and the End* is however strongly stigmatised.

Nefisa in *The Beginning and the End* is not pretty. The death of the father of the family - with which the action begins - reduces the family to poverty. They cannot afford a dowry. Nefisa is *'a girl of twenty-three, without beauty, money or father.'* [*The Beginning and the End*, 4.] Her chances of marriage are slim.

Nefisa, as a girl, is less important than the boys. They are introduced and named in the first chapter, as they should be in a good story. Nefisa does not occur until the second chapter. In that chapter she is identified only as the sister. She is not dignified with a name until the fourth.

Nefisa's family are in constant need of money. Nefisa, as an unmarried adult woman, has unmet sexual needs. A young man takes advantage. *'She was quivering, trying in vain to collect her scattered thoughts as he covered her arm with kisses from his coarse lips.'* [*The Beginning and the End*, 27.]

This is more realistic than the stories of Ihsan and Hamida. It is not judgemental. The resolution of the story is however quite difficult.

Nefisa at the end of the novel is arrested in a house of assignation. Her brother Hassanein,

who has managed despite the family poverty to become an army officer, is summoned. The police officer makes it clear he expects Hassanein to carry out an 'honour killing'. *'I've done my duty. The rest is up to you.'* [*The Beginning and the End*, 89.] Nefisa then drowns herself in the Nile.

Nefisa sees herself as culpable. *"I'm a criminal, I know. I won't ask for forgiveness. I don't deserve it."* Hassanein is absurdly judgmental. *"You filthy prostitute! You've already done me incalculable harm!"* Nefisa's fate is seen as a tragedy. *'Life was worthless; death would rescue her from its painful humiliation.'* Yet Nefisa's death provides a resolution. [*The Beginning and the End*, 90.]

Mahfouz is not quite comfortable with this. Hassanein also commits suicide. This however is melodrama.

The double suicide means that the novel, in effect, is about Nefisa and Hassanein. This only underlines the structural flaw I pointed out earlier. Nefisa, as well as Hassanein, should have been mentioned in the first chapter; and she should have been named.

The portrayal of the position of women in a conservative society seems however accurate, if not typical. I would have also preferred a stronger comment on the values of that society.

In *Cairo Modern* the version of adultery portrayed is very cynical. Ihsan is not technically a prostitute. She is unchaste. In a conservative society, women who are seen as unchaste are readily characterised as prostitutes. This applies whether or not they are promiscuous, and whether or not there is a direct commercial transaction involved.

In nineteenth-century British English, the word 'whore' was often used in the same way. It could simply mean 'sexually available'. This was a male point of view.

Mahgub, Ihsan's husband, certainly sees himself as a pimp. [*Cairo Modern*, 29.] Before he marries Ihsan Mahgub has rather sordid relations with a prostitute. '*His girlfriend was by profession a cigarette butt collector.... One evening... he spotted her behind a fig tree with a doorman.... ...he accosted her with his normal audacity and... said with a smile, "I saw everything...." "What do you want?" "....The same." "....Three piasters!"*' [*Cairo Modern*, 5.]

In *Khan al-Khalili* Rushdi, the younger brother, is said to engage in illicit sex. There is also one scene in which Ahmad Akif visits the hashish den, which is also where Aliyat al-Faiza, the local prostitute - '*...whom they all called "husband lover" ....*' - works. [*Khan al-Khalili*, 32.] In *The Mirage*, there is seduction and adultery.

Mahfouz in his later novels is clearly interested in sex and relationships. There is no reason to suppose there is not also a serious interest in the adultery, prostitution, seduction, and illicit sex that are portrayed in these early novels. Mahfouz, a writer working in a conservative society, is I think amongst other things claiming an essential freedom of the novelist to write on sexual subjects.

There is also, however, a certain sensationalism; a desire to shock and titillate, and attract readers. In the later, more serious novels, the element of sensationalism may be judged to persist. This would be problematic.

