Orientalizing The Female Protagonist in Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*

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Abstract Within the contours of contemporary feminist theory, this paper aims to undermine critical allegations assuming that Naguib Mahfouz is an anti-patriarchal novelist introducing a "balanced view" of the feminine/masculine nexus in his novels. This paper provides a new reading of *Midaq Alley*, Mahfouz's celebrated novel, to uncover the hidden patriarchal ideology underpinning the narrative. Located in the intersectional discourses of hegemony and patriarchy, Mahfouz's narrative aims to distort the identity of the female protagonist by transforming her into a rebellious whore dismantling the foundations of a patriarchal society. On this basis, the novel promotes the masculine narrative advocated by the domineering patriarchal community. By denouncing the justified rebellion of the marginalized protagonist against male brutalities, the author views the powerless female subaltern as a transgressor of domestic traditions. Instead of exploring the spaces — what feminist critics call silences — that exist in domestic collective memory with regard to women, Mahfouz portrays his female protagonist in a way which complies with indigenous patriarchal norms about women. Instead of dealing with Hamida, the female protagonist of the novel, as a victim of a patriarchal society regulated by masculine cultural constructs, the author stresses masculinity and macho conviviality, providing little space for the projection of the female counter-narrative.

Key words patriarchy; narrative; Mahfouz; feminist; brutalities; Oriental

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"Re-Contextualizing Western Modes of Representation in Elias Khoury's *Gates of the City*" was published in *Middle East Critique.*

1. Introduction

In general, Arabic literature and culture are carriers of patriarchal values and the major instruments in the execution of the law of the father. In local religious mythology particularly the Adam myth, women are adjunct to men and are not considered as independent entities. Further, myths in postmodern criticism, are tales used to reinforce a master narrative by providing it with a veneer of "eternal truthfulness" which aims to overshadow the conflicts, contradictions and differences lying beneath the surface. Jean-Francois Lyotard categorizes these differences as "legitimating narratives" (19). In order to uncover the dynamics of gender construction in *Midaq Alley*, the myth of what Hisham Sharabi calls "neo-patriarchy"(4) should be initially explored. Sharabi refers to the dichotomization of emerging classes in the Arab world as neo-patriarchy whereas Miriam Cooke examines neo-patriarchy as a metanarrative that should be questioned.

In a related context, neo-patriarchy is considered as a corporate institution dealing with the female community by appropriating it, making statements about it, authorizing views of it, ruling over it, dominating it, restricting and having authority over it. In *Neo-Patriarchy*, Sharabi points out that patriarchy in contemporary Arab societies is in several ways "no more than a modernized version of the traditional patriarchal sultanate"(7). He argues that neo-patriarchy is a structural corollary of dependent modernization limited to peripheral, semi-colonized and colonized societies in the wake of colonial expansion and European supremacy concluding that Western modernity is authentic and probably is not located in patriarchy. Sharabi also clarifies that patriarchy transcends the issue of gender oppression and involves hierarchal trajectories within social classes in addition to political and religious questions. In the same vein, Anshuman Mondal indicates that Mahfouz's underlying representation of women is "symptomatic of what Sharabi calls neo-patriarchy" (4). In reality, Mahfouz seems to comply with traditional patriarchal categorization of women disguising itself as an adoption of modernized notions of femininity. Unequivocally, the gender construct in *Midaq Alley*[1] is tightly connected with paradigms of power, totality and the position of women within social classes.

In her discussion of the concept of patriarchy, the Egyptian feminist writer, Nawal ElSaadawi argues that class and sex are simultaneously responsible for the oppression of women in Arab societies. Personal life obviously includes the

intricacies of sex, the relations between man and woman and the relations between production and the division of labor. She proceeds, "Arab women are still exposed to different forms of oppression (national, class and sexual). The original cause of their triple oppression is the patriarchal class system which manifests itself internationally as world capitalism and imperialism and nationally as the feudal and capitalist classes of Third World countries" (1982:206). According to ElSaadawi, women in the Arab culture are conditioned to accept oppression because throughout successive ages "a system has been built up which aims at destroying the ability of women to see the exploitation to which they are subjected"(1980:5). While female sexuality is suppressed and any expression of it outside marriage brings dishonor to the family "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"(1980:30).

Moreover, in Islamic doctrine men are superior to women in the light of several verses from the Koran: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard."[2] Allegedly, male superiority is not contingent on any biological or gender element but it is attributed to God's will who has made the one superior to the other and because men spend their wealth to maintain women. There is no doubt that female inferiority is reinforced by the agency of a masculine and patriarchal culture rampant in Arab societies where the psychological and mental 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 his life but differs in the fact her body has grown, and she may have reached the age of thirty or forty."[3]

Apart from the preceding masculine / feminine debate, Mahfouz, the Nobel Prize winner, is described as "the godfather of the Arabic novel and one of the major underground historians" (Mehrez 9). Moreover, Roger Allen demonstrates that the sheer bulk and sophistication of Mahfouz's contribution to Arabic fiction in Egypt and the Arab world as a whole, "has tended to push other contributors somewhat into the shadows" (79). It is relevant to illustrate that Mahfouz was profoundly influenced by Western literature to the extent that his novels are often perceived as developed patterns of prose genres affiliated with the European novel. His fiction is generally read in the context of Western novels; its trends measured against supposed western equivalents, its innovations viewed as parallels or

departures from genres "like existentialism and magical realism" (Phillips 285). As a whole, Mahfouz came under the impact of several Western writers such as Gustave Flaubert, Honore de Balzac, Emile Zola, Charles Dickens, William Faulker, Dostoevsky and others.

