

The representation of women in four of Naguib Mahfouz's realist novels: Palace Walk, Palace of Desire, Sugar Street and Midaq Alley

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The representation of women in four of Naguib Mahfouz's realist novels: Palace Walk, Palace of Desire, Sugar Street and Midaq Alley

The following mini dissertation involves the various discourses around Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz's representation of women in four of his most well-known novels, which were originally written in Arabic. At the one extreme, he is described as a feminist writer who takes up an aggressive anti-patriarchal stance, delivering a multi-faceted critique on Egyptian society. However, dissenters of this view are aggressive in their assertions that not only has Mahfouz failed to portray women in a more positive light than his predecessors, but he is accused of the perpetuation of patriarchy in his writing. Egyptian feminist writer, Nawal El Saadawi, is particularly critical of literature produced by men in the Arab world. She believes that even the most well intentioned discourses are superficial in their analysis of the tragedy of the Egyptian woman. Anshuman Mondal is of a similar opinion, although he refers specifically to the Cairo Trilogy in an essay which is concerned with how patriarchy is in fact perpetuated in the three novels.

This dissertation explores these conflicting views. Mahfouz's personal milieu, as well as the broader social context in which he finds himself, is given careful consideration. Egyptian feminism and its impact on political and social reform with regards to women is one of the most important facets of this thesis.

It is also considered whether the genre in which the four novels have been written has a significant influence on the manner in which Mahfouz has represented his female characters.



CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

At the core of this thesis is a dilemma. Naguib Mahfouz discovers that representing the predicament of the oppressed creates a plethora of irresolvable issues, not only for the authenticity of social representation, but also for himself as an author. For the purpose of this dissertation, the oppressed are Egyptian women from all sectors of society. Mahfouz, who has always been considered a liberal, wrote realist novels during an era of intense social upheaval in Egypt, and the central question is whether his realism does justice to the cause of Egyptian women. Realism can of course mean many things. It is necessary to ask, in the course of this thesis, whether his mode of writing implies an ideological commitment to social change (as is expected when we speak of 'social realism'), whether it is largely a stylistic choice in line with the distinct influence of nineteenth-century French realism in Egyptian culture, whether it means an intention to characterise the 'typical' situation of Cairene family life (with all the problematic implications of the meaning of the 'typical'), or whether for Mahfouz realism implies the fatalistic narratives of social and cultural determinism (and indeed whether, given the conservative censorship that still occurs in Egypt, his options as an author have been determined by social coercion).

Whatever interpretation might be put on Mahfouz's 'realism', it is assumed that this mode of writing is loosely linked to modernity and modernisation.

Modernisation in turn, in Egypt as in so many of the emerging states of the first half of the twentieth century, was an aspect of the nationalism that asserted itself as the antithesis of European imperialism. Along with political changes, the modernisation of Egyptian society seemed inevitable. In Egypt, modernisation carried with it particular tensions regarding secularisation, the social traditions of Arabic Islam, and (bound up with these) the situation of women in the Arab world. G.H. Talhami writes as follows, concerning this set of connections:

Emancipation of women was seen as a necessary safeguard against colonial accusations of barbarism. Reformers like Qassem Amin, Abduh, Afghani and Khedive Isma'il saw the emancipation of women as an aspect of necessary modernisation if the imperialists' claims of barbarism and retardation as a justification for colonial control were to be refuted.

Talhami

(1996: 23-24)

Secularisation, within the moral and spiritual universe of the Islamic world, has profound implications for the identity and role of women in society. Yet, in the novels selected for this study (novels that have been translated into English and which are generally considered to be Mahfouz's most noted work), women are represented in terms which differ little from those used by nineteenth-century commentators on Egyptian society. Not only are they represented in these terms, but the narrative point of view does little to offer any resistance to the sense that these terms are normative and naturalised within Cairene society. In some

respects it might be argued that Mahfouz's representations reinforce the very kind of biased 'orientalism' that Said sought to isolate as a sustained western discursive construction regarding the 'east'. Edward Lane's classic The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians (1836) describes in well-informed detail the domestic relations, attitudes and practices regarding marriage, and the practices of relationships between menfolk and female mistresses, in ways that still appear to apply to the mid-twentieth-century world of Mahfouz's Cairo.

It may be argued that Mahfouz sought to be a realist in the literary lineage of French realism (which had obvious major influences on the development of the novel in the Arabic world), and that, in consequence, he had little option in terms of narrative strategy other than to offer a fictional verisimilitude of his undoubtedly patriarchal society. On the other hand, the extra-literary question of coercion is also certainly present. Within the cultural pressures and tensions of the Arabic literary world, taking into account his Arabic readership and the continued vigorous censorship of cultural expression in twentieth-century Egypt, it may be argued that he had little choice than to present his female characters in the most archaic of societal roles. Amina, a central female character in the three novels of the Cairo Trilogy, is described by her stepson as follows:

A woman. Yes, she's nothing but a woman. Every woman is a filthy curse. A woman doesn't know what virtue is, unless she's denied all opportunity for adultery. Even my stepmother, who's a fine woman- God only knows what she would be like if it weren't for my father. [Mahfouz, 2001:88]

The study begins with a survey of the milieu in which Mahfouz produced these novels, taking into account questions of literary genre, the reception of the novels by the West, and the role of censorship. The rise of Egyptian feminist movements is sketched and leading Arabic feminist Nawal El Saadawi is cited extensively. A clear distinction is drawn between Western concepts of feminism and the feminist movement in a developing country such as Egypt:

In underdeveloped countries, liberation from foreign domination often still remains the crucial issue and influences the content and forms of struggle in other areas including that of women's status and role in society. [Saadawi, 1989: vii]



The study proceeds with a reading of the representation of leading female characters in the selected novels, in comparison with the representation of their male counterparts. The study will seek to describe the role played by point of view in the literary construction of a moral universe in the novels, acknowledging that this is largely determined by the dominance of the male characters. Anshuman Mondal is cited as a critic who finds that through this dominance Mahfouz, despite his evident liberalism, ends up replicating a “neo-patriarchal” moral universe. It is argued, though, that if we read Mahfouz’s work in the context of the radical Arabic feminist Nawal el-Sadaawi, the fictional universe of these

novels does indeed direct the reader to an implicit sense of fictional critique of gender relations.

Nationalism, modernization, and the realist novel

Naguib Mahfouz is, without a doubt, the most well-known and celebrated Arab writer in the Western world. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, an accolade which has fuelled the interest of Western scholars in his vast repertoire of writing. Not only is Mahfouz a prolific writer, but he played a pivotal role in the development and refinement of the Arabic literary novel.

There was no legacy of the novel (in Arabic) that I could depend on...I arrived on a scene that was nearly empty. It was incumbent on me to discover things and to lay the ground by myself. Naguib Mahfouz [El-Enany, 1993: 21]

When Naguib Mahfouz endeavored upon novel writing in the nineteen forties, it was a relatively new genre, not only in Egypt, but the Arabic speaking world in general. This is not to say that he was one of the pioneers of the genre, but as he developed as a writer, he added quality to quantity.

There were several fictional works of social criticism and political protest written just after the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, as well as books that explored the so-called “backwardness” of Egyptian society and possible reasons

for the situation (all apparently written by Egyptians). The beginning of the twentieth century was a period during which Egyptian writers were encouraged to expand on their repertoire of mainly romance novels and to produce literature that reflected the realities of Egyptian life, as people sought to find a unique national identity for themselves. [Jad, 1983]

The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century saw a great number of Western dramas, novels and romances translated into Arabic and there is little doubt that Arab novelists, including Mahfouz, were introduced to modern genres through this medium. Many Arab novelists deny the influence of the West, but novelist Yahya Haqqi asserts that “there is no harm in admitting that the modern story came to us from the West, and that those who laid down its foundation were persons influenced by European literature, particularly French literature.” [Moosa, 1983: 68] With the large influx of French novels into Egypt, Mahfouz has acknowledged the influence of literary giants such as Gustave Flaubert, Honore de Balzac and Emile Zola. I will further discuss the impact French realism made on Mahfouz’s writing under the subtitle of “genre”.

The changing political climate in Egypt may be seen in relation to nationalist revival movements that occurred in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century, movements that were not only political but had a profound influence on the arts. People in many European countries became increasingly aware of their national identity due to a renewed interest in the past and national traditions.

These changes were closely related to political turmoil such as the collapse of foreign domination. Many Russian and European music composers used folksong in their compositions, while writers were encouraged to reflect their patriotism in literature. [Sadie et al, 1991]

It was so, then, at the beginning of the twentieth century, that Egypt began to breed a culture of nationalism to counteract the occupation of the British. The Umma Party, the ruling Egyptian faction at the time, was concerned with the cultivation of “a strong sense of Egyptian self-identity” and the “achievement of Egyptian autonomy”. [Jad, 1983: 10]

Predecessors of Mahfouz include Tawfiq al-Hakim, Isa Ubaid, Taha Husain and Haikal. In Form and Technique in the Egyptian Novel 1912-1971, author Ali B. Jad describes Haikal's Zainab as having “heralded the arrival of the novel and its dignity as a form of art.” [Jad, 1983: 107] Mahfouz has given high praise for Taha Husain's On Pre-Islamic Poetry, which he cites as having had the greatest influence on his intellectual development as it is concerned with reason surpassing the boundaries of tradition. [ElEnany, 1993]

Before Mahfouz decided that he would try his hand at writing, he was a student of philosophy and several of his papers were published in journals. The ideas of the French philosopher Henri Bergson made a deep impression upon Mahfouz and there is a marked influence of several of these ideas in his writing. These include the duality of body and spirit, the concept of “two moralities”- one based

on intelligence and the other on “intuition”, as well as the French philosopher’s idea of time as a continuum, in an eternal state of flux.

