



RESEARCH PAPER

Socioeconomic Struggles and Moral Dilemmas: Impact of War in Naguib Mahfouz's 'Midaq Alley'

¹Quratul ain Shafique , ² Yasmeen Khatoon and ³ HM Usman Dar*

1. Lecturer, English Language Centre, Minhaj University Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Lecturer, English Language Centre, Minhaj University Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Lecturer, School of English, Minhaj University Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author

Usmandar.eng@mul.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

War with its manifestations of horror, death and destruction has always been a recurring subject in literature. It has inspired the authors from around the world to create masterpieces depicting its aftermaths. Naguib Mahfouz's timeless novel, 'Midaq Alley' relates the story of a society struggling with the vices and virtues of its people. These poor souls resist against poverty, corruption and crime against the backdrop of World War II. Although war has been depicted as a continuous phenomenon in the novel, its effects have been described implicitly by Mahfouz. This paper focuses on Naguib Mahfouz's depiction of various characters of 'Midaq Alley' as they respond to an ongoing war in their country; it also aims to explore the social and economic effects of modernity as it strikes in the form of a foreign culture represented by Allied Forces. Though we do not witness any casualties as portrayed in other war novels, yet we observe an overall demise of morality, traditions and values of a nation, of which Midaq Alley is a microcosm.

KEYWORDS

Corruption, Economy, Morality, Poverty, Socio-Cultural Impacts, War

Introduction

"If we have been suffering terrors of blackouts and air raids for five years it's only due to our own wickedness!" (Midaq Alley, p.1)

This outcry is an outcome of poverty-stricken, morally corrupt society where individuals fall victim to greed, beggary, gossip, rumor and deception. The world of 'Midaq Alley' creates a dark and dingy atmosphere where poor souls play their parts as they participate in a larger drama called war, directly or indirectly. In this scenario, the Egypt held enormous strategic value for England during WWII. In compliance with Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936, Egypt was to provide logistical support to the British forces. They also facilitated stationing of the British Troops at the Suez Canal Zone at the outbreak of war. Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries were used to defend the cities of Cairo and Alexandria from bombing raids by the German and Italian air forces. It was a vital hub for the export of oil from British controlled parts of the Middle East and control and distribution of oil was of immense importance to the war effort. Overall, officially it remained neutral for the majority of war but would eventually formally declare war on Germany and Japan in February 1945, as the war entered its final phase.

With a masterful insight into human characters and a sharp realism, Mahfouz presents males and females residing in and out of Midaq Alley, their struggle against poverty, corruption and crime against a backdrop of World War II. Though we do not witness any casualties portrayed in the novel, yet we can notice an overall demise of morality, traditions and values of a nation, of which Midaq Alley is a microcosm. We shall

analyze the social, economic and moral impacts of war on the characters of Midaq Alley and also explore the development of these characters as they try to find their way out of the maze of poverty, corruption and greed.

“Mahfouz started his career with writing historical novel but he did not continue to write them and shifted his attention to contemporary life in modern Egypt and this shift emerged not only as a pure literary exercise but also as an artistic response to the socio political situation in the country” (Hazem,2020). The novel was written at a time when more than 14,000 English soldiers were deployed in Egypt, though the country remained formally neutral, it was treaty-bound to host Allied Forces. Their presence in a politically chaotic country, facing multiple issues of transition, rampant corruption and a threat of imminent invasion multiplied the social and cultural problems of its people. They suffered economically, socially and morally as depicted in the novel. Though war is not an explicit theme as we perceive from surface reading, yet its deep-rooted effects are imprinted upon the characters of Midaq Alley, directly or indirectly. Some of them take war as an opportunity to manifold their wealth, others consider it a ladder to climb socially, yet they all are disillusioned in the end. This disenchanted society has been portrayed with immaculate realism by Mahfouz, with no fantasy or fancy involved. This actually, is the bare reality of war, it does not produce any fantasy, it only generates destruction. “Many commentators on Mahfouz’s career have suggested that it was precisely the *dire impact of war* on contemporary Egyptian society during the early 1940s that led Mahfouz to abandon his plan to finish his series of Ancient Egyptian novels” (Allen, 1982). We shall study these dire impacts on various characters as they respond to social, economic and moral burdens inflicted upon them by the menace of war. Another aspect of this study is the presence of Allied Forces in Cairo and the resultant social, moral and cultural transition which the Egyptian society has undergone. We shall observe different characters and their motives, as they are affected by war.

