Images of Arab Women in Midaq Alley by Naguib Mahfouz, and Season of Migration to the North by Tayeb Salih

Author(s): Mona Takieddine-Amyuni


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Mona Takieddine-Amyuni

IMAGES OF ARAB WOMEN IN MIDAQ ALLEY
BY NAGUIB MAHFOUZ, AND SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH BY TAYEB SALIH

Naguib Mahfouz's realistic treatment of his subject matter in Midaq Alley (Cairo, 1947) stands in sharp contrast to the symbolic mode of Tayeb Salih in Season of Migration to the North (Beirut, 1966). The style of Mahfouz here is simple, clear, and direct. His characters are common people who belong to the lower strata of life in Cairo and, more specifically, in the "Midaq Alley" of Cairo, this dark enclosed street which literally grinds down its inhabitants (as its Arabic name suggests), then carries on, indifferent to their plight.

Mahfouz's exact and lucid prose depicts the quotidian, trivial actions and feelings of men and women in the Alley. A detached attitude seems to dominate the author as he examines the nature, function, and effect of the society under scrutiny. Yet, beneath the impersonal surface lurk tremendous evil powers. Mahfouz's mastery of Jamesian irony and his skillful blend of cool observation and biting satire, broaden the description of the specific world of the Alley. Mahfouz, the Cairo citizen par excellence, describes Cairo as a city gripped in decomposition. Midaq presents in a nutshell a disintegrating system within which age-old institutions are falling apart and human relationships are all distorted.

Lying at the core of this vision are images of women dominated by greed, lust, gossip, and envy. These women are either old and sterile like Umm Hamida and Mrs. Saniya Afify, have had children in a remote past like Mrs. Salim Alwan and Mrs. Radwan Hussainy, or hate children and women equally like young Hamida, our heroine. The girl is totally self-engrossed and dominated by one passion, her lust for power and riches. Indeed, in the squalid world of the Alley, money is a central preoccupation: “Money might be a dead tongue in other places, but in Midaq Alley it was very much a live tongue” (p. 137).

The women one encounters in Midaq 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.

While Mahfouz hides behind a morally detached observer who registers cinematographically the daily activities of the Alley, Tayeb Salih writes a sociopolitical novel in symbolic style. He examines a series of violent confrontations between east and west, black and white, village and city, present and future.
Season reads as the existential fable of Arab man and woman in search of identity, a place in the universe, meaning in life. In contrast with Mahfouz, Salih adopts a first-person point of view that gives a high quality of intimacy and urgency to the story. His persona’s eye is turned inward and registers a series of visions in which inner and outer realities are often fused.

Season is not a narrative in the ordinary sense of the word. It is rather built on shifting, cumulative images, modulations, and inner echoes. It dispenses with chronology, subtly plays with fluid time and space elements, forcing the reader to become both actor and spectator in the drama taking shape. It solicits both pity and terror, in the Aristotelian sense, and finally reaches catharsis as the narrator, about to drown in the center of the Nile, cries out for help, breaking his fascination with death. This final, liberating image in the novel strikes the reader’s sensibility with an instantaneous impact, as it functions poetically giving “that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.”

In his endeavour to draw the reader into the intimate circles of hatred that he creates, Salih omits transitions, statements, and logical frameworks. He creates instead a landscape of dreams, hallucinations, and fantasies in poetic style. Such highly concentrated images are thrown violently against the harsh realities of a universe where blood and wars have dominated the scene for endless centuries.

Ironically, Hosna’s village seems to be the only haven in the midst of such storms, a symbol of stability and constancy within a changing world. Hosna’s tragedy, however, disrupts the equilibrium of that focal point where “things begin and things end” (p. 69). Hosna’s fate, as Hamida’s, is designed for her by outside forces before she is even born. Family, village, and religion mold her and require her to be totally submissive to the males who hold power in their hands. Hosna, as Hamida, is dehumanized, is handled like a commodity in an age which demands dignity and equality for all human beings on earth. Both women are the victims of a vitiated power game which fatally leads to destruction and death. Their creators, Mahfouz and Salih, treat them with compassion and sympathy. They use them to denounce a sociopolitical system based on oppression and injustice.

