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Identity, Morality and Social Critique at the Crossroads of Othering: a Study of Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*

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Abstract: *This paper investigates othering in Naguib Mahfouz's Midaq Alley through the intersection of identity, morality and social critique. Also trademarked otherness or the politics of the other, othering is a complex phenomenon that cuts across different fields such as literary studies, sociology, politics, cultural studies, anthropology, etc. As a pervasive and multidimensional recurrence, othering is a versatile concept that traverses the spheres of the superior and inferior individuals across cultures, elucidating the power politics between them. This paper, using postcolonial theory, hopes to unearth the marginalisation, silencing and exclusion the concerned characters in the novel under study experience in their own community for, among other reasons, failing to conform themselves to the mainstream conventions of their social milieu. The paper reveals that the characters receive a cancerous, multilayered othering on the grounds of identity, morality, class and gender.*

Keywords: Othering, Identity, Morality, Social Critique, *Midaq Alley*.

Introduction

This paper grapples with the question of identity, morality and social critique through the lens of othering in Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*. The term othering is a multifaceted concept that straddles diverse aspects of life. Also called otherness and the concept of "the other", othering connotes the marginalisation, exclusion and oppression of individuals or groups in the midst of a dominant culture or society. It is the process of differentiating and suppressing people, marking them as distinct, exotic and subordinate. It is the act of objectifying, silencing and stunting the potentials of the voiceless and the powerless. Othering occurs when individuals or groups are branded as fundamentally inferior and often different to the mainstream culture. People experience othering because of their failure to incorporate themselves in the dominant culture. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) serves as a salient conceptual fulcrum on which the concept of othering although arguably, revolves. The work expounds on how Western discourse views the "orient" as an exotic and inferior other, vindicating the imposition of imperial dominance on them. He states that the "orient" is a "static and inferior counterpart to the progressive West." Said argues that "orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans." This illuminates the superiority tendencies of the Europeans who have always developed predilections for viewing themselves as the 'self' and others as 'others'.

The above proposition echoes Spivak's conviction of the other as the self's shadow (24). In her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that "the subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish." This quote explains the degree to which the woman who, in most cultures is considered as inferior, is severely otherised and alienated. Spivak proceeds to critique the silencing of colonised voices in hegemonic discourses, exposing and stressing the crossroads of power and representation. Due to the intense othering they receive, some women have considered 'dewomanisation' an alternative to the phallocentric propensities of the patriarchal structure. Bhabha (1994) argues that othering is intercalated with race, class and gender, eventuating in hybridity. This means that the three are the catalysts for the rampant recurrence of othering. Bhabha adds that "it is the trope of our time to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond." This is evident of the fact that upper cultures catechise and sometimes, invalidate lower cultures, illegitimising and viewing them as uncouth, barbaric, etc.

Othering operates through binaries, perpetrating socio-economic discrimination which can be contextualised and situated within colonial and contemporary racial and ethnic tensions (Hooks: 1992). She adds that media too is not blameless as it promotes stereotyping and reinforce otherness. Othering is a sensitive concept with profound psychological underpinnings. Tajfel and Turner (1986) submit that intergroup discrimination emanates from an individualistic proclivity for self-esteem fueled by the perceived sense of superiority by the self over out-groups. Fanon's (1952) conceptualisation of the black man is embodied in two facets; the first with his fellows and the second with the white men. Fanon highlights that the black man wears a different deportment when in the company of the white man as opposed to the attitude he exhibits in the midst of his fellows. The black man does this to comport with the white man's expectations and conception of a correct behaviour. Fanon submits that such a behaviour is a result of colonialist subjugation.