However, the presentation of women in his fiction simultaneously reveals traditions deeply rooted in religious / cultural norms and echoes female images of Oriental women as reflected in Western colonial novels. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said points out that Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan, Kuchuk Hanem, becomes symbolic of the power relations between West and East. It also has generated "a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence or history. He spoke for her and represented her"(Said 6). Emulating Flaubert who was one of his masters, Mahfouz speakson behalf of the female subaltern in *Midaq Alley*.[4] Since Orientalism is a totally male phenomenon, to use the words of Said, Mahfouz provides stereotypical images appropriated from oriental discourses introducing the Eastern woman (Hamida) as seductive and the Eastern man (Abbas) as shy. Duplicating master narratives peculiar to colonial fiction where Oriental women are projections of European male fantasy, he views the relationship between the Western colonizer (represented by the British troops dominating Hamida's body) and the colonized Oriental (Hamida) as one of power and domination.

Though Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* is categorized as a realist novel implying an ideological commitment to social change exposing the impact of "nineteenth-century French realism" on the authorand reflecting "fatalistic narratives of social and cultural determinism" (Oersen 5), the novelis pervaded by a gendered discourse generated by apatriarchalideology latent in the male subconsciousness. It is associated with an intense fear and distrust of women. Although the harem no longer exists in the Arab world as a physical reality, its psychological ramifications are still in every house. Women are conflated with the body and its disruptive sexual impulses. The patriarchal order rooted in Arab culture is based on binary and ontological oppositions between men and women, reason and desire, order and chaos. In most of Mahfouz's novels, few women have the courage to construct a life of their own beyond the seated-off chambers ruled by the patriarch.

Exploring the conscious and unconscious ideological bases of Arab-Muslim patriarchal systems, several critics have investigated what is called "the Muslim erotic and orthodox texts." They argue that in Muslim erotic texts women are portrayed as omnisexual beings transgressing patriarchal and social systems and violating the class structure in pursuit of personal sexual satisfaction. The or thodox

discourse gives priority to male desire as a basis for social order. In this context, the submission of women to men is given a spiritual value equal in importance to human submission to God.[5] In most of his early novels,[6] Mahfouz, a pioneer in the male-dominated literary tradition in the Arab world in the Post WWII era provides depictions of Egyptian women that are often reductive perpetuating local myth of female subjection preoccupied with female characters delineation, he creates them within preconceived stereotypes: motherhood versus prostitution and innocence versus sin, and thus reduces women to mere objects of voyeuristic attention suitable for preconceived types and stereotypes indispensable to a patriarchal culture.

Nevertheless, many critics and scholars consider Mahfouz as a novelist defending women's rights in the Arab world. They point out that Mahfouz in his representation of gender advocates a non-patriarchal perspective. For example Miriam Cooke claims that Mahfouz is a feminist writer who challenges patriarchy in his society. Adopting a feminist stance due to his capture of the shifting gender relations withinthe Egyptian society, Mahfouz, according to Cooke's doubtful opinion, interrogates masculinity particularly the way in which he assumed that gender relations are located in "asymmetric power"(107). Cooke also illustrates that the early works of Mahfouz reflect what she calls "the psychological and sexual victimization of women, by selfish greedy men"(107). Ostensibly, Mahfouz seems, on the surface, to be a liberal writer who deals with the gender issue objectively but "it is not difficult to see that the novelist's neutrality of presentation is only superficial" (Elenany 23) particularly in *Midaq Alley*.

2.The Dynamics of Anti-Feminism in Arabic Literature

In traditional Arabic literature women are presented as decayed figures more absent than present and are marginalized by being muted. Even if women are given full physical presence, their power of speech is obliterated. Until the 1950s, Arabic literature "is not about women. It is not about women and men equally. It is by and about men" (Russ3). Arabic literature and culture masculinity as opposed to femininity is embedded in religious, social and economic interfaces besides the vortex of inherited tradition. Different forces have historically given impetus to the cultural metamorphosis shaping the concept of masculinity. Moreover, the institutionalization of masculinity sustained by religious and political intersects with what Judith Butler calls "racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (3). Masculinity, reinforced by the patriarchal matrix produced a diversity of male paradigms and hierarchiesunderpinning and determiningcontemporary gender politics in the Middle East.