In *Midaq Alley*, Mahfouz develops the attempt to portray the life of one of Cairo's old quarters that we first saw in *Khan al-Khalili*. In *Khan al-Khalili* a few scattered locations - the family flat, the Zahra Café, the hashish den, the family tomb - stand in for the quarter as a whole. In *Midaq Alley*, the physical location is more integrated. The alley, I think, stands in for the larger quarter. The physical location is important. We are introduced to the buildings before we meet the people.

The alley '*...was enclosed like a trap between three walls.... One of its sides consisted of a*

*shop, a café, and a bakery, the other of a shop and an office. It ends abruptly, just as its ancient glory did, with two adjoining houses, each of three stories.... Two shops ...that of Uncle Kamil, the sweets seller ...and the barbershop ...remain open till shortly after sunset.'* [1.] The alley is not just a community, though it is also that. It is physically very real.

The importance of the alley in *Midaq Alley* anticipates, or is possibly even a rough sketch for, the alley in *Children of the Alley* (1959). The alley in *Children of the Alley* stands for Cairo, Egypt and finally the Middle East.

There are even verbal echoes. Umm Hamida proclaims to her daughter that: *"The people who live [in the alley] are the best in the world!"* [3.] The alley is so small that it is strange to hear Umm Hamida talk like that.

In *Children of the Alley*, when Shafi'i and Abda return from exile in Muqattam Marketplace, Abda similarly says: *'Your people are here, the best people in the alley.'* [*Children of the Alley*, 45.] Their son, Rifaa, comes to reject this attitude. *"The Al Gabal are not the best people in the alley. The best people are the kindest ones."* [*Children of the Alley*, 54.]

In *Midaq Alley* Mahfouz develops the device of the café. Mahfouz was himself a notorious frequenter of cafés, and two of his novels - *Karnak Café* (1974), and *The Coffeehouse* (1988), his last novel, are set almost entirely in cafés.

In *Khan al-Khalili* the café is simply a place where a group of friends meet. Their conversations and their characters give an impression of the poor, socially conservative quarter where they live. In *Midaq Alley*, the lives of some of the café denizens are more developed. We learn something about them.

The social interest of *Midaq Alley* comes from the - admittedly rather lurid -presentation of poverty in a conservative quarter. The melodrama is provided by the relationship between

Hamida and Abbas Hilu, the barber. While Abbas is absent, working in Tel el-Kebir for the British Army, Hamida is lured into prostitution. Abbas is provoked into unaccustomed rage by seeing her in the company of admiring British soldiers in a tavern. Abbas attacks Hamida, and the soldiers kick Abbas to death. Hussein, outside the tavern, can do nothing. [34.]

In *Cairo Modern* and *Khan al-Khalili* the plotting is very tight. Little happens that does not advance the story towards the eventual outcome. In *Midaq Alley*, by contrast, there are several stories which do not advance the plot at all. They would be independent stories if it was not for the personal connections of the characters with other characters in the novel.

Interestingly, these separate stories are not resolved. There are not in the precise sense sub-plots, since they do not have conclusions. By definition, a story without a conclusion cannot be a plot. These stories are in effect vignettes. They serve to enrich the picture of the popular quarter. Mahfouz is moving away from the novel of character, and towards a form of social realism. He is not there yet.

The vignettes also create a commentary on the main action. The theme of each vignette parallels an element in the main story of Hamida and Abbas. This use of a subsidiary story to make a comment is a technique that Mahfouz develops strongly in *The Cairo Trilogy*.

The stories are those of Mrs Saniya Afify, one of the property owners; Umm Hamida, Hamida's adoptive mother; Hussain Kirsha, the café owner's son and the friend of Abbas the barber; Mr Kirsha, the café owner; Dr Booshy, the fake dentist and Zaita the cripple maker (theirs is one story); and Salim Alwan, the prosperous merchant. Radwan Hussainy is also the subject of a vignette, though it is so slight it is hardly a story. I present them more or less in order of appearance of the characters in the novel.

Mrs Saniya Afify is fifty years old. She is apparently a divorcée, and has never remarried.

