

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 15

Article 7

2013

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Recommended Citation

Hasenfus, Stephanie (2013) "Destroy or Be Destroyed: Contending with Toxic Social Structures in Naguib Mahfouz's Midaq Alley," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 15 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol15/iss1/7>

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Keywords

Naguib Mahfouz, Midaq Alley, Arabic literature

**Destroy or Be Destroyed: Contending
with Toxic Social Structures
in Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley***

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Barely a year after overthrowing Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, activists returned to Tahrir Square to oust the recently elected Mohamed Morsi. President Morsi's failure to address revolutionary demands and his decree placing him above judicial review ultimately undermined the fledgling democracy. Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood's maneuvering to implement Shari'a law

into the nation's constitution endangered feminist calls for equality, allowing for discriminatory, potentially extremist interpretations of vital legislations concerning marriage and employment. Increasingly, in Cairo and Egypt's other overpopulated urban regions, a sharp rise in sexual assaults and prostitution demonstrates the desperate circumstances young women face as they struggle to overcome cultural oppression through political and social reconstruction. Their fight to uproot endemic misogyny leads to vehement battles against sexual objectification and, for entirely too many women, tragic self-degradation. Political reform in Egypt—whether considering the Revolution of 2011 (aimed at democratization) or the Revolution of 1919 (aimed at toppling British colonizers)—has done woefully little to change the circumstances of the oppressed. Thus, if Egyptians hope to transcend the nation's distressing pattern of superficial reform, they must actively resist Egypt's counterproductive legacy of inequitable practices that have resulted in lingering inequality and gender-based oppression.

Such resistance is not new, of course. In fact, prominent Egyptian literature over the last century has canonized anguished cries of injustice echoed by today's revolutionaries. Perhaps most notably, Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* (1947) speaks specifically to the plight of the oppressed, critically examining a mid-twentieth century Egyptian society fallen

victim to moral, economic, and social stagnation. The residents of Mahfouz's alley find their lives entangled and horribly routine—their existence reduced to little more than sin, vice, and rumor. Throughout the novel, Mahfouz emphasizes dark, claustrophobic, and segregated settings in an effort to reflect widespread feelings of oppression perpetuated by the alley's apparent rejection of modern values and social norms. Modernity does not easily break through the walls of the alley, resulting in an inherent lack of progress in vital areas like education, technology, and gender equality. Accordingly, its residents suffer from apathetic modes of thinking which eventually turn toxic. The absence of diversity in thought leads to unchallenged beliefs that result in recurring cycles of violence and corruption. These unchallenged traditions and beliefs, in turn, lead to a kind of self-perpetuated ignorance. In essence, the alley's isolation from the outside world fosters a culture of pernicious and misogynistic traditions, ideas, and oppressive gender roles from which its ostensible protagonist, Hamida, fights to escape. As Mahfouz illustrates, the Egyptian social structure of the 1940s obstructed social progress for the lower class while simultaneously thwarting equality for women. Those who try to escape the alley ultimately fail, thus reinforcing the destructively cyclic nature of mid-twentieth century Egyptian society.

Cyclic things, by nature, cannot be escaped. The

physical geography of the alley illustrates this point. The “alley lives in near isolation,” writes Mahfouz, “its insubstantiality increased by the alley’s enclosure within three walls, like a trap” (1). This physical manifestation of entrapment mirrors the nation’s social entrapment. The residents of Midaq Alley find themselves shackled to gender roles, bound by the pre-constructed identities of a noxious society. For instance, the majority of the alley’s men, from Boss Kersha to Salim Elwan to Radwan el-Husseini, subscribe to the “traditions of the time and the place,” deal with women “as though they were small children,” and seem to believe that this treatment best serves “the woman’s own happiness” (49). Egyptian patriarchal privilege and firmly entrenched gender roles foster this perspective, resulting in a deleterious and prejudicial social environment that reduces women to little more than children. The alley’s isolation from the outside world fosters these corrosive traditions by reducing the potential for new ideas that might upset the status quo; in so many ways, Midaq Alley is a dead end, an inert pool of long-established and outdated beliefs. Both the geography and the traditions of the alley invoke a stifling, claustrophobic atmosphere.

It is, therefore, little wonder that Midaq’s young want to escape. Hamida certainly rejects the alley’s pervasive confinement. Her independent personality and unbridled ambition motivate her desire to escape. Unfortunately, few viable prospects beyond marriage

exist for her. As an uneducated woman with no technical skills, Hamida must depend upon others for support. She acknowledges her situation, noting “if she’d acquired a skill, she could wait and then marry as she wished, or not marry at all” (Mahfouz 133). For Hamida, remaining single inevitably means letting old age steal her beauty while she remains stranded in the alley. She recognizes that her beauty is her only advantage, her only source of power. Her beauty allows her to seduce men, and thereby, to control them. In fact, because her “love of control was secondary to her love of combat,” she possesses a fierce, almost masculine quality, interesting primarily because it derives from her feminine beauty (40). Accordingly, she focuses her efforts on seducing the alley’s social “elite,” thereby shirking problematic candidates for marriage in hopes of landing even better prospects. In this forward-thinking fashion, she transforms marriage into a tactical endeavor from which she hopes to maximize potential luxury in her life.