A cursory reading of the Topography of Midaq Alley reveals that it is a small alley, off the Sanadiqiyya street in the old Cairene quarter (al-Husayn), which consists of two houses with three flats each, and five shops of various sizes and business pursuits. The Alley is surrounded by walls on three sides, its only exit on the Sanadiqiyya street narrower than that of a large modern building in the elegant Sharif Pasha Street. Now Mahfouz’s description underscores how it is an isolated place constituting a world of its own. In this way, it represents a microcosm of the Egyptian society as a whole; it general malaise and how the people encountered Western modernity and its ideals of individualism and materialism and in a war-ravaged economy, they finally let lose their traditional religious-moral values. It is curious how the narrative makes no reference to religious revival in the story set in a time when the intellectuals like Muhammad Husayn Haykal, Taha Husayn, al-‘Aqqad, Tawfiq al-Hakim and Ahmad Amin felt resentful about Western hegemony in Egypt and had turned towards Islamic biographies and history to counter the liberal nurture of moral laxity in the name of individualism. The novel weaves a striking and recurrent contrast between the world of Alley and the world beyond implying the division between the traditional world before and the modern world in Egypt during WWII.

Literature Review

Studying Mahfouz’s narrative, social, political and economic impact of the war depicted in the novel hold enormous influence to understand the choices and actions of certain characters. During their encounter with a foreign civilization, Western ideal of individual liberty shapes the characters’ lives largely in developing materialistic outlook. Interestingly, the story downplays the background war as it refuses to deal with war not in detail, but still we witness many impacts of it prevailing in the lives of most of the

characters, their motives and impulses drawn due to the effects of war, directly or indirectly. They all suffer poverty, inflation, shortage of basic provisions and uncertainty. Though macabre in nature, war proves fruitful for some of them, for a short time may be. Even those who consider it a blessing are disillusioned in the end and are left destroyed by it.

Stephanie Hasenfus (2013) in her article "Destroy or Be Destroyed: Contending with Toxic Social Structures in Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*" discusses the plight of the oppressed as they fall victim to moral, economic and social stagnation. She has studied the characters like Hussain, Abbas and Hamida; as they make their choices in life in order to escape from the dark and deep world of *Midaq Alley*. They fail, however, and are left destroyed and disillusioned.

This moral and social destruction has been connected with the impact of war and foreign influence upon the characters of *Midaq Alley* by A.M.M.Hezam (2020) in his article "Corruption, Poverty and Immorality: An Analytical study of *Midaq Alley*" in which he has discussed the realism depicted by Mahfouz in his novels by studying the impact of war, inflation and poverty on characters' choices. Characters of Hamida and Hussain have been studied to discuss the link Mahfouz has created between poverty and exploitation. Influence of the presence of Allied Forces has also been discussed by Hazem.

As the novel is set in a post-colonial Egypt, struggling with the effects of war and influence of Allied Forces, the characters undergo many tense psychological dilemmas. Scott (2019) in his book "Affective Disorders: Emotions in Colonial and Postcolonial Literature" has dedicated a chapter to discuss the emotions of the characters and how they express their anger against the adversaries.

Material and Methods

This research is qualitative in nature. Using Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Midaq Alley* as the primary text, unlike the previous studies on the novel which have overlooked the background war and its effects on the characters, it uses textual references to elaborate the central argument about how the characters' morals and choices have been greatly influenced and shaped by the on-going war.

Textual analysis

"Putting aside the very real human cost, war has also serious economic costs—damage to infrastructure, a decline in working population, inflation, shortages, uncertainty, and a rise in debt." (Pettinger, 2022) Though war is not dealt with in detail in the novel, we witness all these impacts of it prevailing in the lives of most of the characters; their motives and impulses drawn from the effects of war, directly or indirectly. They all suffer poverty, inflation, shortage of basic provisions and uncertainty. Though macabre in nature, war proves fruitful for some of them, for a short time may be. Even those who consider it a blessing are disillusioned in the end and have been destroyed by it.