*“No more of the bitterness of marriage for me!” In her youth, Mrs Afify had married the owner of a perfume shop. Her husband treated her badly....’ [2.]*

When we meet Mrs Afify, she is in front of her mirror. *‘She gazed into the mirror with... eyes gleaming with delight.’ [2.]* Mrs Afify, like the much younger and genuinely beautiful Hamida, is vain.

Mrs Afify, at the age of fifty, has decided to get married. She has engaged the services of Umm Hamida, the matchmaker. *“You are going to get married in accordance with God’s law and the practice of the Prophet.”* Mrs Afify is ridiculous. This is part of the satire. Mrs Afify’s idea of what constitutes a distinguished husband is also ridiculous. *“A civil servant.... In the government!” “He wears jacket, trousers, a tarboosh, and shoes! ...He sits at a big desk piled almost to the roof with folders and papers.... His salary is not a penny less than ten pounds.”* [2.]

Mrs Afify’s vanity extends to a concern for the appearance of her teeth. She engages the services of the fraudulent Dr Booshy. *“Well now, the best thing is for you to have a new set.” “It must be done in a month.” “I could make you a gold plate. It could be put in immediately after the extraction.” ...everyone in the alley knew that Dr Booshy’s fees were reasonable and that he somehow got plates that he sold at ridiculously low prices.’ [21.]* As we shall see later, the decision to go for gold enables the introduction of what is perhaps the most melodramatic element of the novel.

We learn the bare fact that Mrs Afify does in fact get married. Mrs Afify’s husband is there when she learns the truth about her new dentures. *‘Her new husband was in the bathtub, and when he heard her screams, panic struck him. Throwing a robe over his wet body, he rushed wildly to her rescue.’ [27.]* We learn nothing more about Mrs Afify’s husband, or her subsequent matrimonial life.

Umm Hamida is also one of the greedy ones. *"Oh no you don't, my woman. You will have to reward me well enough with money and a great deal of it. We will go to the savings bank together, and you won't be stingy."* [2.] Umm Hamida is also greedy when there is a possibility of Hamida breaking her engagement with Abbas Hilu the barber in favour of Salim Alwan the merchant. *'[Umm Hamida] was aware that half the money this anticipated marriage would bring [Hamida] would go to her, and that she would be amply rewarded for each blessing that fell on the girl.'* [18.]

Umm Hamida's activities parallel those of Ibrahim Faraj. Umm Hamida, in effect, is a pimp.

Hussain Kirsha is irresponsible. He thinks the war, and consequently his employment with the British, will last forever. *"How can the war end so quickly?"* [30.] He has not saved. He returns to his family with a wife and no money. *"You lived like a king with electricity, water and entertainment and now you're back a beggar, just as you were when you left."* [25.] Hussain is not ready for the responsibilities of a family. *"Worst of all, my wife vomited last week...."* [30.] We are not told how things work out for Hussain Kirsha and his wife.

Hussain Kirsha encourages his friend Abbas Hilu to drink alcohol. *"How on earth can you live among the British and not drink?"* In the same way he encouraged him to work at Tel el-Kebir.

Hamida is also irresponsible. She enters into her engagement with Abbas just as casually as she throws him over. Between them, they are responsible for his death.

Abbas Hilu is naive and gullible. He is not a tragic hero. *Midaq Alley* is not a tragedy. It has most of the hallmarks of melodrama.

Mr Kirsha, the café owner, is a married man and the father of a family. It is also notorious in the alley that he pursues homosexual relations with young men. There is a more nuanced

and in some ways sympathetic portrayal of homosexuality in *The Cairo Trilogy*. The portrait of homosexuality in *Midaq Alley* is prejudiced and conventional. *'Now his heart beat faster still.... a faint glint of evil seemed to issue from his dim eyes.'* [6.] *'Was it the same old reason? That filthy disease? "Men like you really deserve to be punished."'* [9.]

Mahfouz gets away with his scandalous material by introducing conventional judgements that serve, I would imagine, to placate conservative opinion.

The vignette involving Mr Kirsha is about seduction. *'Leaning against one of the shop's shelves.... was a youthful-looking lad.... "Why don't you honour our café?"* [6.] It is another parallel to the activities of Ibrahim Faraj, the pimp.

