

Women and their downfall: feminism in midaq alley



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Naguib Mahfouz's novel, *Midaq Alley*, is a story about a group of people living in an alley in Egypt in the 1940's. Already, from that description, the reader can see that the women of this tale have a significant disadvantage in equality. Surprisingly enough, the women prove to be very strong, independent, and powerful, despite the novel's setting and time. But, is that altogether true? There are many instances where the women rise above and take things for themselves when they want it. They beat their husbands, call the men out on their sins, swindle their way toward a higher rank, and try to escape the reality of their alley life, yet, no matter their dominance, they are always defeated or put back in their place by the male characters of the book. *Midaq Alley* is a representation of feminism in the 1940's, signifying that even in a male-led society in Africa, women can and will do what it takes to be equal, or, in a sense, be the dominant sex. Women have powerful attributes that allow them to do this, but, in the end, their powers turn out to be their own downfall, because it is still a male-led society.

Midaq Alley entails the stories of many people living in the alley, but, arguably, the main focus is on the character of Hamida, an independent and ambitious young woman living with her foster mother. She is described as a very pretty girl with "black, beautiful eyes, the pupils and whites of which contrasted in a most striking and attractive way." (Mahfouz 14). Yet, "...she could take on an appearance of strength and determination which was most unfeminine." (Mahfouz 14). It is very evident that the narration of Hamida's beauty is written from a male perspective, drawing out the way Hamida uses or, perhaps to state it more clearly, does not use her femininity to prove her feminist way. In his article, "Narrating the marginalized Oriental female:

silencing the colonized Subaltern,” Saddik Gohar states that “ Even in episodes in which [Hamida] was given focus, the readers see her through the spectacles of the male imperial narrator embodying the voice of the author or via the eyes of the male characters in the novel” (Gohar 52). Already we can see how Hamida’s sexually pleasing attributes sway the narrator and the male character’s even before she begins her journey or proves the descriptions we see of her. As an established beautiful and strong woman in this alley, Hamida’s story is revealed. She has a difficult time finding a husband that suits her independent ways and desire for wealth above love and affection. She longs to marry for riches, and she hates the idea of the domestic life of raising children. “...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” (Mahfouz 22). She wants to see the world, but the only way she can think of following her dreams is to marry a rich man. In this era and location, that truly is her only escape. She wishes she had been educated as a young child like the Jewish women in her town, but, “ her age and ignorance had deprived her of their opportunities” (Mahfouz 22). According to Sheridene Barbara Oersen, in her thesis essay from the University of the Western Cape, the feminist movement of western culture was just spreading its wings toward the East, announcing that women are capable of receiving a proper education. It soon became policy, but in Oersen’s words, “ government policy and societal beliefs are seldom harmonious and most families did not see the necessity of having their daughters educated.

The crucial aspect of raising a girl was to ensure that she would make a good wife, and because Hamida is from the poorest class of society, she has not been afforded the opportunity of a basic education" (Oersen 62). Because of Hamida's independence and unfeminine-like attitude, she soon realizes that she can take her life into her own hands. When she is discussing marriage with her mother, she says, " I am not the one who is chasing marriage, but marriage is chasing me. I will give it a good run, too!" (Mahfouz 15). This indicates that she feels trapped in a situation that she wants to get out of. She feels as if she is above the alley and the people that live there. She first reluctantly accepts a proposal from Abbas, the barber, after he promises to get a job outside the alley, but later in the book, she finds other means of escaping her alley prison. She, and other women in the book, escape their plights by using their cunning deception and sexual charm. Hamida, when starting her love affair with Abbas, finds ways to manipulate the man so she can get what she desires. She deceives the one that actually loves her, because she knows he won't give her the wealth and adventure she longs for. She forces him into leaving the place he enjoys living in and to becoming a man he wasn't meant to be. Stephanie Hasenfus puts it quite simply in her article, " Destroy or Be Destroyed: Contending with Toxic Social Structures in Naguib Mahfouz's Midaq Alley." She states, "[Hamida] transforms marriage into a tactical endeavor from which she hopes to maximize potential luxury in her life" (Hasenfus 99). Hamida does this by purposefully displaying her beauty and comparing herself to other women. According to the text: " She was well aware of her attire; a faded cotton dress, an old cloak and shoes with timeworn soles. Nevertheless, she draped her cloak in such a way that it emphasized her ample hips and her full and rounded breasts. The cloak

revealed her trim ankles, on which she wore a bangle; it also exposed her black hair and attractive bronze face” (Mahfouz 21-22). And, “ She walked along with her companions, proud in the knowledge of her beauty, impregnable in the armor of her sharp tongue, and pleased that the eyes of passersby settled on her more than on the others” (Mahfouz 23). Hamida is not only a beautiful girl with an unfeminine attitude, but she also knows how to attract men with these attributes. Hasenfus powerfully acknowledges this by saying, “ 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” (Hasenfus 99). Along with sexual charm, women have other ways of proving themselves superior to men in the novel.