Scott (2019) describes the economic condition of Egypt at the time Mahfouz wrote his novel in the chapter titled "Anger: Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*":

The socioeconomic influence of the war made the 1940s 'a decade of sharp contradiction' in Egypt. For some, the presence of over 140,000 Allied soldiers in Cairo led to greater employment opportunities, and many local businesses flourished. The average earnings of the young men employed by the British Army at Qantara and Tel el-Kebir

increased tenfold (Cooper 137), while for a privileged minority the war would prove even more lucrative: between 1940 and 1943, to cite one especially revealing statistic, the number of (sterling) millionaires in the country rose from fifty to four hundred. (Lacouture and Lacouture 99). But of course there was another side to this story; and in many ways, during the early forties; Cairo was becoming an increasingly divided city. While fortunes were being made in the financial district, in the poorer quarters they were storming the bakeries for bread (Vatikiotis 347). Between August hundred 1939 and September 1941, the cost of living index rose by 45 per cent, and during the same period the price of food showed an average increase of 94 per cent.(p.30)

This sudden rise in the cost of living was caused by the ongoing war and the presence of the Allies in Egypt "leading one Member of Parliament to accuse the Allied forces of 'starving the people'" (Scott, 2019, p.31).

M.M.Hezam in his article "Corruption, Poverty and Immorality: An Analytical study of Midaq Alley" (2020) discusses the realism depicted by Mahfouz in his novels and describes him as "a prophet of the future" as he mirrors the political and social life of his country. "He not only reflects reality in his work but also analyses it and foresees the direction in which the political and social wind will blow." (Hezam, 2020) This reflection of society struggling with a foreign culture and an ongoing war became the subject of Mahfouz's work. Hezam quotes Allen:

Many commentators on Mahfouz's career have suggested that it was precisely the dire impact of the war on contemporary Egyptian society during the early 1940s that led Mahfouz to abandon his plan" to finish his series of Ancient Egyptian novels (Allen 295). Mahfouz models his novels on the European novelists, borrowing "social realism from Zola, Dickens, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky who have on a large scale concentrated on the problems of their respective societies. He depicted the troubled lives of the suppressed Egyptians and pointed out to the readers the living conditions of people like a clerk, a worker, and a student who suffered exploitation, conditions of poverty and bad treatment. (p.464)

As we are introduced to the life inside the alley and its people, we become familiar with the sufferings they undergo due to a continuous oppression of poverty, corruption and moral decay, of which war is one of the reasons. Stephanie Hasenfus in her article "Destroy or Be Destroyed: Contending with Toxic Social Structures in Naguib Mahfouz's Midaq Alley" (2013) discusses the plight of the oppressed as they fall victim to "moral, economic and social stagnation":

The residents of Mahfouz's alley find their lives entangled and 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. (p.97)

Hasenfus points out the topography of the alley and its isolation from the outside world which "fosters a culture of pernicious and misogynistic traditions, ideas, and oppressive gender roles." Like Deeb (1983), she also concludes that "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." (Hasenfus,p.98)

It is no wonder then, that most of the characters want to escape from the “abyss” of the alley to pursue a life of comfort and bliss, but ironically, they fail and are disillusioned in the end. All those who want to escape, try to take refuge in war, directly or indirectly. We notice young characters like Hussain Kirsha, Hamida, Abbas, Hamida looking for a promising future through the economic opportunities offered by war. For instance, for fighting in the British troops, average earning would increase tenfold tempting the youth to recruit and fight as a mercenary soldier. Similarly, for privileged minority exploited the war-torn circumstances culminating in flourish of local businesses and black market during that time and the number of millionaires, ironically, rose from 50 to 400. In this category, Mahfouz’s Salim Alwan can be interpreted as the archetype of this group having made fortune in two World Wars.

Hussain Kirsha is the first character who is introduced as a soldier working with British Army, when he enters the alley in the evening in his uniform, he is stared after by café-goers with both admiration and envy due to the “satisfied, well-off look of all those who work with the British Army.” He brags about his wealth and standard of living which has increased due to his job as a soldier, being a clever, energetic and intelligent person, he grabs the opportunities which war offers and increases his wages from three to thirty piasters per day. Now he leads a comfortable life with new clothes, frequent restaurant visits with wine and company of women, all those luxuries which he could not dream of before joining the army. With the help of his cunning nature, he wins the confidence of his master and is allowed to join his “big trade of tobacco, cigarettes, chocolate, knives, socks and shoes.” (Midaq Alley, p.35) He is deceived by these fleeting profits which war offers and entraps his kind and innocent friend, Abbas into this bloody business, only to end up in the destruction of both. “Work for the British Army. It’s a gold mine that will never be exhausted. It’s exactly like the treasure of Hassan al Basari! This war isn’t the disaster that fools say it is. It’s a blessing! Those air raids are throwing gold down on us!” (Midaq Alley, p.36) He prompts his friend in these words and the very use of these words is quite ironical as Hussain is sent back home when the war enters its final months, penniless and totally disillusioned.