We don't find out what happens to the lad. The story is not resolved.

Booshy and Zaita rob graves. Booshy's fraud is based on criminality of a frankly outrageous kind. This is where he finds the gold for the cheap dentures.

Booshy and Zaita are quite organised. *"Won't you lose your way in the dark?" "Oh, no. I followed the burial procession and took particular note of the way. In any case, we both know the road well, we've often been on it in pitch dark." "And your tools?" "They're in a safe space in front of the mosque."'* [27.]

They have been doing this for a while. *"The days are over when people left the jewellery of their dead in the graves." "Those were the days!" sighed Dr Booshy.* [27.]

Booshy and Zaita are caught. *'A loud voice shouted out in an Upper Egyptian accent, "Up you come, or I'll fire on you.'* [27.] There is no indication why, on this occasion rather than all the others, Booshy and Zaita are arrested. This is pure coincidence.

We learn nothing else. We do not learn if Booshy and Zaita are put on trial or what the outcome is. We do not learn if they return to the alley.

I do not find the idea of graves being robbed impossibly difficult. The idea that gold from graves is used to make cheap dentures is not completely impossible. It stretches credibility a little. The internal parallel is, I think, with the outrageousness of the school for prostitutes that Ibrahim Faraj, the pimp, is said to run. This is another element of *Midaq Alley* that belongs more to light literature than to life.

Grave robbing was of course industrial under the pharaohs, and the pharaonic period is something that Mahfouz is very interested in. He constantly refers to Egypt's Pharaonic past, and wrote about it several times: in *Khufu's Wisdom*, (1939), *Rhadopis of Nubia* (1943), *Thebes at War* (1944), *Before the Throne* (1983) and *Akhnaten: Dweller in Truth* (1985). There are Pharaonic allusions in *Children of the Alley*, *The Search* (1964) and - very strongly - in *The Harafish* (1977).

When Arafa and his brother Hanash dig under the wall of the mansion, they identify themselves symbolically as tomb robbers. The mansion becomes a pyramid and Gabalawi becomes a pharaoh. [*Children of the Alley*, 93.] Grave robbing in *Midaq Alley* is crude and sensational. In *Children of the Alley* it is subtle and significant. Twelve years makes a great deal of difference.

Salim Alwan is making money on the black market. '*This second war had so far been even more lucrative for his business....*' [8.] As a prosperous merchant Salim Alwan is in many ways, perhaps rather extraordinarily, a sketch for Ahmad Abd al-Jawad in *The Cairo Trilogy*. Salim Alwan even dresses in the same, traditional style: '[Salim Alwan] *...struts off, dressed in his flowing robe and cloak....*' [1.]

Like Ahmad Abd al-Jawad, Salim Alwan is ambitious for his sons. One is a judge. Like Mrs

Saniya Afify, Salim Alwan is greedy and mean. *'He had heard of rich merchants who had ended up penniless or worse, had committed suicide or died of grief.'* [8.]

Like Ahmad Abd al-Jawad, Salim Alwan is over-sexed. *'...he indulged his marital pleasures in a most immoderate fashion.'* Like Ahmad Abd al-Jawad, Salim Alwan becomes obsessed with a younger woman and thinks of marrying her. *'[Salim Alwan] quite frankly desired [Hamida's] pretty face, that body of sensuality and those beautiful buttocks.... But how could Hamida become a fellow wife of his present wife, Mrs Alwan?'* [8.]

Like Abbas Hilu, Salim Alwan wants to possess Hamida. Like Abbas Hilu, he fails. *'Hamida's disappearance had been a shattering blow to Salim Alwan.... When the gossip reached him about her having run off with an unknown man, he was extremely upset.... His heart burst with resentment and revenge towards the fickle girl.'* [29.] Salim Alwan's money makes no difference. Hamida has her own destiny.