Although pre-World War II novel writing in Egypt has been described as “amateurish”, with the subject matter (during the first part of the twentieth century) being of a generally romantic nature, Mahfouz was not the founding father of the genre and the scene upon which he arrived might not have been quite as barren as his comments may suggest.

Genre

Critics have divided Mahfouz’s work into three chronological phases, in terms of style and content: historical/romantic, realistic/naturalistic, and modernistic or experimental. Midaq Alley (first published in Arabic in 1947) and the three novels of the Cairo Trilogy (Palace Walk was first published in Arabic in 1956, followed by its siblings in 1957), which shall be dealt with in this mini-dissertation, are regarded as part of the domain of realism. [El-Enany, 1993]. Although realism is a much debated critical term and has acquired a rather broad explication in literature, it is “fundamentally...the portrayal of life with fidelity. It is thus not concerned with idealization, with rendering things beautiful when they are not, or in any way presenting them in any guise as they are not...”. [Cuddon, 1999: 729]

This genre was perceived as significant in heeding the call (by the Umma Party)

of the portrayal of Egyptian life without any elements of the quixotic. Mahfouz has acknowledged the influence of French realists such as Balzac, Zola and Flaubert, but he was also influenced by James Joyce's use of internal monologue, surrealism and the theatre of the absurd. [El-Enany, 1993]

Gustave Flaubert, whose narrative approach or rather claim was that the novelist should always remain neutral, neither teaching, explaining nor judging, and who wrote at a time when realism was at the height of its popularity in Europe, noted the following:

“Life leaves everything on the same level, precipitates things or lets them drag on indefinitely. Art, by contrast, consists of invoking precautions and preparations, of setting up clever and hidden transitions, of fully illuminating, simply by the skill of the composition, the essential events and giving all others the degree of prominence they deserve according to their importance in order to produce the profound sensation of the special truth one wants to show. To do the true consists therefore of giving the complete illusion of the true...talented realists ought rather to call themselves illusionists.” [Furst, 1992: 2]

What Flaubert is suggesting is that each individual's perspective on what is real and true is a personal creation (once all the external information has been processed). Thus (in terms of contemporary narrative theory), the narratives presented to the reader as realistic depictions of life are “realities” that have been

mediated, in turn, by the author, the narrator, and the constructed focalization of particular characters.

The translation of Mahfouz's novels

The question of mediation is complicated further by the process of translation. Naguib Mahfouz wrote in Arabic, but his fame in the broader literary world is largely dependent on his work having been translated into numerous languages, including English. Midaq Alley (Zuqaq al-Midaqq), initially published in 1947, was his first novel to be published in English in 1966 (translated by Trevor Le Gassick). The Cairo Trilogy (Palace Walk, Palace of Desire and Sugar Street) which was written over a period of six years (1946-1952) has a more interesting history due to its considerable length. Mahfouz could not find a publisher for such a lengthy work, as the costs would be enormous and as a result, the novel was introduced to the public in serialized form in the al-Risalah al-Jididah newspaper. Eventually, it was published as three separate novels, the first of which was Palace Walk (Bayn al-Qasrain) in 1956. It was followed by Palace of Desire (Qasr al-Shawq) and Sugar Street (al-Sukkariyyah) in 1957. It was only after Mahfouz became the Nobel Laureate for Literature in 1988 that some interest was shown in translating more of his novels into English. It was, in fact, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis who obtained the rights to his work and arranged for the first translation into English of Palace Walk. [Dyer, 1992]

In an article on Mahfouz, Edward Said recalls an incident in 1980 when he (Said)

tried to interest a New York publisher in the distribution of first-rate translations of the Egyptian author's works. After some time, the idea was rejected and when Said queried the decision, he was told that Arabic was a "controversial language".[Said 2001:1] It appears as though not much change has occurred twenty years after Said's tete-a-tete with the New York publisher.

At the Cairo International Book Fair in 2000, concerns were raised about the small number of books available as far as Arabic literary translation was concerned. A symposium on Arabic Literature in Translation was held, with publishers and guest speakers expressing their concerns for translation quality. One of the speakers, Fatma Moussa, pointed out that the "literary side(of translation)"needed more attention.[Rolph2000: 1]



Amongst the difficulties faced by Arabic literary translators include "the need to compensate for the lack of the masculine/feminine distinction in English, how to render the often subtle mix of classical/colloquial Arabic, and how to deal with culture-specific vocabulary. For example, Al Hamdulillah could be 'Thank God' or 'Praise God'". [Rolph, 2000: 2]

Many may argue that the serious study of an Arabic novel which has been translated into English is a futile exercise, as the act of translation virtually eliminates the essence of the author. Edward Said's opinion is that the mass translation of Mahfouz's works "has obviously been an unliterary, largely commercial enterprise without much artistic or linguistic coherence". [Said

2001:1] However, in the note on his translation of Midaq Alley, Trevor Le Gassick insists that “very little deliberate editing was, however, in fact found necessary; some phrases and short passages that tended to be repetitious have been dropped or condensed and the names of characters and places have been simplified, while left in recognizable form.” [Mahfouz, 1992: xi]

This may well be so, as Le Gassick worked on translating Midaq Alley by himself, but the Cairo Trilogy is an entirely different issue. A monumental work of 1500 pages, it required a number of translators and Le Gassick describes the challenges faced by translators in the three novels of the Cairo Trilogy as “excruciating”. William Maynard Hutchins was involved in the translation of each of the novels of the Trilogy. The rest of the group was comprised of Olive E.Kenny, Lorne M.Kenny and Angele Botros Samaan. Amongst the problems faced by translators in the Cairo Trilogy is the differentiation between dialogue and monologue, which has been troublesome as both are indicated by quotation marks. Describing certain passages as “clearly...heavily edited” and others where the language appears “wooden and slow”, Le Gassick nonetheless concludes that he is pleased with many sections that “read easily and well”. [Le Gassick1992: 4]

Milieu

Midaq Alley and the Cairo Trilogy are all set in the city of Cairo, a milieu Mahfouz seldom strays from in most of his writing. Midaq Alley and the Cairo

Trilogy were written in an era of Egypt's history during which discontent was breeding regarding the large gap in the distribution of wealth between the few rich and scores of poor Egyptians. His realistic evocations of the city streets and familiarity with their secrets are due to a childhood spent in the Gamaliyya district of Cairo and a life-long love of the city.

“Jamal al-Ghitani, a well-known novelist in his own right and a confidant of Mahfouz, who also grew up in Gamaliyya...has retraced the steps of Mahfouz's characters in the quarter and attests that...Midaq Alley and The Trilogy are accurate documentations of the features of the area during the period of their events.” [El-Enany1993: 1]



The actual alley depicted in Midaq Alley is a tiny blind alley located in the heart of Islamic Cairo, near the district of Azhar, a place that had inspired many of the novelist's works written in the nineteen forties and fifties. For a long time, Azhar was a very important centre of trade, especially wholesale trade. [Moussa-Mahmoud 1973] Most of the action in the novel occurs in the microcosm of the alley, which appears to be self-sufficient despite its many shortcomings.

Each novel from the Cairo Trilogy is named after a street in the district of Gamaliyya: Bayn al-Qasrayn (Palace Walk), Qasr al-Shawq (Palace of Desire) and al-Sukkariyyah (Sugar Street). [Mahfouz 2001]

Diachronically, Midaq Alley's narrative spans a few years of the Second World War, whereas the Cairo Trilogy begins during the First World War in 1917 and

ends in 1944 (shortly before the end of the Second World War). The city that is represented here is both a site of intense nationalist fervent, and of continued Western late imperial or colonial engagement (both politically, and culturally) in terms that reflect Said's characterization of Western "orientalism". Artemis Duff-Cooper's classic study of the city, Cairo in the War Years, yields ample evidence of the ways in which Cairo was, up to the mid-twentieth-century, regarded as a continuing mise-en-scene of sexual and diplomatic intrigue, where the "exotic" provided a foil to Western sojourners and their exploits. For Mahfouz, the Gamaliyyah district and its inhabitants constitute a rich mise-en-scene of local colour, values, practices, and intrigues that ironically seems to confirm Said's views but from an internal perspective.

Mahfouz's female characters



In a paper called "Naguib Mahfouz and His Women: The Cairo Trilogy" by Anshuman Mondal, the focal point is the representation of gender. He cites an engaging argument in which Miriam Cooke suggests that during his early career, Mahfouz could be considered a feminist writer. [Mondal 1999] I am not quite certain of what Cooke means, not least of all because the concept of feminism is so inordinately complex. Nonetheless, she insists that it is his sustained criticism of patriarchy that qualifies him as a feminist writer. Which perspective of feminist thought does Cooke employ to substantiate her argument, though? Would it not also be fair to assume that Arab writing would have to be assessed from the perspective of Arab feminist thought? (The very

existence of Arab feminist thought appears to be a well kept secret.) Dr Mondal agrees that it certainly appears as though Cooke has a valid argument, but the premise for his paper is that when delving deeper into the writings of Mahfouz, one will find that his stance is hardly less patriarchal than his predecessors in the literary field.

