

**MIGRATION AND MATURATION:
THE ACCULTURATION OF WOMEN IN NAGUIB
MAHFOUZ'S ZUQAQ AL-MIDAQQ AND YUSUF
IDRIS' "AL-NADDAHA".**

By

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African writers have always examined the often disastrous consequences of urbanization on the peasantry. Most Third World countries are victims of the enormity of economic horror which is evidenced notably in the disparity between city and rural areas. None of this is peculiar to the Third World, of course, since nearly all industrialized societies have similarly experienced the massive migration of the poor to the urban centers. For contemporary Egyptian writers, this thematic examination has been particularly pervasive, however, and has produced a substantial literary output.

Two significant contributions to this collection are Naguib Mahfouz's **Midaq Alley** (**Zuqaq al-Midaqq**) and Yusuf Idris' "The siren" ("Al-Naddaha"). While both works deal ostensibly with interpersonal relations between the inhabitants of a small Cairo alley in the former and a young peasant couple in the latter, what draws the reader's attention ultimately is the connection between the physical movement from protected seclusion and ignorance to a psychological and emotional release in the realization of fantasy. This connection is illustrated through the two central women protagonists, Hamida and Fathiyya. Though the narrative framework in each is significantly different and obviously has a pronounced effect on the authorial presentation and consequent reader perception, there remain some rather intriguing and controversial implications raised which deem a connective analysis quite appropriate.

Similarities abound in the emotional and psychological composition of both women. Superficially, of course, Hamida and Fathiyya share an economic and social status that has relegated them to second class citizenship. Mahfouz's initial presentation of Hamida stresses that she despises her situation and sees flight from the alley as her

only salvation. But at this point Hamida's experience is essentially fantasized; she has no reality-based cognition of her potential as a self so the rescue through escape is viewed solely in a traditional marriage. Umm Hamida, her match-making stepmother, does not believe Hamida will ever find a husband given her attitude of superiority. Ironically, it is that very attitude that eventually leads to her attempted individuation. Hamida concurs with her stepmother's assessment, though for quite different reasons. She does not find any man in the alley worthy of her since none share her materialistic dreams except for her stepmother who, not surprisingly, also wants desperately to leave the alley. Hamida mocks the inhabitants of Midaq Alley, further separating herself emotionally though not physically, from her surroundings. At this stage, however, her desire to be free of the alley's suffocating environment is predicated entirely on the acquisition of material possessions. As she argues with Umm Hamida, "what's the point of living if one can't have new clothes" (Mahfouz 24)?

Lest the reader believe that Hamida is merely a shallow young girl going through an inevitable stage, Mahfouz reveals that her desire to possess is deeply rooted in a motivation to be outside the common expectations of her status. We learn that she is hated by the other women in the alley, that she does not like children, and that "She was constantly beset by a desire to fight and conquer" (Mahfouz 34). Hamida does not want to be another alley wife, burdened by marriage and motherhood. Rather than accept such a passive life, she opts for one of power and wealth. But such a life was only possible outside Midaq Alley and that was a world of which she knew nothing.

In a similar fashion, Yusuf Idris presents Fathiyya as a simple country girl who believed she was destined for the excitement of Cairo. Just as Hamida's argumentative nature indicated the potentiality of selfhood, Fathiyya possessed "a superior mind that was capable of some finesse;..." (Idris 104). She too felt destined to one day leave the limited future offered by her village for "that vast shining place. The 'Mother of the World' they called it, that with its splendor and luxury peeled away the deposits left by squalor and abuse and transformed those who live there into men and women of class" (Idris 104).