Abbas el-Helw and Salim Elwan each offer hope of a new life far away from the alley. Their appeal to Hamida stems from the economic opportunities they afford. She recognizes economic advantage is power and consequently gravitates towards men of relatively substantial monetary value. Accordingly, El-Helw’s ambitions to work for the British Army and expand his own business pique Hamida’s interest. For his part, Elwan, despite his age, affords even greater appeal due

to his well-established reputation as the wealthy owner of a prosperous warehouse. Indeed, perceived wealth proves an alluring bartering tool for those seeking to win Hamida's hand, as "[m]oney will always tame and domesticate a soul such as hers" (80). Thus, it seems that her self-commodification, which leads her to a warehouse owner (who stores and trades in commodity goods) and a pimp (who sells her as a commodity), evolves quite naturally from extant Egyptian marital traditions that mirror the structure of a trade economy.

Hamida's understanding of her own intrinsic bargaining power affords her the chance to secure access to a world beyond the alley. El-Helw also recognizes a similar need for bargaining power. When he notes that Hamida "despises the alley," it dawns on him that, without a business and a house that she can "choose on [her] own," he risks losing his potential influence over her (82). Subsequently, he agrees to work for the hated British only "for the sake of that house"—an unnerving decision considering that he contracts himself out to a foreign army without any higher calling of patriotism or duty (82). In this sense, he, like Hamida, sells himself to the British; his employment—in the form of physical labor—fundamentally boils down to the same self-commodification tactics employed by his erstwhile fiancée.

Based on the notion of such an economic-trade model, it follows that an appropriate transaction must occur for the relationship to succeed. One party must

buy what the other sells or otherwise engage in an appropriate trade; this said, because both parties sell themselves, no such transaction could occur. In this context—unlike El Helw—Elwan fits the bill perfectly. As a warehouse owner who specializes in the keeping and trading of goods, his wealth serves him well as an enticement for Hamida to marry him. So, when Elwan, the “possessor of wealth enough to fill the ocean,” expresses a desire to claim Hamida, she abandons her commitment to El-Helw with “extraordinary swiftness” (130-1). Unfortunately for her, however, Elwan’s failing health renders the deal null and void, returning Hamida to the free market as human merchandise and thwarting her hope for a richer future.

Despite their forsaken circumstances, both Hamida and El-Helw seem to believe they possess a certain amount of agency, or the ability to control their own fates. In reality, however, their autonomy is sorely limited. Their future depends largely on a pre-existing social structure rather than illusory personal choices. Interpellation, a term coined by Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, details how a “societal system reproduces itself” and explains how individuals possess less autonomy than they might think (Parker 224). In this process of societal reproduction, groups and individuals unconsciously fall victim to “dominant social assumptions” (224). For Mahfouz, interpellation ultimately causes Midaq’s residents to act against their own self-interest by leading them to false

consciousness, or the false belief that their actions will manifest in a beneficial manner. Take, for instance, El-Helw's enlistment in the British Army. He seeks financial security only as a means of securing his future with Hamida. However, this enlistment not only leads to his death at the hands of British soldiers but also props up Britain's pervasive presence in Egypt. His choice contributes both to his own oppression and to the sustainment of a cancerous foreign social structure that oppresses the residents of Midaq Alley. In this manner, Althusser's theory of interpellation suggests that the Egyptian self-commodification not only fails to serve the nation's best interests but also perpetuates the very social structures they so desperately seek to escape.

This oppressive social structure, made up of widely disparate hierarchies, depends, of course, upon a number of artificially constructed cultural assumptions. These hierarchies include: the superiority of wealth over poverty, men over women, and British over Egyptian. Contemporary Marxist theory and post-structuralist feminist theory explain well this hierarchical structure. Althusser's theory of interpellation meshes with Judith Butler's theory of performative gender. For her part, Butler argues that "the various acts of gender create the idea of 'gender'" and the "tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain" a "cultural fiction" (331). *Performing* gender, then, suggests an act, rather than an inherent essence. Consequently, performing the role of woman,

in many ways, means performing a subordinate role. In a sense, it means unwittingly consenting to oppression. When culture naturalizes heterosexuality and gender roles, individuals fall victim to a false consciousness, a “way of thinking that is so interpellated into oppressive ideologies that it leads people to act against their own interest” (Parker 228).