If we broadly define politics as a set of stratagems designed to maintain a system of public power, sexual relationships in both novels are part of politics, the power-structured relationships within socially decayed systems. The theme of colonization looms large over Season, while it subtly hides in the background of Midaq; it surely distorts Hamida and Hosna’s lives, both victims of what Kate Millett cleverly calls “interior colonization.” Raw power, indeed, corrupts basic human relationships and fully controls our heroines’ lives.

II

These lives are quite simple to retrace. Hamida is about 20, a natural product of the Midaq Alley where she has always lived. She gets engaged to Abbas Helou, a barber in the Alley, without loving him, because he is the only eligible
bachelor around. She drops him quickly when Salim Alwan, old but rich, asks
for her hand. When Alwan falls ill, a third man enters the Alley and lures
Hamida out of it. A flesh merchant named Faraj (whose name means ironically
in Arabic "liberation") quickly perceives Hamida's lust for money. He turns her
into a prostitute, a Titi, whom he sells to the British and American soldiers in the
taverns and the streets of Cairo. One day, Abbas returns from his place of work
at Tell-el-Kebir⁶ and meets Hamida by chance in a bar as she flirts with the
foreign soldiers. Maddened by jealousy and shame, he attacks the soldiers and is
killed like a dog, trampled by their boots. Hamida leaves for Alexandria and the
Alley resumes its monotonous course.

The Sudanese village customs shape Hosna’s life in the same way as the Alley
fashions Hamida’s. Hosna’s simple and tragic story occupies a symbolically conc-
cise place in the novel and contrasts with her husband’s syncopated and phan-
tasmagoric biography. As a child, Hosna played freely with the narrator and his
friend Mahjoub, both her contemporaries. Later, when the narrator comes back
from his seven-year stay in England, he finds out that Hosna was married to
Mustapha Sa’eed. Her husband was a stranger who appeared one day, pur-
chased a piece of land and settled in that small village at the bend of the Nile.
Four years later, the old peasant Mahmoud gave Sa’eed one of his daughters,
Hosna, in marriage, although, traditionally, girls were not given to foreigners.
Shaking his head, the narrator’s grandfather Hajj Ahmad tells the young man:
“That tribe doesn’t mind to whom they marry their daughters” (p. 6).

Hosna herself had a foreign type of beauty which must have captured Sa’eed
and the narrator’s hearts and imaginations upon each one’s return from England.
The narrator rediscovers her after his long absence:

... she remained standing in front of me: a slim, tallish figure, firmly built and as lithe as
a length of sugar cane; while she used no henna on her feet or hands, a slight smell of
perfume hung about her. ... She had a handsome face with wide black eyes in which
sadness mingled with shyness.... She was a woman of noble carriage and of a foreign
type of beauty—or am I imagining something that is not really there? A woman for
whom, when I meet her, I feel a sense of hazard and constraint so that I flee from her as
quickly as I can. (pp. 88-89)

Destiny wills it differently and the narrator cannot flee quickly enough. Sa’eed
mysteriously dies or disappears in the Nile, leaving Hosna, her two boys, and his
diaries in the custody of the narrator. The young man is forcefully drawn into
the private world of Hosna and Sa’eed. A 30-year-old widow now, Hosna is not
allowed to live peacefully and independently. She is forced to marry the lusty
70-year-old Wad Rayyes, who changes women as he does donkeys (p. 96). She
refuses to give herself to him and when he tries to rape her, she kills him and
commits suicide. In the 1940s, life in Cairo is far different from life in the
Sudanese village a decade later. Hamida and Hosna, however, are basically
defined by the same system of values that treats women as mere sex objects and
inferior, helpless beings.

Patriarchal Arab societies traditionally protect women and children in the
same manner, a manner which denies even the possibility of autonomy to women.
Whether father, brother, or husband, man is guardian or master of woman and totally controls her life. Early marriage is welcome to guarantee the bride's virginity, a symbol of family honor. 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 and concubinage. Indeed, the circumcision of women is still practised and is often mentioned in Season (p. 80 for example), curbing sexual desire in the woman. Salih and Mahfouz dramatize this traditional outlook on marriage and sex in their novels.

Hosna's marriage follows the usual pattern in a girl's life. Once married, the mother gains status and protection through her sons. If she is cursed with daughters only, her mother-in-law and the relatives around her manipulate her husband and find for him another wife, usually younger and prettier. Young widows in the traditional groups are often considered as accursed, and are difficult to remarry, since they are no longer virgins. Hosna's plight is that she is just such a widow. Finally, older women in this conservative world acquire immense power within the family structure and the social group. The character Bint Majzoub in Season, like her old sisters in the Alley, confirms what Evelyne Accad states as a general trend in the position of women in the Middle East and North Africa.