Nawal El Saadawi spares no male writer with the following statement:

“Among the male authors I have read, both in the West and in the Arab world, irrespective of the language in which they have written, or of the region from which they have come, not one has been able to free himself from this age-old image of women handed down to us from an ancient past, no matter how famous many of them have been for their passionate defence of human rights, human values and justice, and their vigorous resistance to oppression and tyranny in any form.”

[El Saadawi, 1989:160]

Is it possible that Mahfouz has fallen into the web of patriarchy simply because of his gender and the psychological heritage that inevitably comes along with it?

In Roland Barthes' essay “The Death of the Author”, he argues that “it is language which speaks, not the author” and if one is to understand the full meaning of a literary text, then an author-centred approach needs to be discarded. [Webster 1996:18] However, if I am to produce a vaguely persuasive

hypothesis concerning Mahfouz's female characters, it is imperative that circumstances be considered that do in fact take into account the constraints under which the author produced his texts.

The epoch in which Naguib Mahfouz finds himself as a man, an Egyptian, a Muslim and a writer (not necessarily in that order), undoubtedly did determine his approach to the literary representation of female characters. In addition, like Emile Zola, Mahfouz does not believe in the concept of individual freedom and great emphasis is laid by him upon the external influences of human development.

The rise of Egyptian feminism



“Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them.” From the Qur'an, Sura IV, verse 34 [quoted by Zenie-Ziegler, 1988: 52]

The perception of Islam in the West regarding the position of women is one of subservience (to men) and oppression (by men) as sanctioned by the Holy Qur'an. Although Egypt is not an Islamic country constitutionally speaking, every aspect of life is infused with religion. Religious leaders (I believe a more accurate description would be interpreters of religion) continue to prescribe, or rather to enforce, age-old “laws” on followers as most view the Qur'an as a text containing

an infallible way to conduct one's life. Over time, it has become a way of life, a tradition, and not only are human beings naturally sentimental about tradition, but when something is practised on a large scale for a long period of time, it acquires legitimacy within that particular society. Let me use an example from Edward Said's Orientalism: The concept of the Orient conjures up certain images and ideas. These ideas, such as the seductive Oriental woman, or the sly Oriental man must have originated from some sort of reliable source or sources, as they are accepted as common truths. Said points out that the entire body of literature concerning the Orient is a carefully constructed discourse by a handful of people, some of whom had never even set foot in the Orient or met the Orientals of whom they spoke so knowledgeably. Points of reference have been created about the Orient by Orientalists like Silvestre de Sacy and Ernest Renan and their texts were accepted as a sort of guide to the Orient. In other words, what they wrote was accepted as the truth, when in fact Said insists that "the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West." [Said, 1995:5]

In a similar way that "orientalism" gives the Orient a presence and reality in the West, the Qur'an is, for many followers, a literal depiction of the path to a pious existence. Both Said's "orientalism" and the world-view of Islam are, then, complex textual constructs and interpretations of reality. The textual construct of Islam gives the spiritual realm a presence and reality in the physical world. This, of course, is not innate to Islam and it may be said of Christianity, Judaism or Buddhism for that matter. The core of the problem is the literal interpretation of

religious texts. In a survey conducted during the 1980s, it was estimated that seventy five percent of the Egyptian population could not read or write, the majority being women. [Zenie-Ziegler 1988] Not only does this mean that the interpretation of the Qur'an is left to a select few, it also indicates that age-old mores are perpetuated because they remain unquestioned by the masses. Many of these beliefs (such as the quotation from the Qur'an at the beginning of this section) relate to women and are accepted by society as received truth or common knowledge. El Saadawi insists that religious leaders are only human and prone to errors like anybody else. Therefore, their “words and actions” should “be submitted to democratic control and critical appraisal by the people whose life they wish to influence and even direct. They should be questioned and appraised by the women and men they are trying to lead.” [El Saadawi 1989: viii] This is of course a liberal view, and the fact of the matter is that Egyptian society, and particularly Egyptian society in the early to mid-twentieth century, was regulated in minute detail by the values of the Islamic religious establishment; and Mahfouz (like all other cultural workers in this milieu) had little room for experiment outside of these constraints.

Mahfouz described the family atmosphere in which he was raised as “the purely religious climate at home”. [El-Enany 1993:7] The young Mahfouz, who studied philosophy at university, became increasingly disillusioned with religion and he has cited Taha Husayn’s On Pre-Islamic Poetry (1926) as the text which has had the greatest influence on his intellectual development. He began to subscribe to the school of thought that reason takes precedence over tradition. [El-Enany

1993] It appears that bridging the gap between reason and tradition was one of the chief obstacles facing those eager to modernise Egypt, as everything “modern” was equated with moral decadence. Despite this sense of the absolutism of patriarchal tradition, however, an investigation of the emergence in Egypt of women’s rights movements does indicate an awareness of both the religious and the secular sanction of women’s independence.

The melange formed by Egypt’s historical and cultural situation provided a difficult formula for a feminist who had to balance two dimensions of being a woman in Egypt during the early twentieth century: Islam and Nationalism. She was a Muslim woman, but of equal importance was her identity as an Egyptian woman, or perhaps I should say the quest to find the essence of what being an Egyptian woman really meant in a positive sense. However, before she could emerge, there needed to be some sort of foundation.

Although the so-called liberal phase of Egypt’s history began in 1919 (Mahfouz was seven at the time) with the revolt against British occupation, there were calls for women’s education and even co-education in the nineteenth century, and in 1893 a secularist liberal called Qassem Amin (1863-1908) wrote a book, Tahrir al-Mara (“The Liberation of Woman”), defending women’s rights under Islamic law. Amin’s discourse on the restrictions on women in society and the consequences is credited as being the chief driving force for women’s liberation movements in the Arab world. [Abisaab et al. 2000] At the turn of the twentieth century Muhammad Abduh, the mufti of Egypt, “was known to have

encouraged male advocates of female liberation.“ [Talhami1996: 5] Only a careful study of his pronouncements, verbatim, would allow one to gauge the exact extent of his interest in the rights of women. Nevertheless, the very fact that a prominent and persuasive figure such as the mufti, who is a legal expert and a spiritual authority, made pronouncements in this vein to begin with is of great significance. Abduh was adamant that the mistreatment of women was against the teachings of Islam.

A Muslim activist and scholar, Rashid Ridha, was even more bold and announced that Islamic tradition sanctified a woman's right to participate in public affairs at a time when most “respectable” women would not leave their homes under any circumstances.  Mustafa Kamil, the most famous nationalist figure at the time, made a point of addressing both men and women at his public talks. [Talhami 1996]

An Arabic monthly for women called Al-Fatah was first published in Alexandria in 1892, as women realised that journalism could bring attention to their cause. Al-Fatah's most prominent feature was that it published the biographies of well-known women. A distinguished Palestinian-Lebanese writer who settled in Egypt, Mayy Ziyadah(1886-1941), wrote a biography on an aristocratic Egyptian woman of Turkish/Kurdish extract, Aishah al-Taymuriyyah(1840-1902). Ziyadah cites al-Taymuriyyah as the first Egyptian woman to call for gender equality. Another woman who became active in women's issues was a Lebanese called Zaynab Fawwaz (1860-1914) who had relocated to Egypt with the

Egyptian family for whom she worked. After the recognition of her intelligence and the arrangement of an education by her employer, Fawwaz's essays and poetry were focused on the rights of women in society.

Issues that arose in women's writing at the time included the questioning of women's exclusion from education and professional opportunities, as well as the effect on society of women's invisibility. [Badawi 1992] However, it was Qassem Amin's book, Tahrir al-Mara, that appeared to capture the attention of the masses. This is possibly due to the fact that he was a respected judge and came from an aristocratic family. [Abisaab et al. 2000]

Egyptian women eventually began to mobilise politically, with two historic all-women demonstrations on 20 March 1919 and 16 January 1920. Besides the opposition against the British occupation of Egypt, the wearing of the veil was also a grievance. The suppression of the veil was one of the major victories of the 1919 uprising. [Zenie-Ziegler 1988] Qassem Amin (the secularist liberal judge) went as far as saying that the veil was unhygienic and un-Islamic and women should discard them. [Talhami 1996]

It is during this volatile era, 1917-1919, in Egypt's history that Mahfouz set the events of the first novel of the Cairo Trilogy, Palace Walk. In 1917, Fuad became the Sultan of Egypt, 1918 spelt the end of Ottoman rule in Arab lands and 1919 saw the revolution against the British led by Saad Zaghlul (who became a national icon), leader of the Wafd Party.[Badawi 1992] (Although Mahfouz was only seven years old at the time of the 1919 revolution, it remained

a vivid part of his psyche and he has woven it into many of his narratives.)