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said critiques how Jane Austen in her novel *Mansfield Park*, Joseph Conrad in his novel *Heart of Darkness*, etc., advance the stereotypical portrayal of the other. He furthers his argument to encompass other texts that depict the colonised subjects as "others", providing the justifications the authors of the texts deployed to ascertain the necessity of colonisation as a civilising and salvaging crusade. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999), a climacteric, interdisciplinary work straddling postcolonial theory, philosophy and literary criticism, Spivak investigates how Western scholarship including philosophy, literature and colonial narratives have through ages silenced and marginalised the voices of the subaltern. Subalternity is the stereotypical and lowly representation of the subjects existing outside the mainstream, hegemonic power structures, especially in colonised communities. She critiques major Western philosophers such as Kant, Hegel and Heidegger for perpetuating Eurocentrism in their works, while simultaneously promoting colonial values and demonising the colonised ones. Spivak enlarges upon the propensities of the Western intellectual tradition and its accentuation and silencing of non-Western voices. She asserts that the colonial subjects who are considered as subalterns experience apocalyptical marginalisation and exclusion in their own communities.

Gunn's masterwork titled *The Interpretation of Otherness: Literature, Religion and the American Imagination* investigates the labyrinthine intricacies of comprehending the other. The other, according to him, are individuals, cultures or groups discriminated and excluded from the dominant social, cultural and intellectual framework. Problematising the concept of alterity, Gunn explores how the 'self' constructs the 'other' through binaristic vicissitudes. Gunn limelights the American-reductionist tendencies of simplistic stereotypical perceptions of the other and how cultures view other cultures, often through the frameworks of power, colonialism and ideology. Through the prism of American literature, Gunn examines how the other is racialised and exoticised. Cutting across philosophy, theology, anthropology and literature, Gunn's book argues that interpretations of otherness obtain in various fields such as the ones mentioned above. The work furthers its examination of American literature, covering how diverse cultural, racial and ethnic communities are depicted. Native Americans, African Americans, immigrants and other marginalised groups, are, according to Gunn, excluded and othered for not being perceived as the equals of the 'self'. In a chapter titled "American Literature and the Imagination of Otherness", Gunn expatiates how writers like James Fenimore Cooper in his text *The Last of the Mohicans* exoticises indigenous people while equally revealing them as an encumbrance to progress and civilisation.

Conceptual considerations

Periscoping identity within the framing of othering

In the landscape of othering, identity and othering are interwoven. Identities are constructed and reconstructed to demarcate the self from the other. Identity is a volatile social construct shaped by personal experiences, cultural norms and power dynamics. Geertz (1973) argues that identity is deeply entrenched in cultural practices. Erikson (1950) views identity as a psychosocial process shaped through life stages. It is, according to him, a by-product of a developmental process and a veritable constituent of psychosocial stages of growth. However, Butler (1990) refutes that gender is prescriptive, proclaiming that it is a performative construct attained through repeated cultural acts rather than fixed traits. This notion reveals the fluidity of gender and that an individual can redefine their identity.

Butler holds that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." This recalls Hall's (1996) submission that cultural identity is both a matter of becoming and being, straddling the future and the past on equal proportion. Cultural identity is not preexisting as it does not surpass place, tune, history and culture. Hall (1996) highlights that the concept of identity is defined by fluidity and contingency. This punctuates that identity is not, as considered by many, a given, stationary trait, but rather, a provisional, capricious aspect. Hall believes that hybrid identities are a consequent of migration and globalisation. Colonialism has had a profound psychological impact on the identity of the colonised who, while trying to navigate Western-dominated societies, were alienated. Giddens (1991) opines that late modernity has disrupted traditional identity, propelling individuals to consider reflexive self-construction.

Rewriting morality within the framework of othering

Both from philosophical and sociological vantage points, morality is a concept that investigates how societal norms and values define good and evil. Durkheim (1893) posits that morality and collective conscience are interposed, which suggests that shared moral codes ensure, sustain and serve as the foundation of social cohesion. Durkheim adds that "morality begins with the fact that individuals are no longer sufficient unto themselves. They must collaborate, and consequently, each must relinquish something of himself for the sake of others." Here, Durkheim implies that individuals are not self-sufficient entities and for them to co-exist, they need to run a communalistic life where each of them will be ready to sacrifice themself at the altar of common, shared interest.