III

Three categories of people are alternately portrayed in Midaq and Season. The older women in Midaq, Hamida herself, and the factory girls outside the Alley represent three different situations within the city of Cairo. Similarly, the middle position of Tayeb Salih's heroine is held in tension between the old-fashioned people of her village and the sexually liberated girls her husband had known in London. The city manners and Western sensibilities of these girls are set in sharp contrast with those of their Sudanese counterparts in the novel, while a basic question is posed by the narrator's central voice: "Where lies the mean? Where the middle way?" (p. 108).

In parallel fashion, Hamida's young nature sways between the older women in Midaq whose way of life threatens to become hers as well, and the young factory girls whom she meets every afternoon outside the Alley, "envy nibbling at her" (p. 35). These young girls took advantage of "war-time employment opportunities, ignored custom and tradition and now worked in public places just like the Jewish women" (p. 35). To Hamida, they looked pretty, rich, free, bold, and knowledgeable. She secretly competed with them for she felt prettier, yet "no doubt, these encounters were one of the roots of her constant rebelliousness" (p. 35). She felt too poor and too ignorant to act as they did:

Oh, God, why had she not learned a profession, as her friends had? If she knew how to do something, she could have waited and married when and whomever she wished, or perhaps she might never have married at all. (p. 124)
Hamida had grown up with the traditional belief that the only acceptable status for her was that of wife. She thought, as did her foster mother, that “marriage was her natural destiny” (p. 71). Marriage, however, is as degraded as all the other Midaq institutions. Endless quarrels recur between Hamida and her mother around marriage. “There is no avoiding marriage” says Umm Hamida (p. 19), and she screams at her daughter: “God will never find you a husband; what man would want to embrace a burning fire-brand like you?” (p. 22). Consequently, Hamida is made at once to hate and to need marriage. Her shrewd pursuits of eligible men follow from this divided attitude towards marriage.

The older women of Midaq have faced Hamida’s perplexing situation. They, however, have internalized their social oppression and now are its incarnation. Their submission and their repressed rebellion have turned them into spiteful women seeking revenge in various ways. In a brilliantly satiric vein, Mahfouz creates female types throbbing with an energy absent elsewhere in the Alley, women who have not only grown in age, but often in stature and power as well. In the Alley, they form a closely knit group, held together by gossip, hypocrisy, and malice. There is neither beauty nor love in the dark street where the tongues of these shrews circulate like serpents.

The stage is set for them in Chapter 2, after a minute and clever survey of the male inhabitants of the Alley. Here, lethargy, senility, despair, and corruption invade the masculine picture, followed by the sharp verbal duel between Umm Hamida and Mrs. Saniya Afify. The writer’s mastery of the art of dialogue creates a brilliantly comic episode, as Mrs. Afify purchases a young husband from the marriage-broker, Umm Hamida herself. The parody of the marriage institution quickly takes shape as Umm Hamida lets out a “raucous, throaty laugh” (p. 20), sensing how lucrative the deal will be!

Mrs. Saniya Afify (the only bride in the novel) is past 50. A widow and a miser, she has a decayed mouth (p. 146) and “neither breasts nor a behind to attract men with!” (p. 147). Yet, a civil servant is very happy to sell himself to her. The beginning of multiple reversals is sensed in such situations; black humour functions at several levels. The civil servant, as well as the candidate for election in another episode, represents an utterly corrupt government. He drinks coffee in his office, sits and rebukes people, and doubles his salary with “a little cleverness” (pp. 104-105). The young man’s corrupt soul is a good match for Saniya’s decayed body.