CHAPTER TWO: The Cairo Trilogy

The three novels of the Cairo Trilogy revolve around the seemingly ubiquitous (if not physically present, he always appears to be on someone's mind) storekeeper Al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd Al-Jawad, his wife Amina (who was married to Abd Al-Jawad before her fourteenth birthday) and their offspring. In Palace Walk, Amina is the first character to whom the reader is introduced:

Habit woke her at this hour. It was an old habit she had developed when young and it had stayed with her as she matured. She had learned it along with the other rules of married life. She woke up at midnight to await her husband's return from his evening entertainment. Then she would serve him until he went to sleep. She sat up in bed resolutely to overcome the temptation posed by sleep. After invoking the name of God, she slipped out from under the covers and onto the floor. [Mahfouz, 1990: 1]

One's initial impression of Amina is that she is an unusually patient, dedicated person who thinks nothing of sacrificing a little sleep in order to ensure that when her husband arrives she will provide him with the necessary assistance. However, the words "rules", "serve" and "resolutely" suggest that there is more to this than personal devotion. Amina's world revolves around her children (Yasin - a son from her husband's first marriage -, Khadija, Fahmy, Aisha and

Kamal), as well as supervising the housekeeper, Umm Hanafi. She has no choice; she is not allowed outdoors for any reason whatsoever, not even to pray at the mosque, and Al-Sayyid Ahmad accompanies her on the occasional visits to her mother. The reader soon realises that this thirty-something woman and her young daughters are completely cut off from life outside the confines of their home. Amina's only respite from the monotony of her daily life is an occasional visit to the roof of the house.

This roof, with its inhabitants of chickens and pigeons and its arbour garden, was her beautiful, beloved world... Then her eyes would fix on the minaret of the mosque of al-Husayn... her yearnings mingled with sorrow that pervaded her every time she remembered she was not allowed to visit the son of the Prophet of God's daughter, even though she lived only minutes away from his shrine... What could this world of which she saw nothing but the minarets and roofs be like?

[Mahfouz, 2001:38-39]

Although Amina sometimes muses upon the unfamiliar world beyond the boundaries of her life, she dare not make her thoughts known to her husband. She never forgot what happened during their first year of marriage when she politely voiced her opinion on his frequent nights out. He had grabbed her by the ears and shouted: "I'm a man. I'm the one who commands and forbids. I will not accept any criticism of my behaviour. All I ask of you is to obey me. Don't force me to discipline you." [Mahfouz, 2001:8]

As the narrative progresses, it is clear that Al-Sayyid Ahmad has created a perfectly dichotomized personality for himself: At home with his wife and children he is an unsmiling and captious autocrat, who is often verbally abusive. His friends and clients would certainly not believe that the exceedingly affable character they have come to know is such a tyrant in his own home and capable of such opprobrious behaviour. There is, however, a more important reason for Amina's subservience. Her father was a scholar of Islam and she lives her life according to what she believes to be the precepts of her religion. The Prophet Himself is said to have made the following statement:

A woman, who at the moment of  death enjoys the full approval of her husband, will find her place in Paradise. [El Saadawi, 1989: 140]

It appears as though it matters little what sort of husband a woman has, as long as she caters to all his needs, regardless of the circumstances. Not only is Amina being a dutiful wife, but more importantly, she believes that she is being a good Muslim woman.

The only realm that gives Amina any sense of self-worth or purpose is the kitchen:

...here she was the queen, with no rival to her sovereignty. The oven lived and died at her command. The fate of the coal and wood...rested

on a word from her. The stove that occupied the opposite corner...slept or hissed with flame at a gesture from her. Here she was the mother, wife, teacher, and artist everyone respected. They had full confidence in everything she produced. The only praise she ever succeeded in eliciting from her husband, if he did favour her with praise, was for a type of food she prepared and cooked to perfection. [Mahfouz, 2001:19]

One must bear in mind that in his work, Mahfouz is always concerned with society in its entirety, not just individuals, a concept which is reflected in the novels of Emile Zola. In a paper called “Egyptian Women as Portrayed in the Social Novels of Naguib Mahfouz”, the character of Amina is described as “an almost accurate representation of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Egyptian middle class womanly woman”. [cited in Le Gassick, 1991:96]

Although the use of the description “womanly woman” by Ibrahim El-Sheikh is rather troubling, I am, nevertheless, interested in his statement that Amina is an “accurate representation” of a certain class of woman at a particular time in Egypt’s history. At this point I would like to infuse the discourse with an idea from Edward Said’s Orientalism.

Of the Orient, Said suggests that it is simply “an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West”. [Said 1995:5] The same comment could apply to the representation of women. Certain ideas about women acquired by men have such a lengthy history that they have attained factual status simply on the

merit of tradition, or rather the tradition of thought. Stereotyping the middle class Egyptian woman is a gross generalization and I don't think that it was Mahfouz's intention. He has been criticized for creating stereotypical female characters such as the mother, the wife, the daughter, the lover and the sex worker. Nawal El Saadawi insists that there's a clear division of women into two categories in Mahfouz's novels, especially in the Cairo Trilogy :

...a woman belongs either to the category which is composed of sacred pure mothers and frigid, chaste, respectable wives, or to that which groups together the prostitute and the mistress, women who are warm, pulsating, seductive, but despised. [El Saadawi 1989:166]



My first point is that misinterpretations of the author's intentions, such as El Sheikh's generalization about middle class Egyptian women and Amina, help to perpetuate ideas such as a "womanly woman". However, let us, for a moment, consider the intentions of the author. From a political perspective, Mahfouz wrote the Cairo Trilogy during an extremely sensitive period (1946-1952) and he has admitted that the work would never have been published under the old regime (before the 1952 revolution). If his female characters are indeed stereotypical representations, the question is if he had any alternative in such an uncertain political climate. It must be noted that any hint of dissent meant a prison sentence, so it is possible that Mahfouz's intention was thus: a superficial reading of the text would most certainly not hint at anything out of the ordinary (in other words, it appears as though the female characters are being

stereotyped), while a more critical reading would reveal Mahfouz's own implicit critique. Why does it appear, though, as if Amina is placed into an especially rigid framework?

Firstly, I would suggest familiarity: the figure of the mother and wife are easily identifiable to even the most cloistered Egyptian readers. The second aspect of familiarity would be the knowledge of characterization possessed by the writer himself. A good deal of Mahfouz's life was spent as a bachelor and the people he became most familiar with were his immediate family members: his parents and his sisters. The other aspect is fear. Indeed, fear is the factor suggested by Nawal El Saadawi as the reason for the oppression of Arab women: men fear the power of women and need to be protected from them. [El Saadawi 1989] With so many changes that had occurred within Egyptian society- more women were being educated and many were even doing the same work as men- men were no doubt beginning to feel that their own power would become ineffective if women were afforded more opportunities. Mahfouz, I am certain, had considered all these factors very carefully.

I would suggest that the careful characterization of Amina is not really meant to be a negative reflection on women. In fact, what Mahfouz does with a character like Amina is an attempt to demonstrate the result of the behaviour of the men around her. To put it simply, she is a product of the patriarchal society in which she is immersed. He utilizes her character to expose Egyptian society and the

mentality of the average Egyptian male. In the paper by Anshuman Mondal cited above, he describes the criticism of Mahfouz's writing with regards to gender as "sensitive to its own patriarchal assumptions" resulting in "rather superficial" engagements and he adds that the general consensus on the Egyptian writer's "consideration of the problem (of gender) has been... progressive, i.e. that he has adopted an anti-patriarchal stance".[Mondal1999: 1-2) Mondal states that on the surface, it certainly appears as though Mahfouz is a progressive thinker on issues of gender and then he makes the following statement:

Once we step through the fog of confusion we find that Mahfouz's underlying representation of women conforms to 'traditional' patriarchal canons of femininity whilst disguising itself as an espousal of 'modern' notions of 'womanhood'. This is precisely symptomatic of what Sharabi calls 'neopatriarchy'¹

.[Mondal1999: 4]

I do not think that Dr Mondal's assessment is completely fair. Before Mahfouz,

¹ Hisham Sharabi describes neopatriarchy as an elaboration of patriarchy in *Neopatriarchy*. Neopatriarchy not only includes the oppression of women by men, it also involves the various social "classes in their hierarchical relations to one another, as well as individuals in their relations to their family, the neighbourhood, the workplace, the public sphere and the state..."
[Mondal1999: 1]

there was scarcely the vaguest attempt at an anti-patriarchal stance in Egyptian literature, yet it seems as though Mahfouz is expected to revolutionize the notion in one fell swoop. Not only is he expected to project a powerful anti-patriarchal stance, but it is assumed that his female characters should be exemplary examples of progressive Egyptian women. At this point, I would like to reiterate that the author wrote this novel during a politically sensitive period and although he delivers a great deal of social commentary, he always proceeds with caution. After all, Mahfouz spent his entire life as a civil servant, serving in various capacities and writing part-time until his retirement. Being dissident in such a radical manner would not have pleased the ultra-sensitive authorities at all. In fact, Mahfouz was attacked on a street in Cairo as recently as the nineteen-nineties by a Muslim radical. Apparently the writer's work upset conservative Muslim sensibilities and the young man took the initiative to stab him, resulting in Mahfouz's complete withdrawal from social activities.

It is also worth mentioning that during the nineteen-seventies, outspoken women's rights activist Dr Nawal El Saadawi was imprisoned for her writing and many of her books are banned in Egypt to this day.

Returning to the character of Amina, I suggest that one of Mahfouz's chief objectives is to expose the mentality of the average working class Egyptian man, and more specifically his perspective on women. For example, Amina's stepson Yasin, who is very fond of her and regards her as his mother, has the following

to say:

A woman. Yes, she's nothing but a woman. Every woman is a filthy curse. A woman doesn't know what virtue is, unless she's denied all opportunity for adultery. Even my stepmother, who's a fine woman- God only knows what she would be like if it weren't for my father.

