

## EXPLOITATION OF ISLAMIC VALUES BY THE CHARACTERS OF NAGUIB MAHFOUZ'S NOVEL *MIDAQ ALLEY*

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### Abstract:

*The aim of this research paper is to study the actions of various characters – which they owe to the teachings of their religion Islam – and analyse them from psychological perspective basing on the outcome of these actions. In other words, an effort is made to study the exploitation of Islamic values by the characters of the novel Midaq Alley. The novel under study is written by a Nobel laureate Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, which was translated in English in 1967. It deals with the life of residents of a back street in Cairo, Egypt in 1940's. The framework used for analyzing the actions of the characters is the teachings of Islam based on the last and final divine book the Holy Quran. Taking the references from various incidents and the dialogues of characters, the actions carried out on the pretext of practicing Islamic values are adjudged whether those actions have been sincere and honest or only performed for gaining the doers' hidden motives. Textual evidences provide us with sufficient proof so as to conclude that their seemingly religious actions had been in fact only to gain personal and worldly benefits.*

**Keywords:** Exploitation, Midaq Alley, Islamic values, hidden motives

### Introduction

Naguib Mahfouz is a Nobel laureate of 1988 hailing from Egypt. He used to write short stories from 1934 to 1971 while he was a civil servant. He is an author of as many as 34 novels and over 300 short stories. Themes of most of these writings revolve around the Egyptian culture practiced in his native town Cairo. Being a vocal person for the freedom of speech and a torch bearer of human rights, he also remained a political activist throughout his life. The glimpses of these activities of his are also clearly reflected through his writings. Having over ninety percentage of population with Islam as their religion, Egyptian culture has a strong imprint of Islam culture, Cairo, the city of a thousand minarets remains to be the centre of gravity for this culture.

The setting of *Midaq Alley* in terms of time is such that it lies between the two revolutions of Egypt. The motive of both, having taken place in 1919 and 1952, was to acclaim freedom from the British colonization. The main focus of the novel is far from being political. However, we see the background glimpses of the same in the actions of characters of the novel. It is also worth mentioning here that the author himself has been involved in the decades-long struggle for freedom.

The novel under discussion, *Midaq Alley* also takes place in a back street of Cairo, in the Gamaliya neighbour-hood, a place where the writer Naguib Mahfouz and his family used to live in his childhood. This novel named in Arabic as *Zuqaq al-Midaq*, published in 1947, was Naguib's first one to have been translated in 15 different foreign languages. It was translated in English and was published in 1967 for the first. So far so, all the characters in this novel being Muslims seek guidance from their divine religion. This is in fact the true representation of the writer's religious, cultural as well as social background. The basis of religion of Islam is the last and final divine book the Holy Quran revealed to the last and final

prophet of Allah, Hazrat Muhammad (Peace be upon him). Islam is a complete code of life and offers solution to all problems may they be social, cultural, economic in nature. However, the adjudging criteria of each action by a Muslim remain to be purity and motive in doing it. In the novel, almost all the characters are though following Islam but they lack the good faith and purity in their actions. In other words, they exploit this divine religion in order to achieve their underlying motives.

### Literature Review

Some of the other writings by Naguib Mahfouz translated in other languages include *Whisper of Madness*, *Mockery of the Fates*, *The Struggle of Thebes*, *Cairo Modern*, *The Mirage*, *The Beginning of the End*, *Palace Walk*, *Palace of Desire*, *Sugar Street*. Naguib Mahfouz, inspired by Sir Walter Scott (1771 – 1832), set off with a mission to pen down the complete history of Egypt in the form of a series of books. Later he had to resort to dealing with study of common people with reference to the impact made on them by the psychological and social change. He is known for ‘the blunt expression of his ideas’. Besides various other sub-themes, his works mainly focus on topics of homosexuality, socialism, and God. He is one of the writers who likes to go against the flow and thus was at times criticized for choosing the prohibited subjects. Combining intellectual and cultural influences of the East and West, Naguib chiefly portrays the progress of Egypt through the twentieth century. In his youth, his short stories seem to have a great influence of Western detective stories as well as Russian classics. His settings in the densely populated urban streets of Cairo give us the feel of the modernists in Kafka, Proust, and Joyce. Later, however, he became well-known for a number of banned novels like *Adrift on the Nile* and *Children of the Alley*.