On the other hand, Mrs. Kirsha is, next to Umm Hamida, the closest woman to Hamida. She had nursed her with Husayn, her son, when both were babies. She is a strong 50-year-old woman, one of those “women renowned for their tempers” (p. 62) in the Alley. Married to the cafe-owner who is a hashish addict and a homosexual, she is sexually frustrated and full of hatred for husband and humanity at large. Yet, “she was really proud of him [her husband], of his masculinity, of his position in the Alley and of the influence he had over his associates” (p. 65). He loved her too, in his own traditional way, but wished she could leave him alone:

Was it not his right to do as he wished? And was it not her duty to obey and be satisfied as long as her needs were satisfied and she was adequately provided for? She had become
one of the necessities of his life, like sleep, hashish and his home, for good or bad and he never really considered dispensing with her. (pp. 65–66)

Their relationship is a huge farce as Mahfouz sees it. When Kirsha’s young lover steps into the café, Mrs. Kirsha falls on her husband, virago-like “punching and slapping him forcefully,” while stunned customers “thoroughly enjoyed witnessing such a dramatic scene” (p. 86)! On the other hand, would a Mrs. Kirsha be loving and understanding towards her own sex and towards Hamida in particular? Not at all! She knew how much Hamida hated children, so she hoped to see her “a mother too, suckling children under the care of a tyrannical husband who beat her unmercifully!” (p. 34); a clear-cut example of a disintegrated psyche, living, hating, and reversing the rules that have molded her since childhood. Similar instances could be multiplied to illustrate this crucial point: Husniya, the bakeress, fiercely abusing her animal-like husband; Mrs. Salim Alwan, her youth and vitality gone, rejecting her husband’s “attentions” (p. 60); Mrs. Hussainy completely submitting to her “saintly” husband’s tyranny and considering herself a fortunate woman (p. 45); and so on and on.

Mahfouz sums up these sadomasochistic, master–slave relationships by sarcastically and deftly remarking:

We must not underestimate the power of the traditions of the time and the place. We must not forget that among this class, the prevailing opinion was that women were best treated as children, above all for the sake of their own happiness. (p. 45)

Of course, one must not forget it, unless one were able to create a first-class parody of a world which leads to the complete distortion of basic human relationships.

Clearly, Mahfouz’s heroine reflects his deep belief in the bankruptcy of a system regulated by a power game and a diseased struggle for domination between male and female. Hamida is the direct product of the Alley and its inhabitants which she hates; she calls the first “Nothing Alley” and the second “Non Entities” (p. 23). She almost suffocates in the Alley and is forced into a brutal struggle for survival, seeking breathing space outside her street. Undoubtedly, Mahfouz depicts Hamida as the direct result of a corrupt socioeconomic situation that imprisons her and absolutely determines her fate. As a result, Hamida is totally indifferent to morality (p. 71); she ruthlessly uses her fiancé, pure Abbas Helou, until his tragedy takes place.

Hamida’s rebellious nature quickly finds a good match in Faraj, who enters the scene and in turn, manipulates the young girl. Intoxicated by his “foreign” manners and his lavish spending in Kirsha’s café, Hamida is slowly lured out of the Alley. She brutally awakens, however, to Faraj’s crude assault and a power game is triggered between the two, in which she is bound to become the tragic loser because not only does he have money, but also he is a man, in a male society that has crushed women for endless centuries. It is true that Hamida is strong, but her combative nature is limited to the sex object which she represents in her world. In any case, she will not yield easily. As war is fiercely waged between Hamida and Faraj, images of conflict, struggle, and battlefield recur, foreshadowing similar confrontations in *Season*, though in a totally different atmosphere, as we shall see:
Fury flamed within her [Hamida] and she gathered all her strength for the challenging battle ahead. . . . Her rebellious nature told her to plunge straight onto the battlefield. . . . He would pay a high price for this conceit of his. Her love was neither worship nor submission, but rather a constant heated battle. (pp. 163 and 172)

As Hamida turns into Titi, she knows “that she had made her choice with all her strength and it was the one she really wanted” (p. 173). Her natural talents made a stunning display at Faraj’s “school” (p. 219). Her dreams of clothes, jewelry, money, and men were now fulfilled. However, the realms of realism and fantasy collapse within her as her love-hate relationship with Faraj develops.

Tragically, her fate follows her in her new life:

Hamida only felt a sense of independence when she was soliciting on the streets or in a tavern. The rest of the time, she was tortured by a sense of imprisonment and humiliation. (p. 221)

The poor girl her mother wanted to sell to Alwan has become a luxurious item to be purchased by the British soldiers. Her condition of imprisonment and humiliation has remained basically the same. Hamida’s fate from beginning to end is inscribed in her looks, in her flesh, and in her situation in the Alley, where older women have shown her a model that fashioned and repelled her at the same time. Her fate is also shaped by forces outside the Alley, where the colonizing British rule had been superseded by a pseudo-independent but equally unjust regime.