Beauty is a strong asset used to dominate, but being able to tactfully use it as a ruse for the ultimate goal requires cunning and deceptive strength. In Hamida’s story, we already know that she is independent, strong, and deceptive with one goal in mind: to marry a man outside of the alley that has riches beyond compare. Hasenfus explains while describing Hamida’s goals and modernity of her ways that “ in this forward-thinking fashion, she transforms marriage into a tactical endeavor from which she hopes to maximize potential luxury in her life” (Hasenfus 99). It is no mystery how Hamida cunningly deceives the men around her. Her beauty is used in a clever display of her dominance. Abbas is determined to marry her, and, because of her desire for riches, he feels obligated to leave the alley to work for the British Army though he is quite content with how things are. In the

novel, Hamida is only interested in his proposed idea of working in the war to gain more money, and “ if he were successful he could certainly provide some of the things she craved. A disposition like hers, no matter how rebellious and unmanageable, could be pacified and tamed with money” (Mahfouz 46). Hamida is a prime example of a woman using deception to get what she wants, but she is not the only woman in the alley. Yet another woman uses tact to reach her goal, despite her increasing age. Miss Afify and Umm Hamida trick a younger man into marrying Miss Afify by buying her gold teeth and giving the man a younger picture of herself.

Miss Afify is an aging widow that recently decided to marry once again. The text does not specify exactly why she has decided this, but Oersen, has an astounding way of looking at it. She says, “ It appears that over the years, Mrs Saniyya Afify has found herself increasingly isolated from society. Despite her wealth, she has no social status because she is an unmarried woman.” (Oersen 57). This makes a lot of sense when looking at women at the time. Women in that time and place could be very rich and prosperous, but without being married, they lack the title of a prosperous individual. A title comes with a man, so, to have a high place in society, a woman must be married. Sadly, Oersen relays that, “ Through the character of Mrs Afify, it can be assumed that even wealth and the many political changes in favour of women are not enough to crush traditional societal mores” (Oersen 58). Saniyya Afify achieves this marriage a comical and unconventional way, however. Because she lacks her youthful beauty, she and Umm Hamida come up with a plan to deceive the match Umm Hamida found for her. The two begin by discussing the man and his job and wealth. Then Umm Hamida

says that he wanted a picture of Miss Afify, to which this dialogue takes place: The widow fidgeted and her face blushed as she said, “ Why, I haven’t had my picture taken in a long time.” “ Don’t you have an old photo?” She nodded toward a picture on the bookcase in the middle of the room. Umm Hamida leaned over and examined it carefully. The photo must have been more than six years old, taken at a time when Mrs. Afify still had some fullness and life in her. She looked at the picture then back at its subject. “ A very good likeness. Why, it might have been taken only yesterday.” “ May God reward you generously,” sighed Mrs. Afify. Umm Hamida put the photograph, with its frame, into her pocket and lit the cigarette offered her (Mahfouz 64). Not only are they giving the man an old photo of Miss Afify, but Umm Hamida also tells him that she is in her 40’s and not the late 50’s age she is. Along with this deception, Mrs. Afify buys a set of golden teeth to cover the fact that her teeth have been rotting and falling out with her age.