Religion and literature go hand in hand as the concern for both of them is social and cultural norms prevailing in a society. Naguib Mahfouz’s writings, as indicated in the initial sections of the paper, have a great influence of his religion Islam. He takes up the religious point of view of the psychological problems of the characters discussed in his novels and therefore, his themes keep fluctuating between tradition and modernity. We come across the same situation in the novel under discussion supplemented with themes of Orient and Occident owing to its time of taking place that is, during and after the colonization period of Egypt by the British. As far as importance of religion in human life is concerned, Sigmund Freud maintains:

“...religion has clearly performed great services for human civilizations. It has contributed much towards taming of the social instincts. But not enough... It has ruled human society for many thousands of years and has had time to show what it can achieve. If it had succeeded in making the majority of mankind happy, in comforting them, in reconciling them to life and in making them into vehicles of civilization, no one would dream of attempting to alter the existing conditions.”

Besides this theoretical aspect presented by Freud, Emile Durkheim's sociological and historical study is also useful in understanding how Mahfouz relies on his powerful central characters who are either personally religious or use religion to politically empower Egyptians and their identities. Durkheim says in his book *On Morality and Society* (Heritage of Sociology Series):

“... religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are born only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain or recreate certain mental states of those groups.”

This establishes that Mahfouz is unlike other Arabic authors who take influence from the Western writers and believe in Eurocentric literature being from a colony of the British. Taking a lead from Mahnaz Mona Afridi from University of South Africa who has produced a dissertation bearing the title *Naguib Mahfouz and Modern Islamic Identity* we can have a quick rundown of all the main characters of *Midaq Alley* as a mixture which includes Salim Alwan, a business tycoon of the alley, Abbas, a young barbershop owner; Umm Hamida, the foster mother to the female protagonist Hamida, a bath attendant and marriage broker; Hussain Kirsha, a middle-aged cafe owner; and Zaita, a street person who creates other beggars. The novel is full of characters and is written in such a unique way that each chapter introduces and explains a new character thus explaining the part of that character in the main plot. It keeps the reader's focus and consistency as he fears that he would lose the rhythm if he forgets about some character or if he leaves some portion of the novel unread he may end up losing the complete plot.

Naguib exclaimed his surprise when the critics considered Hamida as a symbol used for Egypt with regard to her upheaval motives and her unlikely fate ending up as a prostitute at the hands of the wealthy enticing pimp Ibrahim Faraj. Naguib, however, revisits his surprise and when sees his own creation from a different lens siding with the critics. In the above mentioned dissertation, the focus of the scholar remained on highlighting the Islamic identity of characters of Naguib's selected books including *Midaq Alley*.

There has been various research papers written on this promising novel by Naguib Mahfouz dealing with multifarious aspects discussed in it. One such instance is that of socio-cultural issues. In that discussion, the writer points out the limitations as well as outrages by the various women of the novel in order to come out of their shell and have a transition from socially traditional female to a modern day symbol of fashion and a model of attraction for the outer world. The baseline of the writing was to investigate the drawbacks of Arab Feminism.

The novel also takes lead over the other works by the writer as it has not only been translated into other languages but it has also been filmed and featured on Mexican cinema screens when in 1994, *Midaq Alley* was adapted into a Mexican film, released as *El Callejon do los Milagros* (The Alley of Miracles) and starring a pre-stardom Salma Hayek. The film was critically acclaimed in Mexico, and won 11 Ariel Awards (presented annually by the Mexican Academy of Film).