Foucault argues that morality is actuated and enforced through disciplinary frameworks saddled with behavioral regulation. It is a tool for societal control, where disciplinary systems enforce conformance through surveillance. This fact interweaves morality and power to suggest that it is the power structures that birth morality. This insinuates that what is considered moral is what those in power consider as such. Through this purview, othering occurs when one segment of the society is seen as immoral or deviant which is justificatory of exclusion. Foucault sums this up thus: "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise." Shklar (1984) assert that societies justify inequality through moral narratives that condemn and ascribe the plight of the socially disadvantaged individuals to their choice.

Redefining social critique through the eyes of othering

Social critique is a phenomenon that questions existing, mainstream societal structures and ideologies to unravel inequalities and power structures. Karl Marx (1867) in his *Das Kapital* provides a social critique through the framework of economic systems and class struggle. He sees capitalism as a parasitic, exploitative system that subjugates and alienates workers from their labour. "Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks." This resonates with Karl Marx's conception of a democractic government as a tool used by the ruling class to suppress and exploit the working class. The Frankfurt School of Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) impugns cultural industries for advancing capitalist ideologies. They argue that cultural industries perpetuate consumerism and entrench passivity. They catechise how enlightenment which I, in this context see as the White civilisation, parades and behaves as a dictator of men. The enlightener, according to them, knows and can thus manipulate the enlightened. bell hooks (1984) interrogates how white feminist movements sideline other non-white feminists and movements on the ground of race, class and culture. "To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body." Crenshaw (1989) highlights systemic racism as a cause for othering within the framing of social critique. Bourdieu (1984) posits that cultural practices buttresses class hierarchies, promoting discrimination. Klein (2007) questions neoliberalism for leveraging crises and wars to exploit the Third World by imposing market-driven policies.

In line with the foregoing, this paper, using postcolonial theory, is hinged on investigating the interplay of identity, morality and social critique within the framing of othering in *Midaq Alley* by Naguib Mahfouz. It seeks to situate and contextualise othering in the characters based on their experience of othering and how they have been framed as others.

Snippet

Set in the 1940s, during World War II, when the British army was stationed in Cairo, *Midaq Alley* narrates the story of characters domiciling the titular alley. Midaq Alley is a ghetto area in Cairo consisting of a few shops and houses. The novel interweaves the themes of identity, morality and social critique with the concept of othering. It tells the gripping story of Hamida, a young beautiful lady whose desire to redefine and elevate herself engenders her alienation, exclusion, oppression and marginalisation in her own immediate society. Alongside other characters, Hamida suffers severe othering from the self for belonging with the underclass. They are stereotyped as outcast, immoral, socio-cultural rebels and people with distorted identities.

Rethinking identity through the lens of othering

Midaq Alley is more than a setting. It is a capricious mise en scene that constructs a portraiture of a microcosmic Egyptian society where characters with different facets of identity are shaped by gender, class and aspirations. Mahfouz presents Hamida, the central character as a person that grapples with attempts to negotiate and renegotiate her gender. Hamida provides the fundament of the novel, initiating a compulsive conversation of the text from the perspectives of othering, oppression, exclusion and alienation. Housed in a patriarchal society and humbled by her poor background, Hamida dreams of marrying a wealthy person who can take her away from the dilapidated, shabby alley. She craves for a rise in social status to energise her social class mobility. Hamida's abhorrence of Abbas, a poor person that has been madly in love with her, is informed by the excessive othering she experiences in the alley. Hussain, a member of the British Army and Abbas' friend, convinces him that it is only through money that he can win the heart of someone ambitious like Hamida. This informs how terribly Hamida and the other members of the community yearn for a luxury life. Consequently, Abbas joins the British Army to be able to live up to Hamida's expectations and to earn a new identity. After formalising his engagement to Hamida, Abbas prepares to leave for a 1-2 year stay with the army. Upon meeting a wealthy person by the name of Salim Alwan, Hamida undoes her betrothal with Abbas for detesting to marry a poor person like Abbas who lacks ambition. This is emblematic of Hamida's strong appetite for rethinking her identity. Due to her low social status, Hamida becomes shocked to learn that Salim Alwan, although old, wants to marry a second wife that is clearly his inferior socially. This is symbolic of the social, economic, political, etc. discrimination people of Hamida's class suffer. It also justifies Hamida's craving to move up the socio-economic ladder to escape othering.