[Mahfouz, 2001:88]

An utterance from Yasin in this particular vein is especially ironic as he is probably one of the most impious characters in the trilogy. Amina's ill-fated visit to the mosque of Al-Husayn was Yasin's brilliant idea while Al-Sayyid Ahmad is away in Port Said. The result is that Amina is knocked down by an automobile and her collarbone is injured. For this reprehensible behaviour, her husband banishes Amina from her own home. It is only after much persuasion by the children that Al-Sayyid grudgingly allows her to return (after being exiled to her mother's home for a period of time).

Yasin describes a woman as "a filthy curse", yet he seems incapable of existing without women. He is highly unselective in his choice of sexual partners and appears to seduce everyone including the date palm vendor, his first wife's maid, and even his second wife's mother. With a character like Yasin around, it certainly seems as if Amina and her daughters are fortunate to have an overprotective figure such as Al-Sayyid Ahmad as their guardian.

Although Yasin's conduct may appear disgraceful, there is an Arab proverb which asserts that "Only the pocket of a man can bring him shame." [El Saadawi, 1989:29] El Saadawi comments that for Arab society, "shame is only the result of poverty, where men are concerned. The male ego grows in proportion to the number of his female conquests, and his sexual relations are a source of pride and occasion for boasting." [El Saadawi, 1989:29-30]

Throughout the Cairo Trilogy, both Al-Sayyid Ahmad and Yasin engage in a number of illicit affairs. When Yasin is caught attempting to sexually violate Umm Hanafi, the housekeeper, his father is only angry because the woman is old and unattractive. The solution is to find his son a wife post haste. When Yasin's wife, Zaynab, finds him in a compromising position with her maid, she is obviously enraged. Instead of reprimanding his son, the temperamental Al-Sayyid Ahmad is incensed with Zaynab for being so distraught about the situation. Even Amina thinks that Zaynab has caused an unnecessary rumpus by bringing attention to her husband's infidelity. Al-Sayyid Ahmad spends most of his nights away from home, socialising with his numerous friends and entertaining his lovers. In Sugar Street, the final novel of the trilogy, the narrative has taken such a bizarre turn that Yasin's third wife, Zanuba, is his father's former lover and she's also the god-child of a former lover of Al-Sayyid Ahmad.

The fact is that these men never suffer any serious consequences for their actions. In front of his wife and his daughters Khadija and Aisha, Al-Sayyid

Ahmad's veil of piety remains intact until his death. On occasion, one gets the impression that Amina suspects that everything is not as it seems, yet naivete and traditional beliefs take precedence over common sense.

The mental and psychological development of a woman is greatly retarded, and she is unable to free herself from passive attitudes and the habit of depending on others. She remains like a child in the early stages of its life, but differs in the fact that her body has grown, and that she may have reached the age of thirty, forty or even fifty years ...Experience is looked upon almost as a deformity to be hidden, and not as a mark of intrinsic human value...Women, therefore, tend to nurture their ignorance and simplemindedness so that society continues to look upon them as being virtuous and of good reputation. Parents also encourage ignorance in their daughters, and want them to be simple and naïve. [El Saadawi, 1989:44-45]

It is in the best interest of the man to have a naïve, ignorant wife. However, it is even more advantageous for the wife, as in the case of Zaynab where she refused to remain blinkered, and suffered the consequences. If she had had even half the naivete and unflinching belief in her husband of her blissfully ignorant mother-in-law, she may have had the opportunity to endure a long marriage. If she had been less interested in her husband's social life, she may have been spared the shame of a divorce. It seems that raising an ignorant, obedient daughter is ultimately for the girl's own benefit. A female who is aware

of her rights as an intellectual, emotional, and spiritual human being will find anguish and little else.

Like many other women, Amina has to depend on the males around her as a source of information. A deeply religious woman, she insists that when her youngest son Kamal returns from school in the afternoon, he report on the lessons taught to the class by the religious instructor. She is deeply disturbed by what Kamal tells her one day, that the earth does not rest on the head of an ox but rotates on its own axis in space. Amina decides to consult her eldest son Fahmy:

...she slipped off to Fahmy's room to ask him about the truth of the ox supporting the earth, and whether it still did. The young man thought that he should be gentle with her and answer in language she would like. He told her that the earth is held up by the power and wisdom of God. His mother left content with this answer, which pleased her, and the large ox was not erased from her imagination. [Mahfouz, 2001:

70-71]

Thus, Amina's perception of the truth and of reality is created by the males around her. Being illiterate as well, she has no means of questioning these sources.

After the death of her eldest son Fahmy in the 1919 uprisings against the British,

Amina is so grief-stricken that Al-Sayyid Ahmad relaxes a few of the rigid house rules. She is permitted to pray at the mosque and visit her mother on occasion, although she takes no liberties despite her newfound freedom. She has been conditioned to accept the restrictions imposed upon her, as “down the ages a system has been built up which aims at destroying the ability of women to see the exploitation to which they are subjected, and to understand its causes.”

[El Saadawi, 1989:5]

As mentioned before, the two evident moral miscreants in the Cairo Trilogy, Al-Sayyid Ahmad and Yasin, do not appear to suffer any consequences for their misdeeds. I think that this may be one of the reasons why Mahfouz may be interpreted as perpetuating “neopatriarchy”, as Mondal also notes that “Everywhere, it seems, women afford men sexual opportunities.” [Mondal,

1999:6]

Before I comment on the above quotation, it is imperative that the moral dilemma of the two men is discussed. It is not simply their moral dilemma; instead it is a predicament in which I think Mahfouz must have found himself. In order to depict the lives of the average Egyptian middle classes, he had to be as faithful to actual circumstances as possible. This encompassed the reservation of judgement, regardless of the behaviour of the characters. The punishment meted out to them would have to be in line with reality. The reality is that the sexual behaviour of both Al-Sayyid Ahmad and Yasin may be seen as reprehensible, yet according to El Saadawi it was perfectly acceptable in Egyptian society at the

time.

Shaykh Mutawalli, a spiritual advisor, confronts Al-Sayyid Ahmad (who is known for his affairs with so-called “entertainers”) about his womanising and reminds him that like the Prophet, he is allowed to have more than one wife. Quite accustomed to the Shaykh’s directness, he remains unperturbed:

Don’t forget, Shaykh Mutawalli, that the professional women entertainers of today are the slave girls of yesterday, whose purchase and sale God made legal. More than anything, God is forgiving and merciful. [Mahfouz, 2001:46]



Besides the attitude that certain women were meant for sexual recreation, it is interesting to note that sex work or prostitution was legal and actually supervised by the state until 1951. [El Saadawi, 1989] What is more noteworthy, however, is that Al-Sayyid Ahmad uses the Holy Qu’ran to justify his behaviour, which is disadvantageous to all the women in his life. His gender affords him special status: he will be forgiven for sexual misconduct but a visit to the mosque by his wife (who was fully covered in the prescribed traditional apparel) was unforgivable.

Mondal argues that “Mahfouz’s textual strategies...take refuge behind the ‘realism’ of his portrayal of patriarchal society. But the assumptions which are encoded into Mahfouz’s descriptions of that reality, of that society, become a

legitimate concern for the critic because novels are never mere passive reflectors of life, mere ciphers of reality.” [Mondal, 1999:8] This is one of the difficulties with realism pointed out by Gustave Flaubert. The narrative is constructed so that even if the author’s opinion is not blatantly obvious, it exists none-the-less. In other words, there will be a natural tendency of bias towards certain characters (in this particular case).

Mahfouz has admitted that Kamal, the youngest of the Abd Al Jawad children, is an autobiographical character. I think that through the sensitive and introspective Kamal, the author voices his most direct criticism. Even when Kamal is a child, he questions traditions such as marriage. Deeply unhappy about the prospect of losing another sister to marriage, he decides to discuss his frustrations with his mother Amina:



‘What’s happened to your mind, Mother?...Are you going to give up Khadija the way you abandoned Aisha?’

She explained to him that she was not abandoning either of the girls but was pleased by what would make them happy...She explained to him that happiness has a price. He protested,

‘Who told you that marriage brings happiness? I can tell you that there’s absolutely no happiness in marriage. How can anyone be happy when separated from his mother?’

He added fervently, ‘And she doesn’t want to get married any more than Aisha did before her. She told me that one night in her bed.’

His mother argued that a girl needs to get married. Then he could not keep himself from saying,

‘Who says a girl’s got to go to the home of strangers?...’

[Mahfouz, 2001:326-327]

None of the other characters questions the mores of society the way Kamal does. However, as the narrative progresses and Kamal becomes older, Mahfouz shows how society begins to corrupt his reasoning and he becomes a disillusioned adult. It is a recurrent idea; there is no such thing as individual freedom. The individual is always a product of the society in which they find themselves. Could this be why Nawal El Saadawi maintains that she has never read a male writer who has not transcended the age-old traditions of depicting women? Mahfouz seems to accept a sense of social determinism, both for himself as author and for such a potentially liberated character as Kamal.

Hence, I do not agree that Mahfouz’s textual strategies “take refuge behind the ‘realism’ of his portrayal of patriarchal society”, as Mondal asserts, because he exposes so much of himself and his faults through Kamal. He often appears keenly aware of the shortcomings of exposing Egypt’s patriarchal society in an ambitious narrative which deals with a number of other critical issues.