Towards the end of *Midaq Alley* Radwan Hussainy makes the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca. *'Hussainy had hoped God would choose him to make the holy pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina this year and so he had.'* [33.] This confirms his image in the novel as a man of God. It has no relevance whatsoever to anything else that happens in the novel and has no effect on the action. I can only think that the pilgrimage, like most other things Radwan Hussainy says and does, are there to placate conservative opinion. Like the conventional judgements of homosexuality and prostitution, they enable Mahfouz to get away with what is in fact rather a sensational and quite salacious novel.

There is an episode in *Midaq Alley* which is even more curious than the episode of Radwan Hussainy's *hajj*, and that is the episode of the election party. *'One morning Midaq Alley awoke in a tumult of great noise and confusion. Men were setting up a pavilion in a vacant lot in Sanadiqiya Street.... "...it's for an election campaign party!"* 'Mahfouz uses it to introduce Ibrahim Faraj, who watches Hamida watching the fun. *'When Hamida returned*

*from her afternoon stroll she found the party in full swing. ...she moved her head until her eyes met those of a man staring at her with insolent intensity.*' [19.] As such it is a clumsy device. The election doesn't even work as a justification for Faraj being in the alley. It is true that Faraj is a stranger. *'His tidy appearance and European dress made him seem oddly out of place in the crowd'*. We are not however told that Faraj has any interest in politics.

The description of the candidate suggests a potential for violence. *'...Ibrahim Farhat ...was surrounded by his retinue... most of whom appeared to be weightlifters from the local sports club.'* Corruption is made explicit. *'Farhat had offered [Kirsha] fifteen pounds for his support.'* The candidate's whole approach is venal. *"And don't forget there will be rewards for all, if I win.... And before the results are out, too."*

Introducing Kirsha links the description of the election to the main narrative. It involves giving Kirsha a biography. *'[Kirsha] had taken an active part in the rebellion of 1919 and was reputed to have planned the great fire which destroyed the Jewish Cigarette Trading Co in Hussain Square.'* After the revolution *'...he had found a new ...outlet for his energies in the subsequent election battles.'* This of course is not only irrelevant to Kirsha's behaviour in the novel. It completely contradicts his character as it has been described, and Mahfouz knows it. *'All the spirit of the old revolutionary was gone....'* [19.]

Mahfouz is not writing about politics in *Midaq Alley* because it is relevant to the novel. It is not. He is writing about politics because he is interested in politics. Politics is to be one of the great themes of his work.

In *The Cairo Trilogy*, nationalist politics drive much of the action. The treatment is nuanced and sophisticated. By the end of the novel we have been introduced, via the medium of Kamal al-Jawad's nephews, Abd al-Muni'm and Ahmad, to Islamism and Marxism as well.

Politics in *Midaq Alley* is described as violent and venal. The treatment is superficial. As in

the portrait of Salim Alwan, Mahfouz is making a very rough preliminary sketch. It will be developed later.

Hamida's character does not change. Her experience does not touch her. It is only her situation that changes. This is one of the characteristics that makes *Midaq Alley* a melodrama rather than a work of realism.

The change in Hamida's situation is shown through her relations with three different men: Abbas Hilu the barber, Salim Alwan the merchant and Ibrahim Faraj the pimp. Hamida moves from a young man who is poor but presentable to a rich, middle-aged man who is already married and from there to a pimp.

Prostitution is presented as her destiny. *'The truth was that without realising it she had chosen her path.... She asked herself what people would be saying about her on the street the next day.... "A whore!"'* [24.] Faraj also recognises this. *"She's a whore by instinct."* [23.]

Hamida's progression from man to man curiously parallels Nawal's progression from brother to brother in *Khan al-Khalili*. In both cases the relationships with different men serve to portray the personality of the young woman fully.

Nawal is a teenage girl from a conservative family. She values marriage. *'For her, life was entirely focused on a single goal: heart, home and marriage.'* [21.] She does not value education. *"Haven't you thought about what you want to do at university yet?" ...this young man was trying to mould her into the kind of woman that he wanted her to be....'* [21.]

Despite the restrictions placed on her Nawal is able to engage in courtship and the search for a mate. Ahmad Akif is inhibited. Ahmad spots Nawal on the balcony from his window. *'He left the window, went over to the other one that looked out on the old part of Khan al-*

*Khalili, opened it, and leaned on the sill.... A young girl was sitting [on his neighbour's balcony] embroidering a shawl.'* [10.]