In Midaq Alley, Mahfouz introduces an antagonistic perspective toward the female community.Lying at the core of Mahfouz's negative vision of Cairo are hostile images of women dominated by greed, lust, gossip, and envy. These women are either old and sterile like Umm Hamida and Mrs. Saniya Afify, or have had children in a remote past like Mrs. Salim Alwan and Mrs. Radwan Hussainy, or hate children and women equally like young Hamida delineated as totally self-engrossed and dominated by one passion, her lust for power and riches. In fact, the female figures the reader encounters in the novel, according to Mona Amyuni, sum up in their lives, activities, and yearnings the image of Cairo itself, a kind of female monster whose entrails are chewed by imperialist greed and a small, corrupt, rich class under King Faruk (25).

Historically, male philosophers and writers have played a significantrole in disseminating anti-feminist sentiments which contributed to the degraded status of women in some societies including the Arab world. For example, Thomas Aquinas refers to the connections between women and Satan whereas Socrates observed 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".[7] In an interview with Salwa Elnaimi, Mahfouzstates: "our world is masculine and one cannot imagine it otherwise.Women continue to struggle to become part of social life. But I could not describe a world in which women play the same roles as men."[8] The preceding argument by Mahfouz disrupts Cooke's notion about Mahfouz's alleged anti-patriarchal perspective underpinning his fiction. There is no doubt that Mahfouz was brought up in a very conservative religious environment and he married at the age of forty which was an anomaly at his own time when men used to marry in their early twenties. It is also known that he did not have direct contact with females either at work or within his own family. The most famous works of Mahfouz constantly betray his anti-feminist sentiments.

In Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy*, Yasin, the stepson of Amina, a central and dignified female figure in the *Trilogy* refers to her as "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 is denied all opportunity for adultery" (2001:88). In this context, ElSaadawi, argues that none of the male authors in the West and the Arab world she has read "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 defense of human rights, human values and justice."[9] ElSaadawi points out that in Mahfouz's fiction women fallinto two main dichotomies. The first category includes "sacred pure mothers and frigid chaste, respectable wives"

whereas the second group is epitomized by "the prostitute and the mistress, women who are warm, pulsating, seductive, but despised" (1980:166).

As a counter argument against critical assumptions suggesting that Mahfouz, is a pro-feministwriter who emphasizes the evils of patriarchy in his fiction, the incidents of *Midaq Alley*divulge a one-sided vision of the female Oriental. His representation of Hamida, the female protagonist of the novel, is polarized by a complex pattern of images situating her as a whore and a rebel who threatens an inherited patriarchal system. Markedly, Mahfouz has fallen into the snares of patriarchy in the novel most likely because of his gender and cultural/religious orientation and since language speaks in literary texts not the author to use the words of Roland Barthes there is an ample evidence in the text to support this assumption.

In this basis*, Midaq Alley* is integrated in the male/female power nexus prevailing the narrative. Viewing the female subaltern as a vicious woman (vile whore) and stripping her of her humanity, Mahfouz's master narrative is transformed into a patriarchal construct characterized by what Jacques Derrida calls "violence of the letter, a violence of difference, of classification, and of the system of appellations" (110). Viewing the Eastern female as a lustful whore, Mahfouz portrays the protagonist in a manner not only conforming to local patriarchal traditions but also to norms deeply seated in Orientalist and colonialist literature. In fact, Hamida is defined by a "system of values that treats women as mere sex objects and inferior, helpless beings" (Amyuni 27). Unequivocally, the status of women in the alley as dominated by a local patriarchal institution represented by the father, the brother, or the husband. Within this hegemonic system, woman's life and destiny are controlled by a male master or a guardian. In her study of *Midaq Alley*, Mona Amyuni points out that early marriage is welcome to guarantee the bride's virginity, a symbol of family honor. She adds that "forced marriages are customary and it is taken for granted that the girl has no say in the choice of her husband. Sexual life and sexual fulfillment are therefore prohibited to women, while men indulge in polygamy."[10]

In the patriarchal microcosm of *Midaq Alley*, Hamida's narrative is restructured and rearticulated to conform to masculine and class politics. Feminism and patriarchy, in the novel, intersect with other issues such as class conflict and colonization. Like other men of the new lower middle class Mahfouz seems to believe that the limited emancipation available to women in Egypt since the women's liberation movement led by Qasim Amin at the outset of the twentieth century threatened to increase competition for scarce professional positions. The

limited emancipation obtained by women denied men their "traditional source of status as guardians of family honor" and imposed on them "valuesassociated with their European competitors and oppressors" (Cole405). This association is evident in the narrative. In *Midaq Alley*, Hamida is simultaneously exploited by the male community in the alley as well as Farag, the pimp who allured her into the prostitution swamp selling her body to the British colonizers.[11]