As with Hamida, who admires and envies the Arab and Jewish women who worked in the factories, wore fashionable clothes and "...exuded an air of boldness and secret knowledge" (Mahfouz 35), Fathiyya has a naive view of life for the women of Cairo. Hadn't her cousin Fatima who'd gone there to work as a maid come back looking as a European, she asks. This need to dress, to act, to be European in every manner of appearance drives each woman to reject not only her environment but also her personage. What is especially tragic in this is that the rejection and desired Western acculturation is founded not in any ideological belief but rather in an acceptance of a superficial materialism. Fathiyya has no doubt that it was in this "paradise" that she would become the person her destiny had ordered. This destiny, so crucial to Fathiyya's decision making, is signified by a "voice" that emanates from within. Accompanying it is a vision of "The Man in a Suit", a troubling and prophetic dream of her own destruction.

"..the inescapable vision of the Man ...like a dreadful hand stretching out and threatening to pull her down into the mud and filth: and the voice assuring her that the end result of her being in Cairo would be to make her see that she was going to descend to forbidden territory with the Man and there was nothing she could do about it" (Idris 110).

Each woman's initial foray beyond her environ is precipitated by a man. Though Hamida has rejected the possibility of marriage to any resident of the alley, she is not averse to allowing someone outside its quarters take her away. Ibrahim Faraj is such a man and his attraction to her, while originally misunderstood, stirs Hamida's emotions. He holds what "she has never before known in a man; strength, money and a fighting disposition" (Mahfouz 138). Already possessive of an aggressive personality and will, Hamida lacks only Faraj's promise of wealth, precisely what she seeks outside the alley. Her mixed feelings, the love of his possessions and yet the indignation at his effrontery, codified in his arrogant stalking of her, confuse Hamida. She thinks constantly of ways to fight him, to convince him that her will is superior and that he must be her subordinate. Yet Mahfouz makes it clear that all of this is mere sham. Hamida's will, strong enough to drive off the attentions of the alley's men as well as to incur the wrath of its women, is no match for the enticements of

the Cairo beyond her streets. Nor does she deceive herself for long as she comes to realize that her “street games” simply reinforce her dependency. Though she puts up the pretense of morality and scoffs and rebuffs the advances of Faraj, it is evident she has gotten exactly what she wanted. As Mahfouz explains, “morals were not part of her rebellious nature she always followed her own primitive nature” (Mahfouz 71).

Once outside the confines of Midaq Alley, Hamida succumbs entirely to the temptations of the city. The ride in the taxi “intoxicates” her and she loses whatever lingering inhibitions remained. She kisses Faraj and enters his apartment, actions certainly outside the behavior of a respectable unmarried Muslim woman. She is angry with herself, not for having done these things (Mahfouz has already dismissed any moral judgment from her character), but rather for her failure to respond as she had anticipated, as she had to any man who challenged her. Instead of arguing, insulting, even striking him, she simply submits. Ironically, Hamida’s surrender to Faraj appears to be her moment of liberation, for once she accepts his offer, she has effectively cut herself off from her past life. She believes she is now the person she had dreamt becoming. What is troubling, however, is that this new identity is founded in prostitution. This is not an uncalculated admission by Hamida for she understood well that by returning to Faraj the following day, she could not then go back to the alley. But it is also clear from the negative language Mahfouz employs to delineate Hamida’s journey that her apparent emancipation cannot last. Inspired by greed, it is intrinsically baseless. “She made her choice with all her strength and it was the one she really wanted. She was sliding down her chosen route and all that blocked her way to the pit were a few pebbles” (Mahfouz 173).

In “The Siren”, Yusuf Idris uses flashback to reveal Fathiyya’s determination to take control of her life in order to facilitate what she believes to be her destiny. This destiny, though prophetically destructive, necessitates a move to Cairo. As such, she rejects a wealthier suitor to marry Hamid, simply because he offers the prospect of living in the city. However, once she settles into their one-room apartment under the stairs of the building where her husband works, she becomes merely an observer of the city. She spends her time crouched in the doorway, not interacting, not participating in the life of Cairo “where people lived every day as if it were a saint’s day or a feast” (Idris 106).