In this sense, her powerfully independent nature is as useless as the withdrawal of the British armies from Cairo in 1936. Her master Faraj is the direct product of the wealthy class in Egypt, cherishing the former ruler out of lust for private interests, to use Fanonian terms. The sexual politics in the novel culminate in the final scene, where the angry, drunken soldiers in the bar fall on simple and pure Abbas, killing him with blows, kicks, and glasses, while the Egyptians are paralyzed and watch impotently (pp. 241–242). The theme of prostitution, as obviously incarnated by Hamida, is insidiously omnipresent in the novel. Homosexuality, beggary, bribery, and sexual and political go-betweens are all forms of the prostitution of the self and the nation. Naguib Mahfouz fiercely denounces prostitution in its sociopolitical implications, while he treats the only person who had the courage to rebel with compassion and sympathy.10 Hamida is aware and brave. She makes a choice in life and defies her society with the only tool she has ever been given, her body. Herein lie her heroism and her tragedy.

IV

Tayeb Salih’s heroine Hosna, like Hamida, makes a choice and sticks to it up to the end: “‘After Mustapha Sa’eed,’ she tells the narrator with a decisiveness that astonishes him, ‘I shall go to no man’” (p. 96). The narrator admits that Wad Rayyes has asked him to talk to her on Wad Rayyes’s behalf. Hosna remains silent for so long that he nearly gets up and leaves. At last he hears her voice in the darkness “like a blade of knife” (foreshadowing, of course, the imminent tragedy). Hosna says, “If they force me to marry, I’ll kill him and kill myself” (p. 96).
Tayeb Salih subtly weaves the villagers' voices within the fabric of Hosna's intimate life. "'I shall marry no one but her' Wad Rayyes says, 'she'll accept me whether she likes it or not'" (p. 97). After all, who is she to resist him, a man of means and position in the village?

Does she imagine she's some queen or princess? Widows in this village are more common than empty bellies. She should thank God she's found a husband like me . . . . She'll marry me whatever you (the narrator) or she says or does. Her father's agreed and so have her brothers. . . . In this village the men are guardians of the women. (pp. 97–98)

The finality of Wad Rayyes's statement intensely highlights the inhumanity of the female predicament in the traditional Arab World. Other voices join in to complete the picture. Hosna's father promises her to Wad Rayyes, then swears at her and beats her until she yields (p. 122). Mahjoub himself, the narrator's lifelong friend and Hosna's former playmate, says, "Women belong to men, and a man's a man even if he's decrepit" (p. 99).

Are the village women more sympathetic towards Hosna? As in the case of Mahfouz's Alley women, they fall on Hosna and condemn her very harshly, thus imitating their masculine counterparts. The narrator's mother judges Hosna in the following terms: "What an impudent hussy! That's modern women for you!" (p. 123). Wad Rayyes's former wife, Mabrouka, remains asleep "despite all the shouting that brought people right from the far end of the village" (p. 128), while the tragedy takes place near her. Mistreated, turned into an object, a stone, all Mabrouka says when Bint Majzoub tells her about the double murder is "Good riddance!" She then turns back to sleep!

Bint Majzoub herself is a wonderful creation in Season. Totally uninhibited, mixing freely with men, drinking and smoking, she makes everybody merry with the stories of her love life. Her old age and rich means have seemingly liberated her and she is dearly loved by Hajj Ahmad and Wad Rayyes. She is the only one who has the courage to describe to the narrator all the horrid details of the double crime, yet she fails to understand Hosna's revolt: "She accepted the stranger—why didn't she accept Wad Rayyes?" (p. 123). Bint Majzoub is basically rooted to the customs of the village and resists any change.

Even Mabrouka's unconventional attitude following her former husband's death scandalizes Bint Majzoub. She describes to the narrator how the people who returned from Wad Rayyes's burial had found the old woman sitting, quietly drinking her morning coffee. When some of the women wanted to commiserate with her, Mabrouka yelled, "Women, let everyone of you go about her business. Wad Rayyes dug his grave with his own hands, and Bint Mahmoud, God's blessings upon her, paid him in full." Bint Majzoub goes on describing the old woman and says: "Then she gave trilling cries of joy. Yes, by God, my child, she gave trilling cries of joy and said to the women, 'It's too bad, but if any one doesn't like it she can go drink the river water'" (pp. 128–129).