3. De-centralizing the Female Subaltern in *Midaq Alley*

In several novels by Mahfouz including the *Cairo Trilogy*, women are frequently treated as property owned by men. They are eroticized, rewarded or punished according to male desires. In *Midaq Alley*, Hamida, as a constructed body of seduction and desire is textually contained and the myth of the sensual female is disseminated in the text. From the beginning, Hamidais concurrently threatened by the intruding gazes of the male narrator and the male community in the alley who condemned her for her explicit sexuality. She is seen by both male and female as a woman who ventures to challenge the patriarchal authority. In *Midaq Alley*, Egyptian women are seen as what Edward said calls "communities of interpretations" (Said 1985:89) which remain voiceless until being reinterpreted and reconstructed by the masculine author. For example Hamida, remains inaccessible to the extent that the reader of *Midaq Alley* learns more about an inherited patriarchal system rather than s/he learns about the life of the female protagonist. Portraying Hamida as an incarnation of the forces of evil in the alley and viewing her male lovers as helpless preys duped by her seduction and temptation, Mahfouz's narrative categorizes the former not only as immoral but depraved. In this sense, the novel provides support for the powerful at the expense of the powerless depicting the aggressive males as victims and the marginalized female as victimizer humiliating the one who has been historically humiliated. Hamida is introduced as a young girl who is not interested in the role of the traditional wife involved in house-keeping, suckling and bearing children. She also wants to emulate the liberal Jewish girls whose economic freedom gives them the means to dress well and whose attitude at that time is considered as a transgression of the boundaries of the conservative local morality. Hamida encounters these girls outside the alley and she competed with them because she was aware of her beauty compared to the girls. They look rich, free and bold though not as attractive as her. Moreover, she was not able to imitate the Jewish girls and get a job in the factory because she was illiterate, therefore she selects prostitution falling into the trap of the pimp.

Ostensibly, the factory girls triggered her rebelliousness and revolt against the alley particularly after the failure of her marriage from Salim Alwan. Alwan's sudden illness, which desexualizes him, shatters her dreams and thus she wants more than ever to escape the stranglehold of the alley. The agent of her release is the pimp Ibrahim Farag, the pimp whose Arabic name is translated by Cooke as "Abraham the Liberator."[12] Meeting with him for the first time, Hamida was attracted to Farag's neat appearance and luxurious life style. She thought he is a passionate lover like Abbas, the barber or Salim Alwan, the rich merchant. Farag, infiltrated into the alley during general election campaigns.[13] He was able to drag Hamida out of the alley by pretending love for her. Finally she fell into the snares of his evil schemes and became a whore. Though falling in love with Farag in the beginning, Hamids was not concerned about the idea of marrying him after she discovered he was a pimp.

Due to the wide difference between the alley's world and the new world of the pimp, Farag succeeded in luring Hamida out of the alley described as a wasteland and a graveyard of decaying bones where women are subject to enormous pains resulting from constant pregnancies, children-bearing and filth. Farag transforms Hamida intoa prostitute changing her attire and external appearance. He also changed her name into Titi in order to be pronounced easily by her customers mainly the British soldiers in the tavern. Nevertheless, the transition from Hamida into Titi and from the alley to the brother took place when the female subaltern "was surrounded by social and economic difficulties and suffering from hunger and deprivation. She was prepared to do anything including prostitution to achieve more money, power and luxury but she wanted also to protest and rebel against her oppressors particularly in the alley" (ElSheikh 1991:88).

Ebrahim ElSheikh points out that Hamida is inferior to the male community in the alley because of her "lack of advanced education, social immobility and blind concentration on the age-old practices of housekeeping and marriage" (90). On the surface, her decision to become a sex worker brings shame to the whole alley and inevitably she has to pay for her non-conformist behavior. Evidently,Hamida is oppressed by an unjust social and political order and devastated by poverty, social classification and a brutal male-dominated mentality. She was given two options: either to stay in the impoverished alley or to become a prostitute.She was "more or less inferior to men on almost all levels, whether economic, social or political."[14] Like the women community in the alley she is marginalized and crushed. Some women were working very hard to keep their starving families whereas others were deprived of any opportunity to improve their lives and cross the poverty line.

Few critics sympathize with Hamida considering her as a scapegoat who takes prostitution willingly as a means of gaining independence to confront her degrading economic condition. Cooke observes that prostitutes are "the most interesting and creative women characters in the fiction of Mahfouz" (111). Cooke clarifies that Hamida "has to break out of a world that expects her to be other than she wants to be. She will break that particular circle only if she can escape the constrictions of her space" (116). Likewise, Amyuni argues that Mahfouz "depicts Hamida as the direct result of a corrupt socioeconomic situation that imprisons her and absolutely determines her fate"(30). Nevertheless, many conservative critics severely criticized Hamida for her rebellion against domestic social traditions. For example, Shahinaz Abdel-Hady claims that Hamida "has no religious, moral or human values to believe in"(84). According to Abdel-Hadi, Hamida has rejected her destiny as a traditional Egyptian woman and the convention of marriage is not important for her. She is not condemned by her circumstances to sell her body. Further, Hamida has rejected her destiny as a traditional Egyptian woman for whom marriage is the sine qua non for social acceptability. She is not condemned by her circumstances to sell her body as she is engaged to a respectable young man and has a secure, if poor and unexciting future in the alley (83). Because of these reasons Hamida should be banished out of the alley

The rebellious nature of Hamida coupled with her beauty materialistic ambitions paved the way for her to become a whore according to some critical speculations. Marius Deeb demonstrates that Hamida, a "stubborn, narcissistic and over-zealous" woman is not crushed by poverty or social circumstances and she was fully responsible for her destiny, "Mahfouz never states anywhere in the novel that Hamida has been forced to become a prostitute" (1991:33). In the same scenario, Deeb argues that Hamida is a cunning woman who wants to get rid of her pimp and her lover at the same time, therefore she encouraged Abbas to take revenge against Farag. Other critics who sympathize with Hamida consider her as one of the few women characters in Arab men's literature who makes a real choice. She chooses prostitution because her choices are limited, not because she is forced. Sasson Somekh illustrates that "Hamida is not a pathetic prey: unconsciously she is willing to be trapped"(85).