Given the opportunity to work, Fathiyya is prevented from so doing by her husband. She knew additional income would help, but her real motivation was to get into the vibrancy of the city. It is precisely that vibrancy that frightens Hamid and rather than “abandon themselves to the city and its movement, to let it do to them what it did with the others, [they] were terrified and appalled by it and recoiled more tightly in upon themselves” (Idris 108). Fathiyya has made it to Cairo but her secluded apartment is little more than the closed world of Midaq Alley. Still, her observations about the women who live there reveal an understanding that escapes her alley-dwelling counterpart. The women she had so admired for their physical beauty become less idealized. Indeed, unlike Hamida, who manages to become at least physically commensurate with them, Fathiyya realizes that her envy is misdirected, concluding that in her own untouched appearance, she is actually more beautiful than any of them. She sees beyond the masked glitter of make-up, clothes, cars, and flashing lights to discover poverty and hunger greater than in the village she had been so desperate to flee. Once she becomes a mother, she is able to venture into the city and witness firsthand the reality of urban life. Oddly, Idris does not permit Fathiyya to react to her discovery as one might expect. There is no indignation or revulsion, no disillusionment, no resolve to return to the safety and security of the village. That is not the lesson Idris wishes to impart. Fathiyya hasn’t abandoned her dream vision of Cairo; she has merely modified it. “If the ugly slime of evil lay at the bottom, then salvation must be in the learning how to float” (Idris 110).

Unfortunately, Fathiyya’s decision to accommodate the evils of the city, an accommodation inspired by her fidelity to the vision, results in a violation of her most intimate being. She is raped by “The Man in the Suit”, a rape Idris equates with Cairo itself. The attack is described in language remarkably similar to that used by Fathiyya when discussing her initial impressions of the city. What is perhaps most disturbing is that her natural instinct to resist the attack is overcome by feelings not entirely repulsive. She is stunned at this reaction but realizes she has only submitted to what she knew was destined and now... “The submission imposed on her by defeat began to change into submission born of enjoyment” (Idris 120). During the attack, Fathiyya could have called for help but didn’t, partly from shame but also because “They may have stood in the path of destiny

... and it was in the disastrous nature of the affair that she was to defy a kind of death, a private fall, that no one else knew about or faced with her" (Idris 119).

Is Idris suggesting that Fathiyya enjoys being raped? That the violation is somehow pleasing to her? While that conclusion may appear plausible given a superficial analysis, a closer examination reveals that it is not the rape to which Fathiyya responds positively, but rather what it comes to signify. The "Vision" that has directed all of Fathiyya's actions to this point is perhaps best understood in terms of Erich Neumann's conception of the "inner voice". Neumann sees this voice as "the decisive ethical authority" (8) that dominates all decision making, even if such decisions ultimately challenge conventional morality. Fathiyya has always acknowledged the destructive nature of her vision; indeed, even as she submits to it and moves toward its fulfillment, beginning with her marriage to Hamid, she struggles, though unsuccessfully, to remove all temptations. Her initial reaction to "The Man in the Suit" was one of fear as she knew well he was the embodiment of the doom that her vision foretold. Nonetheless, all of these attempts to wrest free from the vision were merely diversions. The vision or voice that Neumann characterizes is "...the peril of a living experience of the deep layer in the psyche where numinous power and suprapersonal claims cannot be shut out ...to our own ruin. It is at this point that the conflict arises: we have to do what is 'evil' from the point of view of the cultural canon... by consciously enduring the conflict involved in the 'acceptance of evil'..." (106). When her husband returns in the course of the attack, his immediate suspicion is that his wife has been unfaithful to him. Fathiyya does not speak, remaining prone against the bed while her attacker flees, followed quickly by Hamid. But "The Man in the Suit" is lost amid the city's crowds, reinforcing the idea that the real villain has always been Cairo. Fathiyya, as the wife of Hamid, no longer exists at this point. Her vision has been fulfilled and nothing remains of the peasant girl who had married and moved to Cairo. She wishes Hamid would kill her; indeed, that is what he must do she posits, to put an end to the physical remainder of Fathiyya the wife. But when he returns and does nothing, simply standing in the darkened room, sobbing, she wonders, "Would he have done that if they'd been in the village? The curse had got him as well. Cairo had defeated him, made him soft, sapped his will so that he was no longer capable of killing his wife when he's caught her in the act" (Idris 121).

