



## Gender Roles in the Novel (Zuqaq al Midaq) by Naguib Mahfouz

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### ABSTRACT

*The key purpose of this paper is to investigate the gender roles in Naguib Mahfouz's novel "Zuqaq al Midaq"- Midaq Alley- which was written in the 1940s. Egypt has witnessed fatal change in the structure of the society. Males adopted new roles. Likewise, females adopted new roles too. This change in the gender roles is because of the British colonization and both males as well as females are looking for new identities. This paper is discussing the changing roles of the male characters like Abbas, Kirsha, Salim Alwan and Ibrahim Faraj who plays a significant role in the changes of both males and females. It discusses the females role in an oriental society governed by men. Hamida is the central figure who is influenced and influences other characters. Zuqaq al Midaq gives us a good picture of the gender changing roles in Egypt.*

**KEYWORDS :** Gender roles , patriarchy , freedom , Zuqaq al Midaq

### Introduction:

Traditional gender roles were certainly starting to change, and women were starting to accomplish a certain agency, when Egypt was re-asserting its identity as a country after the independence from British rule. Naguib Mahfouz, a Noble prize winner of literature, portrays this drift of gender roles in Egypt in one of his most famous novels, Zuqaq al Midq (Medaq Alley). He is the father of Arab novel. The story of the novel certainly resonates with that of Egypt, which had to revolt twice against Britain. Midaq Alley is a microcosm of Egypt during World War II. While the war is wreaking chaos on most of the world, it offers new opportunities for the inhabitants of Midaq Alley. As a result of such turmoil the gender roles start to change in the Egyptian society. As one historian has mentioned that the 1940s were "a decade of sharp contradiction" (Baraka) in Egypt, and the war served to increase many of the disparities already evident in Egyptian society.

Naguib Mahfouz presents dynamic female characters in the roles of mothers, wives, prostitutes, daughters, sisters, and lovers. They are obedient, subservient, powerful, strong, independent, and religious. Mahfouz's female characters are unique to his understanding of the feminine and the internal and external contradictions within Egyptian culture.

In Egypt, women were traditionally allotted the role of a mother, caretaker, or domestic help within the familial structure. However, this too changed, especially in Egyptian literature. The status of women remains a deeply problematic matter within many Muslim countries today; however, the different characterizations of women presented by Mahfouz reveals the diversity of women in Egypt. Mahfouz writes across generations and his female characters evolve with his stories. The unstable status and roles of Egyptian men and women is characterized through the progression from the old to the new generations. Mahfouz's male characters express their own existential and spiritual quests through women, whether it is their quest for identity, stability, lust, love, or harmony. The male characters become vehicles through which women are depicted as the central models and bearers of meaning and social responsibility. Miriam Cooke (1990) and Mona M. Mikhail (1992) have said that women in Arab literature have been defined mostly by male writers and that their voices have been dominated by males. However, women's roles in Mahfouz's writings are described as powerful, not necessarily through an exteriority of power in the field of politics or society, but in the deeper community that reflects values, morality, and Islam. The roles that the female characters play in Mahfouz's novels define not only patriarchy, but provide another way to view exteriority/interiority during the twentieth century.

### The role of Males in Midaq Alley:

Naguib Mahfouz clearly portrays the gender roles of both females and males in the Egyptian society. There was a drift of changing in the role of males and females in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century. The traditional role of males is to be a supporter and a protector of a family. This role was sacred. Due to certain factors, values of the Egyptian society are changed topsy-turvy and the Midaq Alley becomes no

more than " a graveyard of decaying bones", (*Midaq Alley*, 167). As a result of changing roles of both males and females , Zuqaq al-Midaq becomes full of hardships , a place where beauty fades away, while the life in the world beyond the Midaq Alley is full of ' light ' , wealth and happiness. Money plays an indispensable role in the world of the Midaq Alley. So far as the role of the male is concerned, Salim Alwan , a wealthy businessman has used his money as a power to gain something that he does not deserve. The role of a businessman changed from the role of the constructor of the society of Midaq Alley to the role of captivating Hamida through his money to amuse himself and the British. Abbas , a barber, decides to leave the society of the Midaq Alley to make money to resist class differences and to captivate Hamida by providing her everything she wants. Kirsha, a café owner, has misunderstood his role as a husband. He feels patriarchally that he does his duty towards Mrs. Kirsha. Accordingly, she must be silent towards following young boys. He is afraid of none. There is a total change in the role of a husband in *Midaq Alley*. Mr. Kirsha starts pursuing love with a young boy. Such change in the roles of males as well as females makes Midaq Alley as a graveyard. Therefore, every one of the inhabitants of this Alley wants to run outside the Alley and to find pleasure and happiness. The only exception is Ridwan Hussiany who is the happiest person in Midaq Alley. This is because of his piety and wisdom. Sheikh Darwish seems lost in a state of unconsciousness. He wanders the streets dressed in a suit, muttering either Islamic contemplation or words in English. He looks for his own world, different from the world of the Midaq Alley where everything is a matter of change and decay.