His friend, Abbas, meets the same fate but in a more disastrous way, prompted by his friend’s false glorification of a soldier’s life, this kind and innocent young man leaves his shop and joins army to be able to win the heart of his beloved. He has no motive to join Army except to increase his living standard and to live a happy life, unfortunately, this very motive turns out to be futile and results in his death at the hands of British mercenaries. The decision of Abbas to join army, its declaration to Hamida, “I will do all I can to save as much as possible. When the war is over – and people say that will be a long time-I will come back here and open a new barber shop in New Street and I will make a luxurious home for us together” (Midaq Alley, p.46), his leaving the alley with a heavy heart and teary eyes, his dreams and his merciless killing, all provide a devastating tale of a helpless human crushed under the burden of a decayed economy, influenced by corruption and war. As this poor soul has little or no options left to increase his position, he chooses the path of destruction to build his dreams, ironically.

After he returns to Alley to plan his wedding with Hamida, he discovers her elopement. Out of rage and revenge, he begins to look for her and the pimp, Faraj, but ends up meeting a gang of British soldiers entertained by Hamida in a bar. Here comes the first and the final clash between the two poles, the native and the foreigner, the subaltern and the oppressors:

His normal hesitancy and reserve disappeared as he felt all the sorrow, disappointment, and despair he had suffered in the past three days boil up within him to

burst forth in a mad frenzy. He noticed some empty beer glasses on the bar, took one, and, not really aware of what he was doing, hurled it at her with all the force of the anger and despair within him. He acted so quickly that no one, neither the soldiers nor any of the tavern employees, could stop him, and the glass struck her in the face. Blood poured in a stream from her nose, mouth, and chin, mixing with the creams and powders on her face and running down onto her neck and dress. Her screams mingled with the enraged shouts of the drunks in the tavern, and angry men fell on Abbas from all sides like wild animals. (p.280,81)

Scott (2019) observes the end of Abbas's life as the conclusion of the clash of two worlds, the world of Midaq Alley and the world beyond, powered by the Western soldiers:

This moment represents the fulfillment of all that has been threatened over the course of Midaq Alley and the refutation of all that has been promised. Although the Allied forces have always hovered on the periphery of the narrative, it is only at this late stage that they emerge into the light to destroy Abbas and erase the crucial distinction that has been established between the novel's foreground (the alley) and its background (everything else). At this point, too, the anger that has always threatened to spill over into violence finally does so, with a cataclysmic ferocity that leaves Abbas 'quite defenseless'. (p.52)

His beloved, Hamida, on the other hand, proves herself as an opportunist who fulfills her ambitions and beastly desires of wealth, freedom and power by throwing herself into the pit of prostitution for British soldiers. For a transient period of time, she indirectly gains material benefits from war, only to be left crushed and crumbled eventually, akin to Hussain and Abbas. Living a life of misery and destitute, where she can't even have good clothes or a decent cloak, she considers herself shackled in the chains of poverty and breaks free as soon as she finds an outlet. Here again we witness a human suffering in the form of scarce resources, poverty and unfulfilled dreams resulting in total devastation of humanity, all due to prevailing war. Hasenfus(2018) observes her transformation as she transits from Hamida to "Titi":

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. (p.105)

As she watches her figure in the mirror of her luxurious room in Sharif Pasha Street, she encounters a woman adorned with jewels, fine clothes and make-up. This woman has sold herself to devil in order to earn pounds from Allied soldiers, this is her downfall and we may conclude that apart from her moral weakness and frailty of character, war is responsible for her poor and unsatisfied condition also, which led her to meet this pitiable fate: 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. (p.107)

Apart from these victims of war, there are few characters presented as beneficiaries of it. One of them is Salim Alwan, the richest man of the Alley, who owns a promising perfume company, "the war has doubled its activities and profits. The wartime situation convinced Salim Alwan of the wisdom of trading in commodities which previously had not interested him-for example, tea. Thus he had become active in the black market and profited heavily from it." (Midaq Alley, p.60) As with many businessmen of Egypt during war, his profits doubled. "This second war had so far been more lucrative for his business and now he was very prosperous." (Midaq Alley, pg.62) Despite his material gains and wealth, he has no concern for the poor around him, he never shows generosity towards them nor does he consider them any equal. His increasing wealth and decreasing health make him an ill-tempered, greedy and selfish beast, who never gains any pleasure from his money collected with such corruption and evil means. Although war provides him material gains, his spirits are empty and he ends up as a hollow man, sans contentment and gratification.