Nevertheless, the mainstream narrative is over-eclipsed by a predominantly patriarchal perspective which dehumanizes Hamida. By identifying her as "a whore by instinct"[15], the narrator adopts the voice of Farag, allowing him to exercise his masculine power on the female victim. In other words, the male pimp uses his power to classify, categorize and represent the subaltern other. By calling the poor

Hamida a prostitute even before she fell into sin, the pimp utilizes his strength as a male who is able to name and identify. Since naming and addressing is an act of possession performed by the dominant oppressive narrator, any name attributed to the female subaltern is a hegemonic act of naming, i.e. erasing the real or original name. It is then a re-naming intended to deprive the female protagonist from her identity in order to affiliate her with the prostitution quagmire or obliterate her existence.

The process of identity formation through which the male narrator creates and formats the female other and the traumatic impact of such formation on the victim is apparent in Midaq Alley. The male-female relationship in the narrative is damaged by masculine assumptions and psycho-pathology about women inherent in Arab culture. As a matter of fact, the entire process of refashioning, labeling, framing, naming and renaming are all masculine strategies aiming to subjugate and negate female individuality. Firdous Azim argues that the notion of "naming and addressing is an act of possession to be performed by the dominant subject" (60). Faragassociates Hamida with inherited immorality betraying his masculine supremacy of naming and calling her a whore. He also changes her name into Titi to fit her new role as a professional prostitute frequented by foreign troops.

In the beginning of the narrative, Hamida was supposed to be sold by her foster mother to Salim Alwan, the company owner, at a low price. Afterward, she was transformed into Titi who was sold at higher price by Farag to the colonizing soldiers. In this sense, Hamida's body is physically exploited by representatives of a patriarchal culture and their accomplices. Ignoring the wide age gap between them, Mr. Alwan wants to marry Hamida her for sexual purposes after his aging wife fails to satisfy his raging desires. Farag changes her name and teaches her English language and dancing in order to sell her body to the British troops. Attributing a new name to the female subaltern by an agent of patriarchy involves an un-naming dynamic which is an act of hegemony aiming to erase her original or real name. Renaming in this context intends to obliterate the female identity in order to affiliate or misappropriate her. In a related context, the female subaltern is dealt with as a newborn baby appropriated by the father / narrator/ pimp when given her name. This process also aims at stereotyping the victim by placing her at the bottom of the social and human hierarchy.

In Midaq Alley, Hamida is reduced to a non-entity, an object enclosed into a gendered classification. From her first appearance Hamida is introduced through the gaze of the male narrator and the male characters in the alley: "Hamida set out, wrapping her cloak around her" and listening to the clack of her shoes on the stairs

as she made her way to the street. She walked slowly conscious of both her gait and her appearance, for "she was aware that four eyes were examining her closely." The eyes belong to Salim Alwan, the company owner, and to Abbas, the barber. Apparently, she is viewed as a pure sex object not a human being:"She draped her cloak in such a way that it emphasized her ample hips and her full and rounded breasts. The cloak revealed her trim ankles on which she wore a bangle; it also exposed her black hair and attractive bronze face" (Mahfouz 1977: 33).

In *Midaq Alley*, Hamida, the female in the cloak, sustains the stereotype of the latent sexuality waiting to be unveiled. She is viewed as the embodiment of the passionate, sensual and inviting woman. The focus here is on Hamida's external appearance with implications that the male agents only have the power of unveiling and penetrating the secrets of the female body in cloak. In other words, the male whether in the alley (Abbas and Alwan) or in the brothel (Farag) or in the tavern (the British soldiers) has the masculine supremacy of pulling the veil / the cloak. Pulling the veil / the cloak off a woman in colonial fiction signifies or "serves as a visual metaphor for ideas of opening and discovery" (175). Franz Fanon considers the pulling of a veil off a woman as "baring her secret, breaking her resistance, making her available for adventure" (43). Emulating colonial fiction, the author of *Midaq Alley* portrays sexual relationships within the power structure integral to the Egyptian society. Unquestionably, Hamida is the victim of a socially decayed system and her combative nature is limited to the sex object which she represents in her microcosm. Lured out of the alley by Farag, Hamida was unveiled and inevitably lost the power game with the pimp, because "he is a man in male society that has crushed women for endless centuries" (Amyuni 30).

