

‘midaq alley’ and  
‘season of migration  
to the north’ essay



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In this essay I plan to argue that the social position of women is clearly shown to be subordinate in 'Midaq Alley' and 'Season of Migration to the North'. I will firstly examine how and why men pursue women in the two books. I shall also look at women's status and rights in society. I shall then go on to look at marriage, as well as violence between men and women both inside and outside of marriage. In Midaq Alley, Salim Alwan pursues Hamida. However, he does not do this out of any sort of love but because he fears that his 'youth and virility' are vanishing, and wishes to prove to himself that he is still virile. He wishes to do so because his wife, who has always disapproved of his special food, is increasingly reluctant to indulge him in the active sex-life he wants. He accuses her 'of frigidity and of being sexually exhausted'. However, Salim Alwan shows no sympathy for her 'obvious weakness' and does not 'alter his passionate habits'. This demonstrates how the husband is the dominant one in a traditional marriage within the Egyptian culture, and that the wife is required to meet his needs - whatsoever she feels about them. He considers his wife's complaining as 'rebelliousness' - showing that he considers himself to be the 'master' in their relationship - and decides to obtain himself a new wife. This proposed wife is Hamida, and he believes that marrying a young wife will prove his virility and allow him to fulfil his needs. In 'Season of Migration to the North', Mustafa's widow, Hosna Bint Mahmoud, is forced into marrying Wad Rayyes, an elderly man, against her will.

Although many of the villagers advise Wad Rayyes not to marry Hosna Bint Mahmoud, everyone in the village, apart from the narrator, supports him in his right to do so if he so wishes. Wad Rayyes, like Salim Alwan, wishes to

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marry Hosna Bint Mahmoud in order to prove his own youth and virility.

Mahmoud justifies this in saying that: ' women belong to men, and a man's a man, even if he's decrepit'. This demonstrates how, in Sudanese culture, men's rights supersede those of women. The village supports Wad Rayyes' right to marry her, against her will, even though they themselves believe it to be an error in his judgement. Despite Hosna Bint Mahmoud's grievances, she remains reticent and submissive, causing very little commotion, until her tragic death at the end. This shows how the cultural expectation of the women not to complain has been ingrained in Hosna Bint Mahmoud so very deeply as she has been brought up that she cannot go against this until her final violent act. In Midaq Alley, Hamida requests that Ibrahim Faraj marry her.

Ibrahim Faraj treats marriage like ancient history, asking of her whether she learnt of the term from the Qur'an or at school and tells her that he has forgotten the term. Hamida takes in his views and decides that actually he is right because she doesn't want to be tied down, confined to the house and tied to the ' exhausting duties of wife, housekeeper and mother'. Not only do these sound as though she is repeating his excuses back to herself, but they also demonstrate that in this society she would be expected to fulfil the exhausting duties of a wife, housekeeper and mother. The only Sudanese woman (other than Hosna Bint Mahmoud) to whom much attention is paid in the novel is Bint Majzoub. In the village's social hierarchy, she is accorded same the status and respect of the men. Her independence is accepted in the novel and is treated as near-equal by the men. However, to achieve this

she has had to take on many 'masculine' attributes. She laughs with the men in her 'manly voice, coarsened by too much smoking'.

In order to be accepted, she has had to sacrifice much of her femininity: 'she used to smoke, drink and swear on oath of divorce like a man'. In her adopted masculinity, Bint Majzoub is completely unable to empathise with Hosna Bint Mahmoud whatsoever. Bint Majzoub masculinity contrasts with that of the women in Midaq Alley, where no women visit the *cafi*<sup>1/2</sup> where the men meet. In Midaq Alley, many of the men look upon their wives more as possessions than people. For example, Kirsha 'astonished at her [his wife's] attempts to stand in his way without justification' when his wife complains about his behaviour. He feels that it is 'her duty to obey and be satisfied', and this shows how the society they live expects the wife to obey the husband without question or complaint. Moreover, had he wanted to dispense with her, 'there would have been nothing to prevent him'. However, he does not do so because 'the fact was that she fulfilled a need'.