While on his social rally, Hamida sees Ibrahim Farhat, a politician of grandeur, watching her. Due to her craving to marry an influential, rich person, Hamida feels an immediate connection with him, praying that he will frequent Kirsha's cafe so he can look up at her window. She and Farhat meet during one of her daily walks and Farhat expresses his love for her. Astounded, she rejects him only to quickly reconsider her decision. It is apparent that Hamida reevaluates her position when she realises that marrying him will help her reexplore her identity. Hamida parades as an extraordinary figure that feels too important to stay in the alley. Mahfouz states that Hamida "was proud of her beauty and aware of the envious looks of the women and the admiring glances of the men." Hamida distinguishes herself from the other women in the alley by capitalising on her utter beauty. On her attempt to reevaluate her identity to shun othering, Hamida meets another wealthy person, Ibrahim Faraj who inducts her into prostitution. Although she realises that Faraj does not want to marry her, she is overjoyed when he moves her to his beautiful house in a wealthy part of the town. Faraj deludes Hamida with his empty promise to give her a better life. He changes the name of poor Hamida to Titi, teaches her the English language and dance, tampering with her identity. Hamida's pursuit of wealth and status is reflective of the pervasive crisis of identity in the alley which expatiates the social expectations and desire the inhabitants exude for upward mobility.

Midaq Alley presents a bold attempt by characters such as Hamida who grapple with the tension between traditional values and the encroaching influence of modernity. Women in a society like hers are expected to be bound by patriarchal norms and traditions. However, her desire for wealth and status impels her to defy the restraints. This explains the extent to which Hamida has been caught between identity and the crisis of modernity. Mahfouz carves Hamida as a rebellious character full with vigor and adventure. As a revolt, she breaks herself free from the shackles that tether her to the dictates of a traditional society that suffocate the rights of women. Hamida's struggles remind us of how colonial influence often disrupts native identities, creating a sense of alienation (Fanon: 2008).

As highlighted above, the titular alley is an enclave for the preservation of traditional identities. However, it is a site of entrapment. It can be argued that Hamida accepts to be inaugurated in prostitution to redefine her gender roles. Hamida "hated the alley and everything in it ... She hated its narrowness, its closeness, and the low standards of its people." This subtly mirrors her internalised frustration with the phallocentric constraints and her lust to break free. Hamida's situation underlines the exclusion and oppression springing from the society she is enmeshed in due to her disadvantaged social class status which consequently instigate her to rethink her identity to be able to mainstream herself in the pervading socio-cultural and economic milieu. Hamida's condition is a reminder of what Spivak (1999) posits about women who, due to their gender, are forced to grapple with gendered othering from the duo of colonial and patriarchal structures within their own culture. She is also reminiscent of Austen's principal character Fanny Price who, due to her low background, is caught within the intersection of gender and subalternity. Mahfouz offers us an othered representation of the character of Hamida. His submergence of her narrative voice in a text dominated by a plethora of male voices as Gohar (50) asserts, reverberates the imperialistic attitude of the narrator that Mahfouz deploys to tell the story.