The journey of Hamida from the alley, an epitome of impoverished conservative Egyptian/Arab societies, to the world of prostitution is also dominated by male power and desire. In this context, the text is shaped by masculine politics engendering a set of stereotypes about the female protagonist. Hamida's story is narrated in a male-oriented manner reducing her to a sexual object. Events are tailored to tantalize the sexual fantasies of the male readers whose eyes are determined to colonize the body of the female subaltern. Laura Mulvey indicates that women are frequently colonized by the male gaze "so that they can be said to connote '*to-be-looked-at-ness*'" (162).The discourse of eroticization surrounding Hamida provides a pretext for the male gaze to project its fantasies on the female Oriental who is styled accordingly. Obviously, the powerful patriarchal discourse reinforced by religion and tradition guaranteed men a sense of superiority in terms of society, politics, economics and sex. In *Midaq Alley*, patriarchy

ferociously defends its policies, therefore female individuality is problematic in the conservative society of the alley where women should conform to inherited norms.

In the view of Henry Giroux, we live in "an age marked by a crisis of power, patriarchy, authority, identity and ethics" (2). For centuries, women in Arab culture have been looked at but never allowed the power of looking. They are frozen in what Laura Mulvey calls "moments of erotic contemplation" (163). It is within "this economy of the gaze" that the body of Hamida is reified. The male gaze aims to strip off and break through Hamida's "intimate life." According to Hager Ben Dris, "the gaze has the power of unveiling and penetrating the secrets" of the female other (167). Looking is a male privilege denoting masculine power of action while the looked-at-female is a passive object of the male gaze: "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact"[16].

The gaze in psychoanalysis emerges as a central problem. In Freudian terms the object of the gaze (the woman) is approached as an absence or a lack. Her lack of the male penis arises an anxiety of castration in the male looker. The symbolic castration happens once the female shrinks into an object and she is mutilated as a punishment for luring the male. In *Midaq Alley* Hamida is reduced into an object through a strategy which "objectifies her into a fragment, a lack, a part, an object of what was once whole" (Sullivan 95). Thus, the male unconsciously adopts two ways of escape from his fears: He either underestimates or subjugates the female and punishes her or over-evaluates her into a fetish. In other words, the masculine oratory is basically an ambivalent discourse. Through such an ambivalent perspective the masculine discourse maintains, perpetuates and gains power.

Besides, the ambivalent way of stereotyping the female other is perceived by Homi Bhabha as a Freudian fetishism as "the disavowal of difference, is that repetitious scene around the problem of castration" (74). This fetishism implies an ambivalent vacillation between an acceptance of similarity and a refusal of difference. The ambivalence of the masculine is originated in the oscillation between the pleasure of acceptance and the anxiety of disavowal. The fetish also bears within the seeds of its own ruin. While being seductive and desirable, the female other is filthy and repulsive. This affection and hostility which runs parallel with the acknowledgement and disavowal of castration, according to Freud "are mixed in unequal proportions in different cases, so that the one or the other is more clearly recognizable" (345).

It is relevant to argue that *Midaq Alley* abounds with references to sexuality,

aggression and enslavement which are symbolically conflated in the narrative. Further, the female beauty of Hamida explicitly exerts an emasculating power over the men in the alley and the masculine tries to confront the power of castration. The fear of weaning masculine power is indicted through castration anxieties motifs in addition to images and metaphors of sexual weakness in the text epitomized by the Salim Alwan episode and the symbolic castration of Abbas by the foreign soldiers. Mr. Alwan is afflicted with a disease which strips him of his sexual potency shortly after he decided to marry Hamida.

The embedded problem in *Midaq Alley*is not female sexuality but the sexuality of the Egyptian-Arab man, his burden. Thereupon, there is no surprise that the males in the alley attempt to liberate themselves from the emasculating power of the female Oriental. In fact, the dilemma of the Arab male "becomes his sexuality and its control and it is this which is transformed into the need to control the sexuality of the other, the other as sexualized female" (Gilman 256). In this context, Hamida is viewed as a femme fatale, a sexually attractive woman but cruel and dangerous to men who have relations to her. The "femme fatale" is defined by Gilbert and Gubar as an immoral female "whose mystical powers deprive man of his powers" (8). Hamida, the engulfing oriental female who rejected to be chastised and her sexuality was not calmed and subjugated should be mercilessly punished by the patriarchal forces inside and outside the alley.

Mahfouz delineates Hamida as a ferocious woman who is strikingly attractive: "Her most remarkable features were her black, beautiful eyes. When, however she set her delicate lips and narrowed her eyes she could take on an appearance of strength and determination. Her temper had always been something no one could ignore" (Mahfouz 1977: 21). Her foster mother, Umm Hamida, told her that no husband "would want to embrace a burning firebrand like you" (1977: 22). She is not interested in marriage or bearing children or cooking or serving a husband like the other women in the alley. Instead of longing for traditional marriage "she was constantly beset by a desire to fight and conquer and she draws pleasure from attracting men and dominating her foster mother" (1977: 34). In the same vein, the narrator points out that she does not care about morality or religion but seeks power, money and men. Thus, Hamida overtly epitomizes the Amazonian woman or the femme fatale defined by Rebecca Scott as "a powerful and threatening figure, bearing a sexuality that is perceived to be rapacious or fatal to her male partners" (1992:8).