The way in which Kirsha 'objectifies' his wife, looking upon her as belonging to him and as someone inferior without any important emotions or needs other than the material (such as food, water, a home and so on) is typical of the society he lives in. The placement of power in the relationship between Mustafa and Jean Morris, a woman from a different culture, is strange compared to where it lies in other relationships between men and women in the rest of 'Season of Migration to the North'. Mustafa pursues Jean Morris, who was the one woman who rejected him. He becomes obsessed with her and is filled with a selfish desire. Although he sees himself as the predator, using words such as 'hunting' and using metaphors

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involving bows and arrows such as 'my arrow missed' when he fails to win her over, she is clearly the one in power and is enticing him on. Such is her power over him that she gets him to destroy his most precious possessions. However, the balance of power switches over when he kills her because her eyes 'follow the blade', wanting him to kill her, until he finally plunges it into her chest. Furthermore, he does not then kill himself, as she asked.

The dominance of men is displayed in Midaq Alley when Radwan Hussainy, the holy man, beats his wife. Hussainy is a very respectable and religious man, to whom many others in the alley come for advice. The fact that this universally respected man beats his wife shows that this is accepted within society. Although this role is reversed with Husniya, the bakeress, and Jaada, her husband, the fact that Husniya beats her husband is clearly meant to be comical. When beaten, Jaada 'howled wildly and swung his fists in the air'. This is a very vivid and funny image, especially with the words 'howled wildly' which is very animalistic, and along with the fact that she beats him with her slippers, mundane household objects, the reversal of the stereotype is clearly comical. By doing this, Naguib Mahfouz stops us from taking this seriously. Furthermore, the acceptance of the practice of beating one's wife is also shown when Kirsha, having publicly argued with his wife, blames himself for not having 'beaten her enough'.

This indicates that in this society, the man is responsible for his wife's actions and discipline, thus showing that women are very inferior in society. Sexual relationships between men and women are often portrayed very violently in 'Season of Migration to the North'. There are two key examples of this: first when Hosna Bint Mahmoud kills Wad Rayyes and second when <https://assignbuster.com/midaq-alley-and-season-of-migration-to-the-north-essay/>

Jean Morris is killed by Mustafa. The first example I described very graphically and visually: ' blood covered the mat and the bed and flowed in rivulets across the floor of the room'. The detail of this description shocks the reader, especially as the book has been philosophical and quite peaceful up to this point. Hosna Bint Mahmoud Bint Mahmoud's body was covered in bites and scratches, symbolising the violence of the relationship and how the man ' owns' the woman and can do as he wishes with her. Hosna Bint Mahmoud stabbed Wad Rayyes in the groin multiple times, as a woman's purpose in marriage in this culture is to produce children and do what the man wants. Furthermore, Wad Rayyes married her as an attempt to prove his own virility.

Mustafa's killing of Jean Morris is also very graphic and shocking, and sex is mingled with murder. The violence of their relationship is developed with verbs such as ' crushing' and ' gushing' which are both dynamic and violent. In this event, sex is entangled with murder: Jean Morris opens ' her thighs wider' both as an invitation to him to have sex with her and also as a request to him to kill her. In both novels, men look upon women as inferior and subordinate. The purpose of the woman is generally seen to be to marry; please their husband and fulfil his sexual needs; have children and do the housework. Violence between the man and woman, where the man beats her, is seen as typical but not the other way round. Furthermore, the only way a woman can gain any respect from the men is to sacrifice their femininity and adopt more masculine attributes. Women are often viewed as something to be hunted or pursued and once captured they become the man's possession, to do with as he pleases.

In both ' Midaq Alley' and ' Season of Migration to the North', women have little or no social status and have very few rights and privileges in their culture. Mustafa even manages to extend this to the western women he meets in England, luring them into his trap.