For her part, Hamida not only deceives Abbas in the beginning, cunningly sending him off to make riches for herself, but also deceives him later after she becomes a prostitute. Gohar says that “ when she encountered Abbas in part thirty-two, she cunningly moved him against Farag in order to get rid of both males according to critical allegations” (Gohar 56). Hamida wishes to get out of her situation, yet, she is disgusted by the thought of going back to the alley and living with Abbas for the rest of her life. Her deceptive strength takes a hold of her, and she, once again, brings Abbas to doing something he would never do. Hussain tries to warn Abbas, and being like a brother to Hamida, he can see through her beauty and deception. Oersen says, Hussain’s reaction is harsh but completely in line with traditional social

values.... Abbas feels that the man should be punished and although Hussain agrees, his absolute disgust with Hamida is expressed as follows: ‘ Why didn’t you murder her? If I were in your position, I wouldn’t have hesitated a minute. I’d have throttled her on the spot and then butchered her lover and disappeared...That’s what you should have done, you fool! [Mahfouz, 1992: 279]’” (Oersen 59). Hamida’s deception can only go so far, and, though it works on Abbas, Hussain is immune to it. There is another man that is immune to Hamida’s deceptive ways, and he leads us into the last section, revealing how although women in the novel try to be the dominant sex, they ultimately fail due to societal customs and beliefs. This man is Ibrahim Farah. Hamida is the most prominent key to seeing the strength the women of this culture possess. She represents Egypt as a whole, and allows Farah to take advantage of her just to prove how strong she is. In allowing the man to dominate her every moment, she feels she is getting the upper hand and being the dominant one in the relationship. She, like many women, uses her body and sexual charm to lord over men, and, in return, she soon realizes her mistake.

To get on top in the society that the novel depicts, women must sacrifice something. This could include freedom, virginity, innocence, happiness, morality, or dignity. Hamida loses her virginity, morality, and innocence when she runs off with Ibrahim, though she feels she is dominant in the situation. She wants love from him, but all she gets is his love for the money she is making him. She tries to tie him down, but he won’t have it, and, in return, she falls into his trap. Gohar states that Hamida believed [Farah] fell in love with her like others and was intoxicated by his warm words: ‘ This is

not your quarter, nor are these people relatives of yours. You are completely different. You do not belong here at all. How can you live among these people? Who are they compared to you? You are a princess in a shabby cloak' (143) (Gohar 55). Sadly, Hamida is simply receiving what she dished out to Abbas. Farah woos her with his kind words, promises, and wealth, bringing her to her ultimate downfall. No matter what the women of the novel do, however, the social order of the time and place simply can not allow a woman to dominate. It was clear from the beginning that Hamida would not get her way, and if she did, she would lose part of herself, but why was this so evident? Bede Scott, in his article, "'A Raging Sirocco': Structures of Dysphoric Feeling in Midaq Alley," sheds some light on the problem. He says: " The intervention of colonial modernity in the novel radically destabilizes the old social order, yet without implementing a new order that can be easily comprehended by the characters or assimilated into their lives. And because they are unable to understand fully the processes of transformation they are undergoing, because these processes are not entirely visible to their consciousness, many of the characters internalize a vague sense of social crisis which eventually resurfaces in the form of displaced anger" (Scott 33). Because this time in Egypt is a huge moment in the transition between the old ways and the new ways, the people of Midaq Alley are agitated. They long for the new, but cannot let go of the old. The women face this in a way the men do not realize. They see progress and realize that this is their time to show their true colors, yet, because the men are still tied to old cultural traditions, the women get no further in their pursuit of equality.

Women, specifically Hamida, in the novel *Midaq Alley*, are faced with a growing sense of the outside world, and a newfound means to reach their goals and find dominance in a relationship with a man. No matter the way they try, however, society can not allow them to reach these heights, and places them back down in a domestic situation, cooking and cleaning and raising children just as they have always done. Women have strong attributes that allows them to find ways around these societal norms, but, in the end, a valuable part of a woman can be lost when they try such feats.

Works Cited

Gohar, Saddik. " Narrating the marginalized Oriental female: silencing the colonized subaltern." *Acta Neophilologica*, vol. 48, no. 1-2, 2015, pp. 49–66., doi: 10. 4312/an. 48. 1- 2. 49-66. Hasenpus, Stephanie. " 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, no. 1, 1 Jan. 2015, pp. 95–108. The United States Military Academy, West Point, New York. Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol15/iss1/7> Maḥfūz, Najīb. *Midaq Alley*. Translated by Trevor Li Gassick, The American University in Cairo Press, 1966. Oersen, Sheridene Barbara. " The representation of women in four of Naguib Mahfouz's realist novels: *Palace walk*, *Palace of desire*, *Sugar street* and *Midaq alley*." The University of the Western Cape, The University of the Western Cape, 2006. Scott, Bede. "' A Raging Sirocco': Structures of Dysphoric Feeling in *Midaq Alley*." *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. 42, no. 1, Jan. 2011, pp. 29–48., doi: 10. 1163/157006411x575792.