There are other characters of society like factory girls whom Hamida envies for their "freedom and obvious prosperity". "They were girls from the Darasa district, who, taking advantage of wartime employment opportunities, ignored custom and tradition and now worked in public places just like the Jewish women. They had gone into factory work exhausted, emaciated, and destitute. Soon remarkable changes were noticeable: their once undernourished bodies filled out and seemed to radiate a healthy pride and vitality. They imitated the Jewish girls by paying attention to their appearance and in keeping slim. Some even used unaccustomed language and did not hesitate to walk arm in arm and stroll about the streets of illicit love. They exuded an air of boldness and secret knowledge (Midaq Alley, p.40-41)."

This air of boldness and shameless confidence has also been exhibited by the devilish pimp, Faraj, who earns in pounds as he sells flesh to British soldiers. For him, the air-raids "shower gold" while he gets rich through his filthy business of seducing and importing girls to the British soldiers. With his shameless smile and sharp eyes, he becomes an embodiment of moral degeneration, displaying a horrifying effect of war on individuals.

Conclusion

The characters of Midaq Alley behave in certain ways because they face adverse economic conditions like poverty and inflation in a backdrop of war. These conditions also affect their morality, their belief and value system as they fight hard to win a battle of life. "Naguib Mahfouz's Midaq Alley 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 alley find their lives entangled and horribly routine-their existence little more than sin, vice and rumor." (Hasenfus, 2013) Hussain Kirsha, who is directly affected by war, shows no moral responsibilities, he indulges in unfair business, develops habit of drinking and wasting money. Salim Alwan becomes an embodiment of corruption and greed, Hamida considers her condition similar to hell, and tries to escape from it by falling into the trap of a devil. She loses all her moral values and feels no guilty or humiliation over her acts. Ibrahim Faraj represents the vilest of all sins, he procures girls to please British soldiers and earns pounds, he too, has no shame or sense of indignity as he shockingly entraps and prepares girls into this filthy business.

With the English soldiers came the British culture and left irreversible impact on the local culture. Poetry recitation/ traditional storytelling in Egypt lost ground to the introduction of Radio attracting the natives for its unique features still unknown to them. Even

it became a customer demand forcing the businessman like the café owner Kirsha to install one. The transformation of local taste and redundancy of the traditional art of storytelling is summed up in his words, "People today don't want a poet. They keep asking me for a radio and there's one over there being installed now." Now the Radio broadcasting reached every home directly unlike clubs, and cinemas and it had enormous impact on moral character of Egyptian society. '... such songs destroyed Egyptian social structure and personal character because they corrupted the virtues of men and women. In his view, these songs reflected popular taste (*al-dhawq al-baladi*) and hence lacked any trace of intellectual, ethical, and social education. An educated listener, therefore, could not find anything in such music that met his higher standards and refined emotions.' (Musallam, 2020, p. 38)

This moral deterioration is an outcome of a poverty stricken, corrupt society where individuals fall victim to greed, beggary, gossip, rumor and deception. Someone declares in the café in first chapter. "If we have been suffering terrors of blackouts and air raids for five years it's only due to our own wickedness!" (Midaq Alley, p.1) We may conclude that these poor souls are paying the price of being the part of a larger drama, called 'war', and spelled as w-a-r!

References

Maḥfūz, N. (1989). *Midaq Alley*. N.P

Hezam, A. M. M. (2020). Corruption, Poverty and Immorality: An Analytical Study of New Cairo and Midaq Alley. *مجلة العلوم التربوية و الدراسات الإنسانية*, 5(12), 461-475. <https://doi.org/10.55074/hesj.v5i12.179>

Allen, R. M. A. (1982). *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*. Syracuse University Press

Deeb, M. (1983). Najib Mahfuz's midaq alley:a socio-cultural analysis. *Bulletin*, 10(2), 121-130

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, Pp. 95-108.

Pettinger, T. (2022, March 8). Economic impact of war. *Economics Help*. <https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/2180/economics/economic-impact-of-war>

Scott, B. (2019). Anger: Naguib Mahfouz's Midaq Alley. In *Affective Disorders: Emotion in Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (pp. 31-54). Liverpool University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvt6rj7f.5>

Moussa-Mahmoud, F. (1989). Depth of Vision: The Fiction of Naguib Mahfouz. *Third World Quarterly*, 11(2), 154-166

Musallam, A. A. (2020). The Impact of World War II On Egyptian Society and On Sayyid Qutb, 1939-1945. *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, 44(1),32-45.