Now we find the role of Ibrahim Faraj has lost the positive side of a man. He is one who misleads Hamida to the path of prostitution. Faraj makes soft words to captivate Hamida, saying: "this is not your quarter , nor are these people your relatives. You are completely different. You don't belong here at all. You are a princess in shabby cloak". (*Midaq Alley*, 143)

These words make Hamida to turn her back on the past and thinks only about the future. Therefore, male roles are changed. They, accordingly, changed the world of the Midaq Alley. Marriage is changed into prostitution . Love is changed into love of money. The stability of the Midaq Alley has vanished. This is because most men deviate from their normal roles in society. They make Midaq Alley only a graveyard. Now , there is no happiness and life as well. It becomes a symbol of death.

### The role of females in Midaq Alley:

*Medaq Alley* portrays the shift in thinking of females of the Egyptian society. The novel foreshadows the roles of Hamida, Saniyya Affi, Husniya and Sayyida. In *Midaq Alley* Mahfouz's protagonist Hamida reflects his obscure belief in the failure of a system governed by a power game and a sterile struggle for patriarchy and domination males and females. When we make a comparison between old females and modern ones of Midaq Alley , we find a great difference. Omm Hamida is content , satisfied with what she has, while Hamida , the young daughter of the Alley, hates the miserable life of the Alley. She calls it "Nothing Alley". Because of the changing roles of females , there is a total sense of

nothingness. Omm Hamida was a mother, however Hamida becomes a prostitute satisfying the lust of the British and the Americans.

Mahfouz characterizes Hamida as all in a society that reminds others of the past. She embodies the hatred and love of Midaq Alley. Hamida represents a woman who is unfulfilled, but who has her own free will and conceptions. Her departure of the Alley and going off to be a whore symbolizes leaving the past and embracing the present. So, the conflict between the roles of old females and modern females is like the conflict between past and present, like conflict between tradition and modernity.

Hamida grows up in a lower middle class. She feels humiliated in a society governed by men. She lacks power as born a woman in an oriented society. However, she is aware of another kind of power to control men. This power is her beauty and charm of attractiveness. She utilizes it as a weapon to captivate the right kind of men who are rich and powerful to fulfill her dreams of wealth and to consolidate her power over men. She says : " I am not the one who is chasing marriage, but marriage is chasing me". At first, she attaches herself to Abbas, the barber. However, she is aware that his poverty will not satisfy her dreams to wear like the Jewish girls. The role of modern females is not to have love, but to have money instead. Modern females of Egyptian society have adopted materialistic roles in the society. Hamida decides to look for someone who is well-to-do. Salim Alwan, a rich of high middle class, fits her in a society where love is measured by money. Salim Alwan, through the power of his wealth , wins over Hamida's love .

The weapon of money to control the opposite sex is not only in the hands of men. Mrs. Saniyya Afifi , a widow who belongs to class of bourgeoisie, utilizes her money to buy a man who is twenty years younger than her as her second husband. Mahfouz portrays the change in the gender roles in Egypt. Females are not totally controlled by males. Saniyya Afifi utilizes her power over men by the use of money. So, money becomes a fatal factor in the relationship between men and women.

Since things do not work out as it is planned by Hamida and Slim Alwan , her rebellious nature against tradition and poverty finds a good match

in Faraj who manipulates the young Hamida. Through Faraj, she apprehends that her attainment lies in the world outside the Alley. Hamida's conquest of money motivates her to strive for freedom outside the Midaq Alley. She conceives, as Rasheed El-Enany says of her journey as one towards light , wealth , and power. However, she becomes the tragic loser not only because of her master Faraj as a wealthy man, but he is a man in a male society that has crushed women for several centuries. Faraj asks Hamida to turn her back on the past and no longer think of anything except the future. She is misled by him. The conflict between the past and the future means the conflict between the old tradition of Egypt where women were given much care and protection than they are given in the present time. In the past , Hamida was given care and love from Omm Hamida, Abbas and other people in Midaq Alley. In the present time, she is changed into Titi instead of Hamida. Titi is the source of fulfilling sexual desires of the British and the Americans. Now, she has been given a new role in the society. She is now no more than a prostitute. She is given new life , new name and new identity. This is the recurrent image of clash between Hamida and Titi , Midaq Alley and Sharif Pasha Street , Abbas and Faraj, tradition and modernity, East and West , poverty and wealth , and between virtue and vice. In between this kind of clash , there lies the role of men and women in Midaq Alley.

### Conclusion:

Midaq Alley or Zuqaq al Midaq portrays a significant change in the roles of both sexes , male or female in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century. The male is no longer a protector of his family. Males adopt new roles in the society. Money and pleasure are the ruling factors of both men and women. The Egyptian woman gets more freedom and liberation. However, she is still exploited by man to satisfy his sexual desire and only to quench his thirst for lust. Hamida looks for a new identity but she has lost the identity of the old generation. She is helpless to get a good role in the Midaq Alley. This is the oriental society which is governed by the male dominance. Naguib Mahfouz was a skillful artist picturing the real picture of the Egyptian society. Zuqaq al Midaq was a microcosm of Egypt and Hamida was its symbol

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