I would like to return to Dr Mondal’s statement, that it appears as though women constantly afford men sexual opportunities in the trilogy. While admitting that this is not entirely true, he continues that it strengthens the distinction between the

so-called “respectable” women and those of “ill repute”. [Mondal,1999] A character like Amina is completely desexualized because she falls under the category of respectable women. Mahfouz strips her of her sexuality by providing other women to cater for her husband’s sexual needs, for example Zubayda the entertainer. Mondal describes women like Zubayda as “a necessary part of the economy of desire in which desire is redistributed away from ‘respectable’ women towards concubines and prostitutes. She plays a vital role in the male regulation of female sexuality for the purposes of maintaining a hierarchical social order based on respectability.” [Mondal, 1999:9]

So, what is one to make of Mahfouz’s licentious male characters who go unpunished and the rigorous division of his female characters into two categories? It is only fair, for example, that criticism of the division between the female characters in the Cairo Trilogy is accompanied by some sort of recommendation and Mondal does not provide any. Although I agree that the division between the female characters appears to be a sign of bias, I will not venture to suggest how Mahfouz may have created more “complete” women. In Egypt, the reality at the time was that so-called respectable women had particular traits and there were certain subjects with which they were never associated, such as desire or sexual pleasure. The world was viewed from a black and white perspective: either a woman was good or she was bad. This is reflected in the rigid characterization of Mahfouz’s women. It is an indication of

the inflexible societal perceptions of Egyptian women, not only by Egyptian men but also, indeed, by Westerners, as Said appears to indicate in his comment on the implications of Flaubert's relations with the odalisque Kuchuk Hanem:

There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence or history. He spoke for her and represented her...Flaubert's situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled. [Said 1995:6]



One could easily draw parallels between East and West, and women and men respectively. As a male, Mahfouz would belong to the West, which automatically places him in a position of power. His perspective, no matter the insight and empathy, remains outside the realm of the actual female experience. One of the difficulties faced by male writers is “speaking” for females.

Mondal raises the point that Amina's narrative voice is hardly ever articulated, except for a lengthy interior monologue in chapter thirty-eight of Sugar Street. He also adds that her voice is limited to the confines of the home and “as the focus of the narrative moves gradually from such a space to a more ‘public’ space, the female voice is increasingly muted and marginalized.” [Mondal, 1999:14]

It is indeed one of the narrative features of the Cairo Trilogy that the male perspective is articulated very clearly. However, I dare say that it would have been highly presumptuous of Mahfouz to attempt or even claim to “speak” on behalf of women. As a well-read person who had delved into philosophy, he must have realised that as a man, he could not possibly do justice to the psyche of a woman. El Saadawi’s view on the situation may be a bit harsh as she comments that “...his understanding of their situation has not moved from a superficial analysis of their social conditions to a deep and sensitive realization of the tragedy women are made to live...” [El Saadawi, 1989:167]. I think that he was keenly aware of this shortcoming and that is why I must reiterate the following: Mahfouz’s female characters are probably foils employed to expose the inner workings of the various male characters. Drawing on the distinction made by Roland Barthes between ‘kernel’ and ‘catalyst’ in the dynamics of a story (where ‘kernel’ refers to decisive actions, and ‘catalyst’ refers to passive or merely accompanying scenarios), it may be argued that Mahfouz’s women characters are (in this sense) mere catalysts while their menfolk engage in the ‘core’ initiatives of the action. [Rimmon-Kenan, 1983:16] The idea that the female characters may simply have such a functionary status with regards to the males is a cause for concern in itself, although I do not think that it is quite as simple as I have suggested. The male characters also in a sense have a limited functionary status, for I suggest it is they whom Mahfouz really wishes to examine and expose. It is interesting, however, that El Saadawi comes to the rescue of Arab men with her comment that the West is biased in their portrayal of Arab men,

with a pre-conceived idea that sexual impropriety comes “naturally” to them. She believes that men everywhere are licentious, regardless of the geography. [El Saadawi, 1989] Mahfouz could hence be unintentionally perpetuating the Western perspective of the Arab man by the creation of so many debased male characters.

It is unfortunate, though, that all the women in the Cairo Trilogy are turned into victims as a result of the men in their lives. Amina and Al-Sayyid Ahmad's daughters, Khadija and Aisha, remain uneducated young ladies in Palace Walk and their focal point is waiting for a proposal from a suitable (according to their father) groom.



El Sheikh mentions that “because of their concentration on securing mainly ‘bread and sex’ without much attention to science and knowledge, middle class men and women were doomed to failure and collapse...Lack of advanced education, social immobility and blind concentration on the age-old practices of housekeeping and marriage have kept these women more or less inferior to men.” [Le Gassick, 1991:91] Although Aisha and Khadija are not nearly as young as their mother when they marry, they are just as ignorant as Amina was at the age of fourteen when she married their father. Besides the fact that their father, Al-Sayyid Ahmad, would never have permitted his daughters to attend school for fear that their honour would be tainted by being seen in public, education was only readily available to the upper classes in Egypt during the first quarter of the twentieth century. The middle classes who could afford to educate their children

sent only their sons to school. After much lobbying by women's rights groups, the government finally offered free education for all children at both primary and high school level in 1944. This is the year which sees the end of all the drama in the Cairo Trilogy; the new dispensation is too late, though, for Aisha and Khadija as they are already mature mothers and members of yet another generation of ignorant women.

The unequal "partnership" between their parents is detailed very carefully by Mahfouz. When Amina raises the subject of a proposal for Aisha's hand in marriage, Al-Sayyid Ahmad seems appalled that she would attempt to have such an important discussion with him:



'My opinion is the same as yours, sir. I have no opinion of my own.'

He roared back, 'If that was so, you wouldn't have mentioned the matter to me at all.'

She said apprehensively and devotedly, 'Sir, I mentioned it to you only to keep you informed about the new development, since it's my duty to let you know everything that affects your home, coming from near or far.'

He shook his head peevishly and said, 'Who knows...yes, by God, who knows? You're just a woman, and no woman has a fully developed mind...'

[Mahfouz, 2001: 166]

Al-Sayyid Ahmad's first wife, Haniya, is not spared his tyranny and her

undoing is not abiding by his rigid regulations. She sees no harm in visiting her father occasionally. When Haniya “displayed some resistance to his will...Al-Sayyid Ahmad had grown angry and had attempted to restrain her, at first by scolding her and then by violent beatings.” [Mahfouz, 2001:115] Haniya does not endure the abuse for long before she returns to her father’s home and eventually the marriage is annulled. The great tragedy, however, is that when Yasin returns to live with his father at the prescribed age, he grows to despise his mother. It appears as though he places the blame for the dissolution of the marriage on Haniya, the disobedient woman who refused to be physically abused.

The most interesting and disturbing tale is the metamorphosis of Zanuba, the lute player. In Palace Walk, she is basically a sex worker and the object of desire for Yasin. Yet, when he first propositions her, he is surprised by her response:

Each of you asks for a rendezvous, as though there were nothing to it, but it’s an important matter that does not take place for some people until after a proposal, negotiation, recitation of the opening prayer of the Qur’an, a dowry, a trousseau, and the arrival of a religious official to write the contract. Isn’t that so sir... [Mahfouz, 2001:263]

However, it seems as though Zanuba is only half serious as she and Yasin become lovers all the same. She becomes a concubine of sorts to Al-Sayyid Ahmad in Palace of Desire, and in Sugar Street she becomes Yasin’s wife after he divorces his second spouse Maryam, with whose mother both he and his

father have had sex. The reason why I have described Zanuba's metamorphosis as disturbing is because marriage and motherhood (in that order) were the overriding factors in salvaging her respectability as a woman. Many would even consider her fortunate, as Arab men preferred marrying virgins. So, it appears as if Yasin emancipates her from a life of depravity by making her a so-called respectable woman. The irony is that she is liberated from one category only to be confined to yet another. I think that Zanuba is probably Mahfouz's most successful female character in the demonstration of the limited options available to Egyptian women.

Two female characters to whom I feel Mahfouz did not pay enough attention are Umm Hanafi and Nur. Umm Hanafi is the housekeeper and Amina's right hand and she appears throughout the trilogy. Yet, the only point in the narrative where she has a feature role is when Yasin returns home drunk one night and finds her sleeping in her usual place in the kitchen. Overtaken by lust, he falls on her, puts his hand over her mouth and begins caressing her. She pushes him off:

He asked, 'Why are you angry? I didn't mean to hurt you.' Then he said amiably, 'Come into the oven room.' In a troubled but decisive manner, she replied, 'Certainly not, sir. Go to your room. God's curse on Satan...'
 ...He took her words the wrong way and was filled with resentment.
 Ideas raged through his head. 'What's to be done with this bitch? I can't retreat after revealing my intentions and going far enough to cause a scandal. I must get what I want even if I have to resort to force.'

[Mahfouz, 2001:298-299]

Umm Hanafi's screams alert Al-Sayyid Ahmad, who finds Yasin on top of her. Even though it is clearly a case of sexual assault, Yasin's father is convinced that his son was seduced by the woman. The only reason why he is angry with Yasin is because Umm Hanafi is so unattractive and the solution is to marry his son off as quickly as possible (to a respectable woman). The reader is given no indication of how Umm Hanafi feels after the incident. One can only assume that as a member of the Egyptian proletariat class, she has even fewer options than her middle class counterparts. She cannot possibly leave; she has been working in the Abd Al Jawad household for twenty-five years and as a divorced woman, she is at the bottom of the social hierarchy. One of the shortcomings of women's liberation movements in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century was that they overlooked the needs of the lower socio-economic classes of society. Feminist Huda Sha'rawi is especially criticised for her failure to include anyone other than the upper class and the upper strata of the middle class in the women's movement. [Talhami, 1996] It seems as though Umm Hanafi's invisibility in the Cairo Trilogy is a reflection of the plight of the class of women to which she belongs.