Another important aspect brought under discussion by the researchers about this novel is that of prevailing role reversal of the genders in Egypt of 1940's. The female characters like Husniya, Hamida, Umm Hamida and Afifi are seen all dominating their opposite gender. This reversal was in fact owing to the decades-long colonization period of Egypt at the hands of the British. The Egyptian Muslim women had learnt new ways of spending their lives in consonance with the attractive life-style presented by their colonizers. The Western colonizers who believed in women to be a show-piece had sowed the seed of rebelliousness among the local women-folk. Unfortunately, the mild gender adapted to their departing masters' openness without realizing the end result. The same sad story is being portrayed by Naguib Mahfouz in *Midaq Alley* where the bold and the beautiful female protagonist Hamida ends up being a prostitute as a results of blindly following her dreams to become self-sufficient. After having reviewed various things already presented in literature with regard to this novel, we come to know that one of various other aspects that is, exploitation of Islamic values by the characters of the novel remains an area which requires some dilation. The same will be discussed in this paper. The significance of this study has, therefore, been quite obvious as discussing the elements of Islamic values only may misguide the readers about true face of

the divine religion. To the researcher, the psychological discussion about the hidden motives of the characters in the event of practicing teachings of Islam should be brought forth in order to keep the sanctity of the true religion alive.

The objectives of this research paper are to study the actions of various characters which they owe to the teachings of their religion Islam and deeply analyse them from psychological perspective basing on the outcome of these actions so as to conclude that their seemingly religious actions are in fact only to gain personal and worldly benefits.

The research questions before the researcher are; what actions do the characters of the novel undertake basing on the religious teachings of Islam? And what personal and/or worldly benefits are the characters getting as a result of those seemingly religious actions?

### **Methodology:**

The research is chiefly based on the textual analysis of the discourse which means that the novel *Midaq Alley* forms the primary source of the research. This paper is therefore, an interpretive research meaning thereby that various selected portions of text have formed the data for research. These textual chunks have been selected on the basis of different Islamic norms and values practiced by the characters. However, the interpretation of this textual data has been done basing on their results either mentioned in the text or interpreted on the basis of some other character's comments, or understanding.

### **Textual Analysis:**

The Holy Quran forms the base of Islamic teachings in which the clear guidance is given in the form of commandments by Allah Almighty. Most of the characters of the novel are seen following these teachings (or in other words commandments of Allah Almighty), the most common of these commandments being the worship of Allah. On page 15 of the text the wealthy widow of *Midaq Alley*, Mrs Afifi when goes to Umm Hamida to have her match made for second marriage prays to Allah as, "O God, please fulfill my wishes." The worship and the prayer of the Creator has been only for her own benefit which is to remarry. Throughout the novel, we see that her wealth has only been used for her ornaments and cosmetics which she wears in order to enhance her beauty. Moreover, she wishes to spend money for having a gold tooth traded from Dr Booshy, the fake dentist of the alley rather than spending money on the poor and the needy, she prefers to spend on her own-self.

In the same way, characters are also asking other characters to pray for them. The same we read on page 86 when Abbas, the proprietor of the barber shop and the male protagonist of the novel asks Hamida to pray for her as he goes to try his luck with British Army. Here, the character of Abbas is shown so far away from basic teachings of Islam that he hardly offers prayers. On the other hand, he wants Allah to be on his side while he tries his fortune. Unconsciously, he is simply aware that owing to his everyday practicing of Islamic values to such a less extent, his prayers will not be fulfilled by the Creator. That's why instead of praying himself, he asks Hamida to pray for him.

Besides praying to Allah at least five times a day, another obligation for a Muslim man bonded in marriage is to support financially his better half and the children that she bears with him. Moreover, it is also in his obligations that he satisfies the sexual needs of his better half. In the novel, the café owner, Mr Kirsha is attracted to young boys and at times engages in homosexual relations with them despite being lawfully married to a lady. His plea for continuing the activity of homosexuality is that he has been fulfilling both the financial and



sexual needs of her wife so she has no right to either blame or stop him from doing such an activity. The same is mentioned on page 76. Moreover, on the same page, rather than considering himself answerable for his wrong doing, he, on the contrary questions why his wife should interfere since her needs (financial and sexual) are met and that it is her duty to be satisfied as long as her needs are met. So, Mr Kirsha commits adultery and that too with his own gender having a fake excuse and making Islamic values a shield for his guard. This is another instance of exploitation of religious teachings by one of the characters of the novel.