Perhaps more important to Mahfouz, post-structuralist feminist theory asserts gender as non-essentialist; stated another way, outside the current societal construct, “there are many different ways to enact gender, many different ways to be female or male, not one essentialist way” (158). Accordingly, Simone de Beauvoir and Gayle Rubin reject the idea that anatomy determines masculinity or femininity. Beauvoir contends that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (157). Hamida, as an impoverished Egyptian woman, dwells at the very bottom of her society’s hierarchy. Indeed, though she possesses masculine traits, she performs femininity for multiple suitors, a pimp, and British soldiers. In her initial encounter with El-Helw, for instance, she takes “refuge in silence,” her fierce wit never revealing itself (Mahfouz 100). She also feels “angry and anxious” for failing “to make herself up” upon her initial encounter with the pimp (202). These public behaviors, and their accompanying anxieties, run counter to the opinions and attitudes she expresses at home, where she criticizes the men from her window and lets “her hair go till it gets

nits in it" (25-6). She consciously preps and primps herself for social interactions, at least initially, hiding her combative nature in favor of a more feminine presentation. Her performance of femininity reinforces dominant social assumptions while ensuring her continual oppression. To her mind, however, fulfilling feminine expectations is an indispensable component of her strategy to escape the alley.

Hamida's escape strategy hangs on finding a husband to rescue her from the "abyss" of the alley (36)—a notion which suggests an infernal pit and triggers conceptions of a Dante-esque hell. Along these lines, Mahfouz's conscious characterization of the alley suggests that its residents live in hell—a land of the dead—and thus have metaphorically died. Hell further embodies punishment, suffering, imprisonment, and hate; so, too, does the alley. To live in these conditions means living without hope of happiness. Moreover, such a defeated and subdued existence signifies the death of the human spirit, a concept that recurs throughout the novel and validates the abyss as a thematic symbol. For instance, the narrator refers to the alley as "the pit of hardship and poverty," offering yet another allusion to this notion of an infernal pit (32). Consider also the role of Zeita, a nocturnal alley dweller who revels in darkness and filth. He likens the alley to hell through his work, robbing graves and mutilating people for profit. His work is the devil's bidding and he thrives as Midaq's only resident truly

fond of his occupation. Zeita's contentedness in this "world of shadows" indicates that the alley suits the wicked and the immoral (35). In this sense, the alley symbolically serves as Cairo's inescapable hell.

Hamida's plan to escape takes an interesting twist when, instead of finding a husband, she flees Midaq Alley to work for a pimp. Though she gains fine clothing and silk bed sheets, she loses control over her life and subjects herself to male control. Ibrahim, her pimp, renames her "Titi," teaching her exotic dances and dressing her in fine new clothes. The process of ornamentation increases the sense that she is merely something to be looked at, and her re-naming marks a distinct loss of personal identity. More to the point, Hamida's transformation results in extreme objectification and orientalization, as her new name "is one of those ancient Egyptian names that the British and Americans find so enchanting and can get their awkward tongues around" (203). In this manner, Ibrahim privileges his Western clients, not Hamida, as he works tirelessly to make her more exotic to suit their expectations. The exotic nature of her name and her dancing transforms Titi into a thoroughly commodified Egyptian seductress, a modern Cleopatra whom Western men will desire. For this reason—and this reason only—Ibrahim seduces her for her looks, recognizing that he can sell her virginity for a small fortune. He thus reduces her to her monetary worth, which lasts only so long as she maintains both her

virginity and her beauty.

In the end, however, men steal her beauty—and thus, her last remnant of power. An enraged Abbas el-Helw, her former beau, flings a beer bottle at her face as she dances for the British soldiers, causing “copious blood [to] burst from her nose and chin” (271). With her beautiful face mutilated by the glass bottle, her value plummets. As Hamida recovers, her mother, a match-maker by trade, reaches out to her, in hopes of “garnering some of the fruit from that cornucopia” (275). Thus, her mother, in spite of Hamida’s diminished beauty, still seeks to make a profitable transaction within the corrupt walls of the alley. In this manner, the alley pulls Hamida back in. Thus, Hamida’s desperate desire to flee her abyss results tragically in her own downfall.

By commodifying herself in a fight to escape the confines of patriarchal privilege, she sentences herself to a metaphorical death marked by the end of Hamida and the beginning of Titi. Men have defiled her beauty, the very foundation of her identity and her only source of power. After Abbas ruins her face, Ibrahim no longer seems interested in exploiting and marketing her to Western men. The Western men in the bar kill Abbas following his stint, “pouncing on him like savage animals” (271). The ruin of Abbas and Hamida indicates that no possible escape exists for the condemned prisoners of the alley. They must either accept the reality into which they were born or risk

destruction in their attempt to break free. Unfortunately, no safe place exists for the young men and women of the alley. Both inside and outside, they must contend with oppressive traditions and attitudes.

This complaint concerning the development and perpetuation of an oppressive social structure echoes beyond Mahfouz's 1940s novel to resonate in modern Egyptian publications. Take, for instance, Henry Barakat's 1959 film, *The Nightingale's Prayer*; Taha Hussein's autobiography *The Days*; Sakina Fuad's more recent though no less haunting short story, "Pharaoh Is Drowning Again"; and Mona Eltahawy's 2012 *Foreign Policy* essay, "Why Do They Hate Us?" In fact, the complaint endures to the present and will continue to endure until political reform is "accompanied by revolutions of thought—social, sexual, and cultural revolutions that topple the Mubaraks in our minds as well as our bedrooms" (Eltahawy 4). Only when Egyptians can achieve empowerment without relying upon the destructive constraints of self-commodification will they reclaim their voice and recover their identity—scars and all.

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