Nur, the maid of Yasin's first wife Zaynab, is a character who only appears briefly and Mahfouz leaves the reader to ponder upon her fate. It is hardly surprising that Yasin is, once again, the instigator of a vulgar scene on the terrace where Nur's shack is located. While Yasin rapes Nur, she only offers

passive resistance by repeating the words “shame on you Master”. The question that arises is what alternative she has. Firstly, Yasin is a very large man and she may have feared a violent beating. In addition to that, Nur is probably afraid of losing her job and with a similar history to Umm Hanafi, she does not have many options. After Zaynab finds them together, Nur disappears quietly and she is not mentioned again. Again, Mahfouz leaves only assumptions for the reader. It is quite possible that Nur fell pregnant and as an unmarried woman, she would be ostracized by society. Legal abortions only became available in 1937 and were strictly for married women. [El Saadawi, 1989]

El Sheikh laments the fact that none of Mahfouz’s female characters do anything about the corruption in their midst except verbal complaint or sometimes shouting. Although Mahfouz introduces a relatively modern female character like Sawsan Hamad in Sugar Street, he shows that despite her career, she is still expected to perform the traditional duties of a wife and be submissive to her husband’s family. Politically, women had made enormous progress, “but life has proved that, whereas political and economic change can take place rapidly, social and cultural progress tends to lag behind because it is linked to the deep emotive and psychic processes of the human mind and heart...” [El Saadawi, 1989:ix] That may have been the reason why, at a less tense era in Egyptian history and more than ten years before writing the Cairo Trilogy, Mahfouz created Hamida for Midaq Alley. She is quite a radical character compared with the women in the Trilogy and she will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: Midaq Alley

Hamida, one of the inhabitants of Midaq Alley, is a young woman in her early twenties who lives with her foster mother, Umm Hamida. Umm Hamida is a marriage-broker and a bath-assistant who is involved in the lives of all the inhabitants of the Alley in one way or another. She is eager to marry off her daughter, but Hamida is a stubborn character who delights in arguing with her mother about any- and everything. Umm Hamida's greatest fear is that her daughter's sharp tongue will deter any suitors, despite her physical beauty. This is not Hamida's only trait that fuels the tongues of scandal-mongers in the insulated alley.



Perhaps the most commonly said thing about her (Hamida) was that she hated children and that this unnatural trait made her wild and totally lacking in the virtues of femininity. It was this that Mrs Kirsha, the café owner's wife, who had nursed her, hoped to God to see her a mother too, suckling children under the care of a tyrannical husband who beat her unmercifully. [Mahfouz, 1992: 40]

Mrs Kirsha, the wife of the homosexual café owner, is of the opinion that Hamida could make a few additions to her feminine virtues. She muses upon Hamida's situation as a single woman and wishes that when she (Hamida) marries, she

will have scores of children to take care of and a husband who will beat her. The words “under the care of”, along with unmerciful, “tyrannical husband” who beats his wife (whom Mrs Kirsha hopes will be Hamida) make for a sadistic paradox. This is the very woman who once suckled an infant Hamida alongside her son, Hussain, and she is the mother of six children. How could she possibly wish ill will upon a girl she suckled from her breast, a girl who has never done her any harm? Could this not be considered an unfeminine trait in itself?

I suspect that the thoughts attributed to Mrs Kirsha by Mahfouz were done so deliberately. Hamida has not borne children yet and her character is contrasted with Mrs Kirsha, mother of six with supposedly all her feminine virtues intact. However, Mahfouz shows that she (Mrs Kirsha) has malignant thoughts about a girl that was like her own child, whereas Hamida dislikes children she is not familiar with at all. Hamida’s character may have been formed by the fact that she is an orphan and has no relatives with children. As a result, she is not used to children and simply doesn’t know how to treat them. This may serve as a reason why Hamida does not possess the relative quality of caregiving .

Hamida’s supposed hatred of children is described as an “unnatural trait”, which means that it is contrary to the usual characteristics of the species, namely human beings. However, the specific trait of nurturing children is an exclusive attribute of the female gender. The assumption is that this is the natural order of things, or that humans have been genetically programmed as such. According to the women of the Alley, the absence of only a single trait

disqualifies Hamida from being what they regard as being truly female or feminine. Mahfouz appears to be questioning Egyptian society's perspective of femininity and the prescriptions of what it means to be a woman.

Citing the opinion of modern scientists, Nawal El Saadawi radically argues that there cannot be an intrinsic human nature that is absolutely secure:

Human characteristics are relative qualities that change and adapt themselves to the circumstances and situations under which people are born and live...Many scientists now refuse to use the term 'human instincts', preferring 'human motivations' which according to them are picked up mainly in the years of childhood and adolescence.

[El Saadawi, 1989: 80]



From a social point of view, it is quite simple to understand why Hamida may be seen as being averse to children. She is an orphan and Umm Hamida does not seem to have any family either. As a result, she has no contact with children and has absolutely no experience in how to approach them. Her "human motivations" at this point in her life do not involve caring for children or even liking them for that matter, but does that make her any less feminine than the other women in the Alley? They certainly think so, and I would suggest that their opinion is meant to be a reflection of Egyptian attitudes of the time. Neither Hamida's past nor her present situation are taken into consideration; she is a woman and by that very definition, she should possess compulsory traits. The fact that she may dislike

children means that she is a deviation from the norm; an unacceptable mutation.

Mrs Saniya Afify, who has been a widow for the past ten years, pays a visit to Midaq Alley's shrewd marriage broker, Umm Hamida. She is around fifty years of age and is rather embarrassed by the purpose of her visit, which is to inquire about the possibility of finding a husband for herself (she is Umm Hamida's landlady and her only business with the woman is to collect rent money). Mrs Afify is also extremely uncomfortable with the fact that she is visiting the home of someone of a lower social class. Thus when she arrives, Umm Hamida spares not a single word of flattery, saying "Welcome, welcome. Why, it's as though the Prophet himself had come to visit us, Mrs Afify!"

[Mahfouz, 1992: 16]



Mrs Afify tries her best to conceal the purpose of her visit, but Umm Hamida is a quick-witted woman who soon discovers that her landlady has not come to raise the cost of the rent. It is soon apparent that the widow is desperate for a husband, which is rather peculiar because we are told that she had been averse to the idea of marriage all this time. Her late husband, who was the owner of a perfume shop, had mistreated her and made a misery of her life.

She genuinely disliked married life and was delighted when she regained her peace and freedom. [Mahfouz, 1992: 18]

One has to ask why, after ten years, she is placing herself in such an undignified

position in order to get married? Her prospects do not appear to be very good, as she is no longer of child-bearing age and would have been considered an old woman in Egyptian society at the time. El Saadawi explains that in traditional Egyptian society, the “value of a woman deteriorates with age...The life of a woman is therefore less than that of a normal human being, since it only extends over thirty years. Once she no longer has any menstrual periods, her life is considered over, and she is said to have reached Sin El Ya-as (the age of despair or of no hope).” [El Saadawi, 1989: 78]

What is this woman’s motivation for finding a partner, after spending a decade being adamant that marriage brought nothing but misery? How will it be possible for Umm Hanafi to find her a husband when Mrs Afify, despite her insistence that she is much younger, has reached the age of “Sin El Ya-as”? 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.

Between 1979 and 1980, Wedad Zenie- Ziegler interviewed scores of women from every region of Egypt. This was several decades after Naguib Mahfouz had written Midaq Alley, but she was surprised to find that “only marriage assures the individual of a place in society. An unmarried woman has no social status, with the exception of a few rare women with prestigious careers... although even they frequently encounter obstacles that with an influential husband they would probably have been spared.” [Zenie- Ziegler, 1988:115]

Mrs Afify's relatives may also have encouraged her to find a husband, as it was considered a most unnatural and an ungodly state to be unmarried. Umm Hamida also reminds her of the following:

...it was for that God created the world. It was within his power to fill it with men alone or women alone but He created male and female and gave us the intelligence to understand his wish. There is no avoiding marriage. [Mahfouz, 1992: 21]

Hence, Mrs Afify will not only be fulfilling a social responsibility through matrimony, but in the eyes of society, marriage is her religious duty. 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. El Saadawi puts it more eloquently:

Time and time again, life has proved that, whereas political and economic change can take place rapidly, social and cultural progress tends to lag behind because it is linked to the deep inner emotive and psychic processes of the human mind and heart. [Saadawi, 1989: ix]

Hussain Kirsha appears to be the only other person, who, like Hamida, never misses an opportunity for an invective against Midaq Alley and its inhabitants and he is determined to leave the wretched place. Hussain is the son of the café owner, Mr Kirsha, who peddles drugs to supplement his income in order to

sate his desire for hashish and young boys. He gets the opportunity to work for the British Army in Tel-el-Kabir and one day, after a particularly heated argument with his parents, he decides to leave the Alley for good. When he is retrenched, due to the predictions that World War II will soon end, he has no choice but to return to the house of his father. On his return, he comments that he thought he had left Midaq Alley for good, “but Satan pulled me back to it.” [Mahfouz, 1992: 252]

If anyone, Hussain should feel the most empathy for Hamida, because their desire to leave the Alley is equally powerful. However, when Abbas tells him about his chance encounter with Hamida, who has been seduced away from the alley by an insidious man, Hussain's reaction is harsh but completely in line with traditional social values. (Abbas was engaged to Hamida and believed that they were deeply in love.) 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]

His comments appear particularly harsh, especially because Hamida is considered to be his half-sister (they were suckled by his mother at the same time). Although Hussain's murderous suggestion to Hamida's former fiancé may

be mistaken as an extreme act of vengeance by a jilted lover, he probably does not even consider the emotional trauma that Abbas has suffered. Hussain's chief concern is that Hamida has shamed the people of the Alley with her lascivious conduct and she should pay the ultimate price for her transgression. In Hamida's case, Hussain does not consider that Satan may have had a hand in her fate, as this was the reason he gave for his fateful return to the Alley. She is conveniently extricated from Satan's influence and must bear full responsibility for the circumstances in which she finds herself.