The Sudanese critic 'Ali 'Abdallah 'Abbas quotes from this passage at length and underlines its importance in the following manner:

Now, this is very significant indeed. It is significant first because Mabruka is speaking here not only for herself or for members of her sex but for us—the readers too. We agree
entirely when she says that Wad Rayyes “dug his grave with his own hands.” This is certainly the most appropriate epitaph for Wad Rayyes. Secondly, Mabruka’s condemnation of Wad Rayyes transcends race, national boundaries and creed. Her scream of hatred is a universal scream against the exploitation of women everywhere. . . . Thirdly, the myth about the docile and humble Sudanese wife who accepts her lot without complaint is given the lie. A woman like Mabruka might appear to accept the ignominious position imposed on her by a man like Wad Rayyes but underneath there is a deep current of resentment and hostility. The resentment and hostility may remain unvoiced but they are there nevertheless. (p. 51)\(^1\)

The desperate narrator knows well that the world is changed, that such cruel customs no longer fit in with our life in this age (p. 99). He turns to his grandfather for consolation as he had done throughout his life. Indeed, when he used to embrace his grandfather, he felt tremendously enriched by an increased sense of love, identity, and belonging. The old man was ascetic and pious, a wonder of nature, “something immutable in a dynamic world” (p. 48).

Suddenly, when the narrator witnesses Hosna’s drama in the making, he feels estranged from parents and friends, and even from his grandfather who tells him:

Wad Rayyes is sprightly enough—and he’s got money. . . . In any case the woman needs someone to protect her. Three years have passed since her husband’s death. Doesn’t she ever want to remarry? (p. 86)

When the tragedy happens, Hajj Ahmad weeps over his friend and curses women; there is not one drop of pity in him for Hosna.

Tayeb Salih violently condemns through Hajj Ahmad’s failure of nerves the power-structured relationships within the village and the world at large. Hosna’s “interior colonization” echoes her country’s large successive colonizations as the narrator’s horrified eyes look at the grandfather’s collapse. The seeds of evil have invaded the scene in East and West:

I found him seated on his couch in a state of fatigue I’d never seen him in before, just as if the source of life inside him had suddenly dried up. . . . “God curse all women! Women are the sisters of the devil. Wad Rayyes! Wad Rayyes!” and my grandfather burst into tears. It was the first time in my life I had seen him crying. (p. 123)

Three years ago the narrator had returned from England with a great yearning, wanting love to flow from his heart, to ripen and bear fruit. He had then asserted that “life was good and the world as unchanged as ever” (p. 5). Now he feels totally cut off from grandfather, parents, friends, and roots. “There is no room for me here” he says, “Why don’t I pick up and go?” (p. 130). Tayib Salih thus dramatically destroys external stabilities under tremendous inner tensions.

By doing so, Tayeb Salih, like Naguib Mahfouz, condemns old-time institutions grown empty of their rich and dynamic content, eaten up by deadly germs. Hosna is caught up within the circle of hateful confrontations which encompasses the highly ambiguous novel. Based on distortions of humanity, on the desire to appropriate and enslave, they naturally lead to suffering and death. In this sense, Salih’s fable is about modern Sudan itself, as it reemerges into the world after a long period of colonization in the East and two world wars in the
The modern Sudanese woman is given birth in agony and blood, through the immolation of Hosna. Formally, Salih conveys his theme by creating a “simultaneity of perception” through the breaking up of temporal and spatial sequence. He also fuses three Jamesian centers of consciousness as Hosna confesses to the narrator her brief life with Sa’eed and her determination to kill Wad Rayyes and to commit suicide. Simultaneously, Sa’eed speaks and the narrator confesses his love to Hosna. The author beautifully achieves here (pp. 88–96) a polyphony of voices in fugal form with rich shimmering echoes.

Hosna says little about Sa’eed. He was a good husband and a good father and he had a secret life, some mystery he never revealed. When Sa’eed dies, Wad Rayyes pursues her for two years and then marries her. The village voices witnessed above form the traditional Sudanese court that condemns Hosna to death, parallel to the court at London which is discovered to have tried her husband. Hosna reenacts in the Sudan Sa’eed’s tragedy in the West, for she has been infected by the germs of “wanderlust” Sa’eed spreads wherever he goes. Indeed, her “indescribable change” after her marriage had amazed Mahjoub, who noticed that “she had come to resemble a city woman” (p. 101). Ultimately, Hosna succeeds where Sa’eed fails.