There is nothing left for either of them at this point. They had each been changed by the city, enough to have removed all traces of the individuals that had come there as husband and wife and were now strangers. There is a family caravan to the train station the following morning, passing along the dimly lit streets of the city that still sleeps, ignorant of them and "...at peace with itself as if it had done nothing" (Idris 122). However, Hamid returns to the village alone as Fathiyya slips away into the crowd at the station and returns to Cairo "of her own free will this time," Idris writes, "not in response to any siren's call" (122). Since Fathiyya no longer resembles the young peasant bride who migrated from her village to Cairo, there is no point in her returning there. The fulfilment of her destiny, culminating in the physically violent surrender to the city ordains that Fathiyya remain in Cairo, slipping away anonymously, facelessly, into the crowd. She has learned to float in the slime.

In a similarly controversial manner, Naguib Mahfouz seems to legitimize prostitution as a definition of selfhood. However, that too must be examined more closely. Hamida has chosen this life in much the same way Fathiyya chooses to pursue her destiny in Cairo. Though Hamida does not share the ominous vision of destruction that motivates Fathiyya, she knows well what she wants from life, but is too naive to perceive the consequences of her desires. She too is guided by an "inner voice", not unlike the ego which is, according to Erich Neumann, "subject to and dominated by... sexuality, [or a] lust for power..." (65-66). But while she has attained the material trappings she sought, there is no indication that her life has been improved. Indeed, she soon longs to be released from the grasp of Ibrahim Faraj, a longing that parallels Fathiyya's decision not to return to her past. Hamida believes she will start a life in a new setting, perhaps Alexandria. Once she has submitted to Faraj and to the city, she believes she has cut herself off completely from the alley.

Unlike Yusuf Idris, however, Mahfouz does not view pursuing one's destiny as necessarily dependent on the rejection of one's cultural ties. While Hamida concludes that all she has done has been motivated by a desire to break free from the restraints of her dismal economic future, the path she has chosen (Prostitution) is not an answer for Mahfouz. As with Hamid, whose marriage is destroyed by Fathiyya's "liberation", Hamida's prostitution is destructive, resulting in the death of her former suitor, Abbas. There is no lasting

emancipation for Hamida. While Fathiyya's acceptance of the "evil" certifies her individuation, Hamida's brief escape from the alley fails miserably. In the end, Mahfouz merely refers to Hamida's return to the alley and her attempt to restore her relationship with her stepmother who, according to local gossip, was now trying to get some of her stepdaughter's newly acquired wealth.

Erik Erikson defined identity as "the confirmation of the individual's sense of selfhood by his membership in the community" (Mazlish 85). Norman Holland narrowed identity into three interrelated categories: Agency, Consequence and Representation. If these psychoanalytic concepts are brought to the works of Mahfouz and Idris examined here, some interesting observations are possible. For Yusuf Idris, Fathiyya's struggle to attain selfhood originates in her inner voice but must be reached only by removing herself from her community and adapting to a new one. In this way she imparts her already existing identity (that of a village girl) to her new community (that of the Cairo women). The consequence of her actions in which she seems to have followed the voice but in reality has been the primary agent all along, leads to her representation, that is, her adaptation to and adoption of a new identity.

For Naguib Mahfouz, however, the path toward individuation is not linear but circular and though it involves an initial move away from the community that has ordained Hamida's existing identity, it eventually returns, having certified that any attempt to establish an identity beyond the boundaries of one's community is doomed to fail. For Mahfouz, there can be no adaptation or adoption and to pursue either is not only futile but disastrous.

NOTE

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