In order to gain more insight into so-called "honour killings", which still take place today and are occasionally reported by the Western media , one has to keep the following oft-repeated Arab proverb in mind:



Shame can only be washed away by blood. [Saadawi, 1989: 163]

In the February 1972 issue of the American Journal of Psychiatry, Harold W. Glidden offers pearls of wisdom in his essay on the psyche of the Arab peoples. He argues that because Arab people can only function in situations of conflict and Islam equates revenge with justice, they are unable to think objectively. [Cited by Said, 1995]

It may be easy to accept Glidden's explication of why honour killings are so prevalent in the Arab world, as it is relatively simple to grasp. Dr Saadawi's opinions on honour killings, however, are slightly more complex:

There is a distorted concept of honour in our Arab society. A man's honour is safe as long as the female members of his family keep their hymens intact. It is more closely related to the behaviour of the women in the family, than to his own behaviour. He can be a womanizer of the worst calibre and yet be considered an honourable man as long as his womenfolk are able to protect their genital organs. [Saadawi, 1989: 31]

Because Hamida has no male blood relations who can assume responsibility for her, it is incumbent upon her so-called half-brother (who has absolutely no knowledge of her circumstances) and her former fiancé to police her actions. Surrounded by poverty, Hamida finds herself in a situation where her gender and social class are synonymous with impotence. The only glint of hope is that a suitable man will request her hand in marriage.

However, Hamida is not content with waiting for fate to happen; Mahfouz allows her to take fate into her own hands. He knows that tragedy is inevitable because she is ambitious and this is not a favourable trait in a woman. She actively seeks a suitable husband and even muses upon the fact that if she had been trained as a skilled worker, marriage may not have been a necessity.

Hamida is sometimes harshly judged by literary critics, who see her as a narcissistic, materialistic, over-zealous young woman who will stop at nothing

to get what she wants. Trevor Le Gassick, who shares this opinion, believes that it is her ambition, which he describes as “materialism”, and her beauty that lead her to become a sex worker. [Le Gassick, 1992]

In his essay “Egyptian Women as Portrayed in the Social Novels of Naguib Mahfouz”, Ibrahim El-Sheikh is more accommodating. He thinks that by willingly becoming a sex worker, Hamida is a martyr of sorts by taking action against her economic situation, unlike the other female characters of the Alley. Prostitution, then, is a means of gaining independence and agency. She is, despite this positive interpretation, a symbol of the gross neglect suffered by certain segments of society. [Le Gassick, 1991]



In defense of Hamida, it is necessary to understand the social context in which she finds herself. Before the first quarter of the twentieth century, only Egyptian girls from the upper social classes were privileged with an education. After intensive lobbying by feminist groups, the government began to open schools for the working classes as well. [Talhami1996] Midaq Alley is set during the Second World War, by which time, theoretically, many girls should have been afforded a basic education at the very least. However, 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.

Instead, from a very young age, girl children are instructed to pay special attention to physical appearance, correcting what are considered as flaws and ensuring that the utmost care is taken with their attire . [El Saadawi, 1989]

Hence, I think that Le Gassick's characterization of Hamida as "self-centered" is rather harsh. She has been conditioned as such by the prescriptions of a seemingly superficial society and the special attention she pays her appearance is certainly not one of her unique characteristics. In addition, she does not attend a tertiary institution or have the opportunity to work, so she does indeed spend a great deal of time thinking about herself. I suggest that instead of vanity, Mahfouz is in fact attempting to demonstrate just how narrow and restricted Hamida's world is, not only her external milieu, but the restricted mental horizons that she has been granted by society.



I agree with El-Sheik that Hamida symbolises Egypt's oppressed, but despite her ambition, I think that he attributes her with power she does not possess when he says that she has chosen to become a sex worker. What could Mahfouz possibly have done with such a character? She cannot co-exist with the people of Midaq Alley, who appear to be in a perpetual state of torpor. I would suggest that Mahfouz transformed her into a sex worker to demonstrate the tragedy of having no options available, firstly as a woman and secondly as a member of the Egyptian proletariat class.

CHAPTER FOUR: Conclusion

Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-à-vis the Orient; translated into his text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kinds of images...all which add up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient, and finally, representing it or speaking on its behalf...Every writer on the Orient (and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. [Said, 1995: 20]



This cautionary statement by Said might well be applied to the work of Naguib Mahfouz as an Egyptian male, writing about subjects (females) of whom, on the whole, he has no first-hand knowledge. One must bear in mind that he was raised in a very rigid, religious environment where he only had contact with females of his immediate family and he married at forty (which was considered an absurd age for an Arab to marry for the first time). He based many of his characters on people whom he met while occupying various positions for the government, but surely the characters in the discourse of other Arabic writers were also influences (even if it was only subconsciously). However, he had a keen understanding of the different political situations in which he found himself. With that in mind, he constructed a discourse as true to reality (probably more so in the Cairo Trilogy than in the preceding novels) as he was able. I do not think

that the question is whether Mahfouz adopts an anti-patriarchal stance. I am convinced that he does so in both Midaq Alley and the Cairo Trilogy. Perhaps one should question to what extent he has overtly or covertly criticised the patriarchal system and whether it has made a significant impression on the Egyptian psyche. On the surface it appears that his narratives do little more than replicate (and hence possibly reinforce) given social codes and values. Reading his fiction in relation to the radical understanding of the situation of Egyptian women as expressed by El Sadaawi, on the other hand, we can indeed infer that Mahfouz is, in his own guarded way, equally distinct about the abuse of women in his society.

On 23 October 1999, a six-day conference  on gender, which was organised by the Egyptian government's Supreme Council of Culture, convened in Cairo and was attended by numerous scholars and writers from Arab countries and beyond. The conference adopted Qassem Amin's ideology on women's liberation, which may seem rather bizarre in the year 1999. Indeed, a conferee, Muhammad al-Shadhili noted that it seemed as though "time has not passed in the Arab world". [Abisaab et al. 2000:1] The director of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Culture stated that the concerns raised by Amin a century prior to the conference were no less relevant in 1999. There are still two primary obstacles facing the liberation of women: the men in society who think that they know what is best for women and the women who think that men are indeed the superior gender. Afaf al-Najjar, a professor of Islamic Studies at al-Azhar, insisted that veiling is obligatory and she "endorsed the literal Quranic truism that women are inherently

inferior to men because they are deficient- 'naqisat' - in intellect and faith".

[Abisaab et al. 2000:5]

This harks back to the 1920s when the President of the Society for the Renaissance of Egyptian Women (who later became a prominent member of the Muslim Sisterhood), Labibeh Ahmed, wrote that "a woman owed her husband complete obedience...maintaining a quiet demeanor when walking in public places, and avoiding noisy street corners".[Talhami 1996:49] She also appealed to the government to do away with co-education. Essentially, Egyptian women are in exactly the same position in which their predecessors found themselves at the outset of the twentieth century. It is tragic there is still little known about the ambitions and opportunities of women in peasant and industrial labour.



Does this mean that the discourses by writers like Mahfouz, for instance, have been absolutely meaningless? The delegates at the 1999 conference were uncertain whether the transformation of gender structure in Arab society should begin with discourse or with the structures of society itself. [Abisaab, 2000] El Saadawi insists that male thinkers and philosophers who influence public opinion have certainly contributed to the poor light in which women are viewed.

Aggressively she cites Tertullian's assertion of the relationship between women and Satan and that Thomas Aquinas supported this view. Socrates noted that "man was created for noble pursuits, for knowledge and the pleasures of the mind, whereas women were created for sex, reproduction and the preservation of the human species". [El Saadawi 1989:120] The conference delegates agreed,

however, that the “state was a major culprit in the regressive situation of women”.

[Abisaab 2000:6]

That said, there appeared to be a revival in women’s issues during the reign of President Nasser (late 1950s and early 1960s), a leader who encouraged the political involvement of women. However, the 1970s saw a resurgence of Islamic extremism in Egypt (encouraged by the government) and it appears that this is where a regression began. The vicissitudes of Egypt’s political life have ensured that any progress made by Mahfouz’s Midaq Alley or the Cairo Trilogy in the psyche of Egyptian readers with regards to women’s issues appears to have been nullified. Nevertheless, the novels were certainly relevant when they were written and if the subject matter at the 1999 Cairo conference is anything to go by, then Mahfouz’s representation of women in the four novels is as painfully relevant in present day Egypt as it was more than half a century ago.

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