Hamida is beleaguered by the temptations Ibrahim Faraj implants in her which eventually launch her on prostitution career. She confesses her wrongdoing before Abbas, the betrothed she has dumped. More so, she has also vowed not to go back to the alley. "She knew she could never return to the alley; she had crossed a threshold that made her an outcast in her own world." This brings to the limelight her seclusion from her own society. She regrets her submission to Ibrahim Faraj who betrays her by capitalising on her weakness and commodifying her beauty. Ibrahim Faraj objectifies Hamida, subjecting her to a marginal status. As a subaltern in his eyes, he sees her as a backward person who does not observe good personal hygiene. He says "Why don't you take better care of your hands; let your nails grow and put polish on them. Your hands are a weak point, you know" (176). Ibrahim Faraj censures Hamida for her nagging attitude and insistence on initiating a love relationship with him. Faraj is a terrible seducer that dumps girls whenever he understands they have depleted their use. Hussain is bent on assuming a British nationality to avoid being othered in England. He unveils that "I'll adopt a British nationality! In England everyone is equal" (173). Hamida is a tragic figure that embodies the impossibility of salvaging herself from the vicissitudes of individual aspirations and societal expectations. Moosa (1994) opines that Hamida suffers severe alienation in a society that consistently marginalises and silences the voice of women. In sum, the character of Hamida is webbed within the confluence of personal lust and societal expectations, culminating in an identity crisis. She neither can disentangle nor reconcile her personal ambitions with communal norms. Mahfouz dramatises this pervasive social fragmentation and identity confluence through Hamida and other characters (Al-Mahfedi: 2017), which coalesce into her fervent thirst for self-redefinition.

On the other hand, the beggars in the Midaq Alley are another textbook example of marginalised and secluded members in the alley. They are symptomatic of the desperation and travails that entrap the underprivileged in cycles of poverty and a hallmark of the extreme poverty that grips Cairo during the period the novel was set. The beggars are compelled to subject themselves to maiming to distort their identity. This identity distortion is an unquestionable pathway to their sustenance and salvation in a society that treads upon the low. The maiming is symbolic of the socio-economic inequalities and the moral complexities in the alley's ecosystem. The beggars as such, are a lens through which othering is depicted. This recalls Levinas (1969) who maintains that the other is often undermined, thingified and reduced to an minimal role. The authorial characterisation of the beggars as marginal is a symbolic

attempt to justify and embody how the self oppress the other. The stereotypical representation highlights the stark economic disparities that underscore the lives of the poor characters.

Mahfouz has offered us a generic, universalised conception of beggars or people with disability, underlining the magnitude of the inferiority complex societies implant in them. Unlike Hamida and Abbas who aspire for an upward social mobility, the beggars have already succumbed to the submergence and subordination their immediate society subdues them to. The beggars are othered by the residents of the alley who see them as a social failure, a symbol of decay and backwardness. The beggars' presence in the alley reminds us of the precariousness of life in the alley, where most of the characters live on the edge of abject poverty. The social alienation the beggars suffer showcases the themes of exclusion and marginalisation in the novel. They serve as an insignia of a subtle condemnation of a society that prioritises wealth and power over human dignity. The maiming the beggars request from Dr. Booshy is one of the pivots of the novel. Dr. Booshy charges less for his services.

The layers of marginalisation the beggars receive from the self in the alley compel them to endure physical suffering for survival. Najjar (1996) argues that "the voluntary disfigurement of the beggars is a desperate strategy borne out of systemic neglect, where human dignity is sacrificed at the altar of survival." The beggars have been homogenised and trademarked "the maimed", losing their identity and individuality. This erases their humanity and identity. The alley ensures the beggar's continued exclusion from economic and social participation. It perpetuates othering where physical difference solidifies their marginalisation and justifies their exclusion from societal concerns.

The cafe owner's son, Hussain Kirsha is excluded for his fervent rejection of the alley's traditional values in favour of modern, Western ideals. "Hussain spoke of a world beyond the alley, one lights and music, but his dreams were foreign to those around him." Like Hamida, Hussain despises the alley and its people which hints at a clash between traditionalism and modernity. This identity confluence and appetency for wealth and status render Hussain an outcast in his own community.

Reconsidering morality within the framework of othering

The beggars evoke questions of morality and religious duty among the alley's inhabitants. Dr. Booshy's acceptance to disfigure the beggars reflects the moral degradation of individuals in a poverty-stricken society. This quack dentist commoditises suffering by exploiting the vulnerabilities of the beggars, inciting questions about the decadence of ethical boundaries in appalling circumstances. Maiming emphasises the moral and social alienation of the beggars at Midaq Alley. The otherness and alienation they experience underscore the cruelty and unkindness of the society which subjects them to hardship.