Shahadat, meaning the testimony in an Islamic statement that declares the belief in the Oneness of God and His Prophet in legal context is used in Islam as a testimony to an occurrence. In the novel when Abbas goes and asks Hamida for marriage, he takes Dr Booshy along as testimony for his goodness as is read on page 106. The hypocrisy or the exploitation of Islamic code is at its peak here as the character of Dr Booshy himself is all far from following the teachings of Islam. Dr Booshy on the converse is seen as digging the dead out of their graves only in order to have their gold teeth out so as to resell them and earn bad money. Moreover, he is also told to be involved in helping Zaita for provision of poor people including children to have the latter's business of beggary flourish. The choice of Dr Booshy in these circumstances as a testimony on part of Abbas was no less than making a mockery of the religious teachings.

Another point worth mentioning here from the reference of Zaita's business of beggary by the children is that Islam emphasizes a great deal on children's rights whereas the converse of this teaching of Islam is seen through Zaita's action as he tells his customers that he is helping the parents of the children whom he cripples and forces to become beggars.

Another character in the novel is that of Radhwan who is considered to be a pious man by the residents of alley. He is consulted by all for their personal matters as he, owing to his piety, is thought to be offering an honest suggestion or solution to the problems faced by others. On the street and in front of other people, he presents himself as a true follower of the teachings of Islam but on the contrary, he beats his wife for petty issues which is another instance for misusing the religion of peace and love.

Islam as a religion of peace and love educates that a child should be married by his or her parents when he or she reaches the age of sexual and emotional maturity. In the novel, we see that the female protagonist Hamida has already been engaged to Abbas which is equivalent to a promise to wait for him until he returns from the war. But when Abbas leaves for joining the British Army Hamida seems to have ignored the same as she receives a better proposal for marrying a wealthy man of the alley namely; Salim Alwan. When objected by her foster mother Umm Hamida, the foster daughter tells her, 'A girl is free until marriage agreement is signed. Nothing has passed between us but a word and a dish of sweets.' Moreover, the mother reminds Hamida that recitation of the Holy Quran has already taken place between her and Abbas which is equivalent to marriage in Islam that is, Nikah, Hamida replies with the translation of another verse of Quran saying that 'forgiveness is honourable'. This is worth mentioning here that the parents' role in an Islamic marriage is only up to facilitating whereas the right of choice lies with the child (young man or woman) getting married and not with the parents. So, the bold and the beautiful female protagonist of the novel Hamida over-rules her foster mother's mentioning and contrarily exploits the above quoted provision of Islam in favour of her.

Eventually, this is the exploitation of Islamic codes that influences Hamida to leave the alley as in fact she no longer follows them. Islam provides women with rights equal to those of men and Hamida once again exploiting the same decides to go with Ibrahim Faraj

and try her luck working shoulder to shoulder with men in the market. She however, faces a major set-back when she discovers that Ibrahim in fact has never been in love with her. On the contrary he proves a pimp who wants to trade the beautiful and attractive figure of Hamida with wealthy persons in order to become wealthier himself. Hamida then realizes that she has committed a big mistake by leaving her foster mother's house in the alley.

### Conclusion:

With the above quoted references in the back-drop, we see that the presence of these traditional Islamic values govern the personal, social, political, economic, and legal lives in over 90 percent of the Egyptian populous. In the novel, it is reflected how characters deal with these Islamic values. Every character seems to be using these codes of religion as a pretext to legalize their wrong as well as immoral actions. There is no place for purity in the use of the divine religion by the characters of the novel in its true letter and in its real essence. No one out of the main characters seems to be practicing Islam in its true spirit. They, on the contrary keep the religion as a tool or a supporting device to justify their wrong-doings. Naguib Mahfouz portrays this hypocritical attitude of the characters of the alley to present the moral and ethical evils in the society of Egypt of 1940's.

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