In a related argument, Louis Montrose demonstrates that "Amazonian mythology seems symbolically to embody and to control a collective anxiety about

the power of the female not only to dominate or reject the male but to create and destroy him" (15). Therefore, Hamida — who dares to subvert the male supremacy by emulating the figure of the Amazon or the femme fatale — should be penalized by being deprived of marriage and being cursed as a cast-out prostitute. According to Walter Raleigh, the Amazon societies are known to be basically located in Africa and Asia. For him, the women who are categorized as Amazonians are existed in the ancient societies in Africa and Asia. The Amazonian tribes are governed by queens not kings and the basic characteristics that distinguish the Amazon is cruelty and terror: "They are very cruel especially toward those who attempt to invade their territories."[17] Geographically speaking, Hamida is from Egypt, an African country, therefore, she partly fits into the figure of the Amazon given her cruelty and ferocity. As the alley's queen of beauty, she desperately fights against the invading and intruding powers of patriarchy but unlike the Amazon women, she lost her battle with the enemies of femininity.

4. Conclusion

Literature does not exist in a vacuum but it is originated in cultural and social milieu shaped by ideological orientations. Instead of reconstituting the distorted image of the female other, in *Midaq Alley*, Mahfouz projected her in a way consistent with the patriarchal politics of his era. His priori approach pertaining androcentric tendencies manifesting themselves in his amplified presentation of the male characters leads to female abuse and subordination. The female other is therefore projected as obsessed with a spirit of violence and abuse. Hamida destabilizes the fixed moral codes of the alley thus she should be dismissed out of it. To protect what David Radavich calls "wounded patriarchy" (135) the alley brutally cracks down on Hamida.

The events of the novel impart that Hamida is victimized three times: by poverty, by local patriarchs and by the British colonizers. In the eyes of the male narrator, Hamida is the cause for all the evils in the alley. She is held responsible for Abbas's departure to work in the British army camp though we did not have any specific incidents in the text to confirm this allegation. She never talked with him or persuaded him to work with the British army. It is Hussain Kirsha, the friend of Abbas, who suggested that the later can emulate him and join the British camp to improve his income. When he heard of Hamida's involvement in prostitution, Hussain, a representative of the alley's male community, was offended. He promptly urged Abbas, to slaughter Hamida: "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." [18] This argument is triggered by the honor killing notion deeply rooted in Arab societies.

Surprisingly, Hamida alone has brought shame and disgrace upon the entire alley according to the narrator. Therefore, she should compromise her dreams as retribution for her transgression and violation of the local moral codes. In Arab societies, male sexual corruption is ignored whereas women's illicit sexual behavior is not tolerated. ElSaadawi argues that a man's honor is safe as long as the female members of his family keep their hymens intact. She adds that the concept of honor is more closely related to the behavior of the women in the family (31) or even in the neighborhood than to male conducts. For example, Hussain Kirsha is offended by Hamida's behavior whereas he turns a blind eye to the delinquency of his father, a drug-trafficker who spent his money on poor young boys in order to sleep with him.

Hamida is also incarcerated because she rejected marriage as an institution where women are domesticated and subjugated. She is abused twice because she is a woman and an Oriental. While Hamida is hurt severely and tarnished for being seductive, capricious and strong-willed, the sexually dangerous Kirsha, the café owner, who exploited young boys is not punished. According to the male community in the alley, Abbas's love for Hamida led him to cooperate with the colonizers in order to improve his financial condition and satisfy her ambitions. Undoubtedly, *Midaq Alley* is hermetically sealed against the female subaltern. The text is rooted in a patriarchal culture where everything is approached from a male perspective. Hamida is being marginalized by being denied a voice, by being objectified and renamed. The readers are given no details about her parents or her full name unlike other characters in the novel.

The image of the female protagonist, in *Midaq Alley*, unfortunately proclaims the predominance of a hostile male narrative originating in a backward indigenous culture. The valorization of the militant views toward Hamida turns the novel into a patriarchal tale depicting women as inferior. Moreover, the authorial adoption of masculine views about the humiliated female protagonist, introduced through the eyes of the male community in the alley, intensifies the hegemonic overtones of the text.Shaped by historical and monolithic discourses on women, the female subaltern in *Midaq Alley*, remains the victim of hegemonic masculine representation indispensible to patriarchal environments. A scrutinized reading of *Midaq Alley* concedes an undercurrent patriarchal agenda prevailing the novel particularly with regard to the treatment of the relationship between Hamida and her lovers, the male oppressor.

Some critics claim that Mahfouz broke new ground in Arabic literature by exposing ways in which women have historically been denied their humanity opening the academic literary canon to previously neglected anti-women discourses. This premise may be apparent in few other novels by Mahfouz but it is not applicable to Midaq Alley, one of the most well-known novels in Western literary canons. Instead of exploring the spaces — what feminist critics call silences — that exist in domestic collective memory with regard to women, Mahfouz portrays his female protagonist in a way which complies with local patriarchal norms about women. His representation of women conforms to domestic patriarchal visions of femininity while on the surface it masks itself as a progressive image of womanhood. In this sense the narrative is reflective of what Sharabi refers to as "neo-patriarchy" prevailing Arab culture.