Through a broad spectrum, Hamida's case presents the reader with a multilayered depiction of moral decadence. Hamida is pronounced an outcast by her own society whose excessive othering forces her into an immoral lifestyle. Raising in a society that respects people based on their fortune, Hamida is compelled to plunge herself into prostitution. While talking to Abbas, Hamida says "you see me only as a low prostitute. But it's what you said, I was betrayed by a devil" (181). Hamida has developed a giddy infatuation toward Ibrahim Faraj and the huge money she has pulled in for him, he, despite being her immoraliser, sees her as an other due to her immoral conducts. This unveils why Faraj who, although an infamous pimp, abominates and discriminates the prostitutes he introduces into the prostitution profession. Whenever she indicates interest in marrying him, he avoids the matter saying "get to work, my dear, 'love' is only a silly word" (176).

Ibrahim Faraj emblematises exploitation and instantiates moral decadence. Like a predator, Faraj preys on Hamida's vulnerability, ambition and desire of a modern life to delude her into prostitution, thus spreading and fuelling immorality. He, under the camouflage of love, helps Hamida realise her ambitions and desire for freedom in illicit way. Instead of him to accept her, he ends up othering and deeming her unequal and unmarriageable. Faraj "offered her dreams of a better life, full of wealth and freedom, but it was a trap that ensnared her in a world of shame." This explains how he distorts Hamida's aspirations and corrupts her morals, exploiting her weaknesses and subduing her to oppression. Hamida is a victim of circumstances caught between the intersections of class and gender which eventuate her exploitation (Al-Dabbagh: 2008) as exemplified through Faraj whose predilection for money propels him to contaminate her. Falling from grace, Hamida fails to return to the alley which symbolises the magnitude of her exclusion. This is because after her navigation of a new life, Hamida becomes morally corrupt and ends up being anathematised by her own society. Maybe she refuses to return to the alley because she fears the oppression and othering she will suffer from a society that will view her as morally corrupt. Faraj is othered due to his predatory nature and illicit profession. His manipulative proclivities isolate him from the alley, reflecting his moral decay.

As a young lady defined and enclosed in a patriarchal structure, Hamida seeks for independence and self-assertion. The endeavour at self-reassertion and reevaluation showcases her as an immoral person in the eyes of her society. Her independent, opinionated mind colludes with the suppressing patriarchal norms of her society. She navigates a life of luxury that will unchain her from the

shackles of poverty, oppression and othering she experiences on gender grounds in her own society. Consequently, this attracts her the intense othering, alienation and denigration of her society for her immoral proclivities. Ibrahim (2005) notes that Mahfouz explores, through a feminist lens, the gendered exclusion and othering Hamida encounters what compels her to navigate a life of independence and to redefine herself.

Hamida's unconventional aspirations define her as immoral, severing her from her own community. Hamida, unlike the other women who have succumbed to the phallogocentric tendencies of the alley, repudiates the expectations on women. This also leads to her designation as an immoral person by her society. She has carved out an identity for herself by eschewing domesticity and marriage which are central duties expected of a woman. She looks down on the cultural construct of the alley. "Why must a girl's life revolve around marriage and servitude? Why couldn't she choose her own path? This quote reveals Hamida as a rebel of the gender norms that expect her to conduct herself in accordance with what is expected of women, portraying her as immoral. Hamida's fondness of modernity and wealth, two aspects she deems can break her out of the othering she faces, are lucid factors that trademark her as immoral. In his essay "Marginality and Modernity in Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*", Al-Shetawi (2010) maintains that Hamida is depicted as a fascinating figure who is caught between traditional and modern identities. This means that Hamida's attempt to redefine herself deprive her of morals in the eyes of her society. In pursuit of a life of materialism, Hamida flees Midaq Alley, leading to an affirmation of her immorality. This is another instance where her social status provides an impetus for her exclusion from her own community.