Ahmad can't deal with it. *'At that fleeting moment, when their eyes met, his emotions overcame him and he blushed deep red in sheer embarrassment. He did not know how to behave or what was the best way to get out of his predicament.'* [10.] Nawal nevertheless continues to encourage him. *'...when she reached [the shelter door], she turned and gave him a very meaningful look.'* [14.]

Rushdi is much bolder. *"How can this boy be so brazen?"* [21.] That enables Nawal to respond. Even though Rushdi is obviously ill, *'...[Nawal] encouraged him to resume their walk together since she was keen for them to be alone together.'* [37.]

Through her relations with the brother's we see that Nawal's freedom of action is limited by her conservative environment and the personality of the two brothers. Within those limits, Nawal - a very ordinary girl - finds some space for agency. It is rather a charming portrait.

The portrait of Hamida is not charming at all. She is greedy and domineering.

Hamida is aware that Abbas Hilu cannot give her what she wants. *'...she was aware of the great gulf between this humble young man and her own greedy ambitions....'* Nevertheless she allows herself to be seduced. *"Let's turn off into Azhar Street. It's quieter there...."* She turned off toward Azhar Street without a word.' Rather passively, she becomes engaged. *"We have reached an agreement, Hamida, and the matter is decided."* [10.]

Hamida has no qualms in abandoning Abbas Hilu for Salim Alwan. He is a better bet. *'This at last was the man who could give her all the luxury and freedom from drudgery she longed for.'* Yet as soon as Salim Alwan is introduced into Hamida's life as a prospective fiancé he is removed by a heart attack. *'The next morning Umm Hamida cheerfully set out for Alwan's*

*office to read the Qur'an and to confirm the engagement.... Salim Alwan had suffered a heart attack.'* [18.] Hamida and Salim Alwan do not in fact become engaged, and - as with other vignettes in *Midaq Alley* - there is no outcome. Salim Alwan exists in the novel simply to demonstrate that Hamida is faithless and mercenary.

In a similar way, Ibrahim Faraj exists solely to introduce Hamida to prostitution. He has no other existence. We learn nothing else about him. In the last few chapters, when Hamida has found her calling, he disappears. This is typical of melodrama.

With Faraj, Hamida behaves seductively and shows some passion. In a behaviour that is classic for forward young women in the novels of Mahfouz, Hamida flirts with Faraj through the window. *'She hesitated and then, turning the catch, she opened up the window a bit, carefully standing behind it as though watching the celebration in progress.'* [19.] Faraj can inspire her to real feeling. *'She clung to him, her head raised toward his face, her mouth open and trembling with passion....'* [26.]

Faraj seduces her. *'He walked behind her and, with indescribable boldness, stretched out his arm and gripped her hand.... "Good evening, my darling."'* He pays her compliments. *"Why, you are as beautiful as the stars.... don't you go to the cinema? They call beautiful film actresses stars."* What really charms Hamida, however, is wealth. *'In her whole life she had only ridden in a horse-drawn carriage and the magic of the word "taxi" took time to die away.'* [23.]

Hamida rapidly realises that Faraj is not a lover. *"You are trying to corrupt me! What an evil, wicked seducer you are! ...You are not a man; you are a pimp!"* [23.] Faraj denies he is a pimp. This is where Mahfouz introduces an element of the novel that is so sensational that it is frankly absurd. *"Your lover is the headmaster of a school, and you will learn everything when the time comes."* [24.]

The school for prostitutes is not in fact complicated. There are only three departments'. *"This is the first class in the school... The department of Oriental dancing."* Then there is: *"The department of Western dancing."* And finally: *"This department teaches the principles of the English language...!"* The English language is apparently best learned while the young ladies are naked. [26.]

I can believe that there have been people at various historical epochs who have undertaken to teach young ladies the accomplishments they need in order to do better in their chosen profession. This however is absurd. I am afraid I think, just as with Zaita and Booshy stealing gold teeth from graves, that this belongs more to light literature than life.