Egyptian and Arabic cultural mythology is replete with negative images about women manufactured by male authors and disseminated in literary works. Cooke argues that female characters in Mahfouz's fiction threaten male identities while the males "are constructed according to the binary model of master/slave." She argues: "their conception of masculinity is too rigid to accommodate interaction with women on the basis of equality" (108). In this context, Naguib Mahfouz has been characterized by Cooke as a pro-feminist author deconstructing patriarchal constructs and giving voice to the voiceless female subalterns in the Arab world. This paper introduces a new reading of *Midaq Alley* arguing that Mahfouz's one dimensional and minimalized portrayal of women betrays that the novel is entrenched in patriarchal trajectories aiming to trivialize the role of the female protagonist, Hamida, who is demoted and given peripheral proportions in the narrative canvas. The paper also illustrates that the act of stereotyping imposed on Hamida is a male invention, therefore, it is repeated in Mahfouz's novels following *Midaq Alley* until it becomes integrated into the popular and collective consciousness of the Arab people. Evidently, the readers of Mahfouz encountered several silenced female subalterns in other successive novels who replicate Hamida.

Notes

1. *Midaq Alley* is Mahfouz's most well-known novel in the West because it was translated and published in English in 1966 before he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in the late eighties. Written in Arabic in 1947 the events are set in a tiny blind alley in the heart of Islamic Cairo near the historic district of Alazhar. Most of the action occurs in the microcosm of the alley. Diachronically the narrative spans the WWII events and the presence of the British soldiers (and

their allies) in Egypt.

2. The citation is quoted from *The Koran,* The Women Sura/Section, verse 34 translated from Arabic by Yusuf Ali.See Abdulla Yusuf Ali, *The Koran*. Beirut: Alaalami Library press, 2001. 114.

3. See ElSadaawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, trans. Sharif Hatata. London: Zed Press, 1980. 30.

4. The incidents of the novel are located in ancient Cairo uncovering deteriorating system within which age-old institutions are collapsing and human relationships are totally fragmented.

5. For an interesting account on this issue, see Fatnah Sabbah's book: *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*. New York: Pergamon, 1984.

6. *Midaq Alley* (1947) was written after Mahfouz published his first collection of short stories in the 1930's followed by the publications of three historical novels: *Fate's Mockery* (1939), *Radobis* (1943), *The Struggle for Thebes* (1944) and two novels *New Cairo* (1945), and *Khan al-Khalili* (1946) belonging to what critics call the tragic realism period in his career.

7. See ElSadaawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 1980.120.

8. Cited in Miriam Cooke, "Men Constructed: In the Mirror of Prostitution." *Naguib Mahfouz: From Regional Fame to Global recognition*. Eds. Michael Beard and Adnan Haydar. New York: Syracuse University Press, 199. 108.

9. See ElSadaawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 1980.160.

10. See Mona Takieddine Amyuni,"Images of Arab Women in *Midaq Alley* by Naguib Mahfouz and *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Saleh." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (17) 1985: 28.

11. The events of the novel took place during the last years of WWII. In his introduction, the translator, Trevor Le Gassick, argues that the novel is set in the early forties providing glimpses of "unusual intimacy into Egypt in a period of fast transition." However he affirms that "both the locale and the events of this novel should certainly not be viewed within a narrow framework of time. We see how characters are enticed away from the roles natural to their birth and upbringing by the hope of material gains chiefly through work with the British army." See Trevor Le Gassick, Ed. *Critical Perspectives on Naguib Mahfouz*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1991. 8.

12. See Cooke, "Men Constructed: In the Mirror of Prostitution." 1993.117.

13. Political corruption and the economics of war constituted the backdrop of the novel. The war (WWII) enhanced the economic potential for the alley dwellers opening new work opportunities for young men in British army camps and for young girls in the domain of prostitution entertaining the British colonizers — the soldiers in the tavern. In the novel Cairo is delineated as a squalid city "gripped in decomposition.""Images of Arab Women in *Midaq Alley* by Naguib Mahfouz and *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Saleh."*International Journal of Middle East Studies* (17) 1985: 25. .

14. See Ibrahim ElSheikh, "Egyptian Women as Portrayed in the Social Novels of Naguib Mahfouz." *Critical Perspectives on Naguib Mahfouz*, ed. Trevor Le Gassick. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1991. 88.

15. See Naguib Mafouz, *Midaq Alley*, trans. Trevor Le Gassick. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1977. 170.

16. See Lura Mulvey,"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed. Anthony Easthope and Kate McGoam. Birmingham: Open University Press, 1992. 162.

17. Sir Walter Raleigh's account on the Amazons was published in 1904. For further details about the attitude of Raleigh toward Amazonian women, see Hager Ben Dris. "Closed to Oriental Heroines: Ethos of the Colonial Text." *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* (36) 2003: 164-189.

18. See Naguib Mafouz,*Midaq Alley*, trans. Trevor Le Gassick. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1977. 279.

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