The realities of her community transform her into a prostitute under the influence of Ibrahim Faraj. This provides us with estranged and nuanced selves of Hamida which have distinguished her as a revolt of the morals entrenched in her society. Mehtab (2019) opines that Hamida's physical and social displacement mirrors the exclusionary proclivities and caprices of urban spaces. Her failure to reevaluate herself which leads to her social alienation and personal turmoil evidences the uncouth, rigid gender roles enforced by patriarchy. Nagi (2013) examines how characters such as Hamida challenge and seek to upturn gender roles. Hamida's abomination of traditional female roles and her quest to attain autonomy trigger her social alienation as she does what the society frowns at. Hamida's exit of the alley in pursuance of modern ideals undergirds how immoral propensities which at the end prevent her from coming back to Midaq Alley.

Despite being a member of the alley, Dr. Booshy is derided for his unprofessionalism. The community others him for his socio-culturally immoral tendencies of disfiguring the beggars. While his lower-class status attracts him discrimination, the residents of the alley see his profession as illegitimate. Mahfouz tell us that "the alley whispered about Dr. Booshy's dubious skills, laughing at the idea of a man of his standing being called a 'doctor'." His disfigurement of the beggars is an act that contravenes the morals and norms of the society which eventually attract him the ostracisation of the alley's inhabitants. The maiming of the beggars by Dr. Booshy is consequent upon the discrimination they experience. This resounds Kleinman's (1997) description of social suffering as a situation where individuals are compelled to navigate systemic failures that render them into victims and agents of dehumanisation.

Zaita too is not spared the othering of the community members. Zaita is othered because of his objectionable profession as a 'mutilator' who helps beggars to disfigure themselves to evince sympathy from the neighbourhood as a pathway for earning their livelihood. Mahfouz describes Zaita as "a man of shadows, slipping in and out of alleys, his trade whispered about but never confronted." Zaita's culpable profession renders him an alien and an outsider in his own community for running a business that is immoralised by the inhabitants of the alley. Kirsha, the cafe owner, is also objectified for interacting with young men, an act that contradicts with the moral expectations of the community. His private life alienates him from the community.

Social critique at the crossroads of identity and morality

The maiming of the beggars is interlaced with the concept of othering, reflecting how societal structures exclude and discriminate oppressed individuals, forcing them to commodify suffering. The voluntary disfigurement the beggars force on themselves foregrounds the alienation they suffer in their own society, entrenching their inconsequential, othered status. The society sees the beggars as different and alien. This exemplifies Edward Said's (1978) conception of the other. According to him, difference is used as a metric for defining who belongs and who does not. We can decipher that the beggar's mutilation is a landmark of their alienation from a society they originally belong to. The dehumanising social structure they are ensnared in has forced them to internalise and normalise otherness and oppression, considering deformity as capital. Consequently, the beggars accept degrading social roles. A quack dentist, named Dr. Booshy is another ensign of oppression and an agency of social exclusion. He removes the teeth and some parts of the beggars' bodies to make them appear more pitiable to attract alms from passersby. This indicates that Dr. Booshy is a perpetrator of social othering and marginalisation who leverages the desperation of the beggars to eke out livelihood.

Mahfouz questions societal occurrences by underscoring how the intense neglect of the beggars has forced them to resort to the mutilation of their body parts. This means that the underclass receive neither attention nor care from either the society or the

government. The beggars have been preyed on by the economic and social system which celebrates and advantages the privileged few. It cannot be more pitiable that the beggars consider disfigurement as currency. In line with this, Reynolds (2001) maintains that "Mahfouz critiques the commodification of the human body, where even suffering is transformed into an economic asset." The beggars in the novel distort their bodies to fit into the society housing them at the risk of attracting more othering. This is a subtle way in which the downtrodden beggars strive to justify their existence in a society that marginalises their voice. As marginal inhabitants of the alley, the beggars go through hell to bring themselves to the spotlight. This echoes Butler's concept of "precarity" where excluded individuals constantly justify their existence to find relevance.