Hamida already realises that Faraj is a pimp. Now she realises he is grooming her. *"Do you think I am going to do the same as they?"* She also realises just how cynical he is. *"American officers will gladly pay fifty pounds for virgins."* She is still resisting. *'...she slapped his face with such force that the blow cracked through the room.'* It is almost as if this is what Faraj was waiting for. *'...he struck her right cheek as hard as he could. Then he slapped her right cheek just as violently.'* [26.] Faraj gives Hamida something that neither Abbas Hilu nor Salim Alwan does. He gives her the opportunity for a dominance struggle.

Abbas comes back from Tel el-Kebir in western clothes. *'Abbas... was dressed in a smart white shirt and grey trousers.'* He has a trinket in a box. *"It's Hamida's wedding present."* He is in for a shock. *"She's gone.... No one knows what's happened to her."* Hussein is probably lying. *'Did he really have no suspicion of the truth of her disappearance?'* The truth is not hard to discover. Hamida's friends are quite eager to tell on her. *"We saw her several times with a well-dressed man in a suit, walking in the Mousky."* [28.]

Hamida is doing well. *'She was a favourite of the soldiers and her savings were proof of her popularity.'* Her dominance needs are not entirely satisfied. *'Not entirely ruled by her sexual instincts, she longed for emotional power.'* She has lost the limited freedom she used to

have in the alley. *'Perhaps the only hour of her past life that Hamida missed was her late afternoon walk.'* She hasn't gained the larger freedom she wanted. *'She no longer had the freedom for which she had risked her whole life. Hamida only felt a sense of powerful independence when she was soliciting on the street or in a tavern.'* She is aware that Faraj, her seducer, is no longer her lover. She challenges him. *"Let's get married and get out of this kind of life."* She has regrets. *'How had everything come to an end so quickly?'*

What Hamida does not expect is to encounter Abbas again. *'Just then she heard a shrill cry rend the air: "Hamida!" She turned in terror and saw Abbas, the barber, only an arm's length away from her.'* [31.] This is of course a coincidence of the type that is typical of melodrama.

Mahfouz now describes Hamida as explicitly evil. She persuades Abbas to murder Faraj. *'Her mind raced with devilish inspiration. It occurred to her that she could conscript Abbas against the man who was using her so heartlessly.'* [32.] The only other character in *Midaq Alley* who is described as evil is Kirsha, the café owner, in respect of his homosexual desires.

One might have thought the attribution of evil could be as easily made of Faraj, the pimp, or Booshy and Zaita, the grave robbers. Mahfouz, however, seems to reserve the category of evil for those who violate conventional sexual norms. It is a game he is playing, I think, with his conservative readers.

Mahfouz thoroughly dislikes Hamida. He also dislikes Mahgub Abd al-Da'im, the nihilist in *Cairo Modern*. A dislikeable protagonist is a sign, if nothing more, of a satirical intention.

Abbas takes the bait. *"I won't be happy until I smash his head in. Where can I find him?"*

He tries to get his friend Hussein Kirsha to help him. Hussein has reservations. *"Hamida is the real culprit."* Abbas persists. *"...isn't it still an insult to us that we should avenge?"* He

persuades Hussein to come on a reconnaissance. *“Wouldn't it be better to go to the tavern where we'll meet them on Sunday, so that you'll know where it is?”*

There is another melodramatic coincidence, this time with a thoroughly melodramatic coincidence. *‘[Abbas] saw Hamida sitting amongst a crowd of soldiers.... He charged madly into the tavern, roaring out in a thunderous voice, “Hamida....” ...he hurled an empty beer glass at her.... ...angry men fell on Abbas from all sides like wild animals.’* [34.] Abbas is beaten to death. Instead of murdering Faraj, he has been murdered. Hamida, either way, is responsible.

Hamida's desire for sexual freedom, portrayed as being a 'whore', her need for independence, portrayed as dominance, and her ambition, portrayed as greed, lead to murder. It is a suitable subject, perhaps, for melodrama. It is a very negative portrayal by Mahfouz of a woman with non-traditional desires and needs.

*Midaq Alley* is also a story about the impact of the present on the past. When the alley is introduced, it is presented in terms of physical remains of the past: *‘...the alley is certainly an ancient relic and a precious one.’* [1.]

Kirsha's café also has traces of the past: *...it retains a number of secrets of a world now past.... its walls are covered with arabesques. The only things which suggest a past glory are its extreme age and a few couches placed here and there.* [1.]

Mahfouz tends to identify the traditional quarters of Cairo with a pre-modern past. In *Khan al-Khalili* the old quarter gives *‘...to the viewer an impression of the Cairo of al-Mu'izzi's time.’* [1.] Al-Mu'izzi was apparently the most powerful of the Fatimid caliphs, whose armies conquered [Egypt](#) and who made the newly founded [Al-Qahirah](#), or Cairo, his capital in 972-973. (Britannica). In *Children of the Alley* (1959) the remote past is of course the Garden of Eden.

It is in the café that Mahfouz places a scene which dramatises the impact of the present on the past. The traditional poet with his fiddle is replaced by a radio. The poet is blind and mentally impaired. The last representative of a vanished age is himself decrepit. It is a vivid image. It is worth quoting at some length. *'In the café entrance a workman is setting up a second-hand radio on a wall..... A senile old man is now approaching the café.... A boy leads him by his left hand and under his right arm he carries a two-stringed fiddle and a book.... He played a few introductory notes just as the café had heard him play every evening for twenty years or more.... The café owner shouted in angry exasperation, "Are you going to force your recitations on me? That's the end - the end! Didn't I warn you last week? ...People today don't want a poet. They keep asking me for a radio."' [1.]*

In *Children of the Alley*, the poets play a vital role. They preserve the oral history. They are valued. *'This was the poet, and these were the tales. How often had [Rifaa] heard his mother say, "Our alley is the alley of tales." And truly those tales were worth his love.'* [*Children of the Alley*, 46.] The poets are however too fearful of authority to be reliable. *'The poets of the coffeehouses in every corner of our alley tell only of heroic eras, avoiding public mention of anything that would embarrass the powerful.'* [*Children of the Alley*, 24.]

The most powerful impact of the present on the alley in the novel is of course the effect of the money that the British Army brings to Cairo. Hussain and Abbas both go to work at Tel el-Kebir. They wear Western clothes. Hussain lives in a flat with electricity and drinks alcohol. Hamida becomes a prostitute. Her customers are the soldiers.

Very briefly, at the end of the novel, Mahfouz mentions what he sees as the attitude of the inhabitants of the alley to history and time: *'This crisis too, like all the others, finally subsided and the alley returned to its usual state of indifference and forgetfulness.'* [35.]

This parallels strikingly the formula Mahfouz uses several times in *Children of the Alley*: *'Good examples would not be wasted on our alley were it not afflicted with forgetfulness.'*

*But forgetfulness is the plague of our alley.'* [*Children of the Alley*, 43.]

*Midaq Alley* is a melodrama. The main story - the story of the protagonist Hamida - is driven by plot and relies on coincidence.

*Midaq Alley* is sensational. It has lurid and improbable accounts of prostitution, homosexuality and crime.

In *Midaq Alley* Mahfouz develops his portrayal of the old quarters of Cairo. In *Khan al-Khalili* the quarter was witnessed by an outsider. In *Midaq Alley* the portrayal of the lives of a group of related characters is quite intimate.

In *Midaq Alley* Mahfouz uses the vignettes of the secondary characters - Mrs Saniya Afify, Hussain Kirsha, Dr Booshy, Salim Alwan and others - to enrich his story. He creates, in a primitive form, the social realism which he will later do so splendidly in *The Cairo Trilogy* and *Morning and Evening Talk* (1987.)

*Midaq Alley* is in itself a rather forgettable novel. It has no very great merits. If it were not for *The Cairo Trilogy* and *Children of the Alley* we should probably never have heard of it. In the context of those later works, however, *Midaq Alley* - for what it foreshadows and anticipates - becomes interesting.

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