On the part of Hamida, one can see that she has developed an exceptional aspiration for money in order to get herself out of the cluster of financial enclosure which deepens her in penury, causing her limitless othering. The society throttles all possibilities for her to achieve her desideratum. Midaq Alley does not avail her of viable opportunities, forcing her to consider and pursue paths that antithesise integrity and morality. The pursuance of money to bring oneself to the spotlight has served as an impetus that anathematises Hamida in her own community due to the bad portrait she carves for herself in the sight of her people. Hasenfus (2013) notes that noxious patriarchal structures and economic constraints stifle the potential of ambitious characters such as Hamida, leading to their destruction in the text. Mahfouz has extended a social critique through Hamida by catechising a society that respects nothing but wealth.

Another social critique can be spotted through Salim Alwan. Although a wealthy merchant, Salim is othered by the residents of the alley who both admire and resent him. He is maltreated because of being distinctly rich. His riches set him apart from the mainstream residents of the alley who are not like him, causing them to otherise him. "His wealth set him apart, a man who is envied, yet feared." It is obvious that material success does not protect one from alienation and othering either. Because the fact that the inhabitants of the alley know full well they cannot attain his status, impels them to envy his fortune. Mrs. Afify, an old widow, provides a prism for social critique. Through her, Mahfouz showcases, on a cruel patriarchal canvas, how older widows are othered for their widowhood status. Mrs. Afify's attempts to remarry render her a subject of ridicule and objurgation. It is apparent that she is derided and excluded for her defiance to comply with the expectations of Midaq Alley in the sense that older widows like her are not expected to seek for marital companionship. Mahfouz states that "her desire to marry again at her age was the source of endless gossip and laughter among the neighbours."

Through Radwan Hussainy, a religious figure, Mahfouz offers us another viewpoint from which the self ostracises the other. Despite being respected for his piety, Radwan is marginalised because of his detachment from worldly concerns. His faithfulness and religiosity provide evidence for his othering by the members of the alley who exclude him for living a life and practicing a religion different from theirs. This provides a strong social critique of a society that sidelines and others godly people for their fervent faith and strong religious affiliation. Moreover, Sheikh Darwish, a former teacher, is another conduit through which Mahfouz critiques the social structures of Midaq Alley. He is marginalised for the poor status he attains upon retirement from civil service. This unravels the vicissitudes of a society that does not consider the nouveau pauvre as part of it. Despite his intellectualism and exceptional wisdom, Darwish is molested because of his poor status. This fact unmasks the alley as a community that undervalues intellectualism and wisdom. Mahfouz reveals that Darwish's "words were riddles, his presence an oddity. He belonged to a world that no longer recognised him." This punctuates Darwish's current status of being an outcast in his own society.

Saniya Afify's Servant (Umm Hamida), Hamida's foster mother is reproached and othered because of her low social standing. A matchmaker and servant, Saniya is excommunicated and considered a dispensable part of the community for her low background which attracts her a lot of scorn. While her matchmaking appeals to many, her status as a servant places her on the precipice of respectability. This means that Saniya's appealing role as a matchmaker does not shield her from exclusion. The voluntary, physical disfigurement the beggars are subjected to by their society is a stark critique of socio-economic inequalities and moral corruption. In order to withstand the pressures in their society, the beggars commodify bodily deficiencies which speaks volumes of the inequality they are caught in.

Conclusion

Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* offers a profound exploration of othering, intertwined through the triumvirate of identity, morality and social critique. Characters such as Hamida provide a purview through which personal ambitions, desires self-definition in a world marked by rapid social and cultural change can be perused. It provides a lens through which the self embody exploitative tendencies towards the other which overstates the exacerbating systemic inequalities and colonial structures marginalising women and the underclass, which consequently force them to commodify their bodies. The novel intricately has knitted the themes of identity, morality and social critique to offer a panoramic elucidation of the struggles the silenced voices in the community grapple with.

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