Ironically, both Sa’eed and Hosna are totally dehumanized as they are turned into sex objects in East and West. The two ultimate scenes in their sexual lives are constructed in parallel form to underscore their highly symbolic meanings. Ann, Sheila, and Isabella, the various manifestations of Jean Morris, all commit suicide after they give themselves to Sa’eed in the “threatre of War” that was his room in London. The sadomasochistic game becomes increasingly acute, with Jean Morris chewing at his very liver (p. 157), until that icy night of reckoning when she waits for him naked on their bed, her white thighs opened, calling for “his satanic warmth” (pp. 162–165).

Hosna’s black thighs supersede Jean’s white ones as they refuse to open to Wad Rayyes. The narrator and the reader are deeply shaken by Bint Majzoub’s realistic description of every single detail of the tragic scene.

We found the two of them in Wad Rayyes’s low-ceilinged room... The lamp was alight. Wad Rayyes was as naked as the day he was born; Bint Mahmoud too was naked apart from her torn underclothes. The red straw mat was swimming in blood. I raised the lamp and saw that every inch of Bint Mahmoud’s body was covered in bites and scratches—her stomach, thighs and neck. The nipple of one breast had been bitten through and blood poured down from her lower lip. There is no strength and no power save in God. Wad Rayyes had been stabbed more than ten times—in his stomach, chest, face and between his thighs. (pp. 126–127)

The brutal war game waged between Hamida and Faraj reaches its peak here. Appalled, the narrator leaves the scene, shouting “How ghastly!... How ghastly!” (p. 131). His voice echoes those of Hosna and Sa’eed. Each reveals in turn the agony of a soul disintegrating under tremendous sociopolitical forces. Form and content in Season suggest that Salih’s three characters are outsiders in search for identity and belonging. Indeed the psyche of each is shattered by different worlds and different values as East and West, tradition and modern
times fight over it. Hosna is the precursor of the future woman of the Sudan, for
she is not allowed to live her present, to live her life. She is treated as an inde-
cent, mad, citified woman by a conservative male society that condones Wad
Rayyes’s senile demands over her. Her self-sacrifice in the name of dignity and
autonomy, the author suggests, is one of the important elements that might bring
about the birth of the modern Arab woman.

The narrator’s untraditional attitude towards Hosna adds hope to the chang-
ing situation. Having spent seven years in the West, he is deeply shaken by his
exposure to both Sa’eed and Hosna, and rejects his people when they coerce
Hosna. He is frustrated and fails, though, as he stands passively watching
Hosna’s drama taking shape. The educated youth of the newly independent
Sudan, as incarnated by the unnamed narrator, have still a long way to go in
their search for identity and an authentic personality.

V

In conclusion, this paper has tried to show the distortions and cruelties brought
about by any type of relationship based on domination and injustice. The para-
lyzed Egyptian crowds watching ‘Abbas’s assassination in Midaq, Hamida’s
departure to Alexandria, Hosna’s fatal rebellion, the narrator’s deep revulsion
and paralysis—are all powerful images, pregnant with protest and the will to
transform such scandalous attitudes in the Arab world. Mahfouz and Salih show
how deadly such distortions are to any definition of a human being, of a human
situation. Through compassion and love for their heroines, our authors put a
plea for the need to shift from a power game to an equal relationship, in which
recognition of the woman and participation in her personal fulfillment will bring
to the world justice and love.

Herein lies the essential meaning of the collapse of Hajj Ahmad, “the immu-
table point in a dynamic world.” The old man will have to change or die.

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NOTES

Author’s note: Parts of this paper were read at the Annual Conference of the Middle East Studies
Association (MESA) of North America, held in Philadelphia on November 2–4, 1983.

London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1975); Season of Migration to the North, trans. Denys
Johnson-Davies (London: 1969, 1970, 1976, 1978). Henceforth these will be mentioned as Midaq and
Season; all page numbers in parentheses refer to the last editions of the above English translations.

2 As my colleague Professor Samir Seikaly suggested in a lecture on Midaq Alley given at the
American University of Beirut.

3 See my previous article, “Tayeb Salih’s Season of Migration to the North: An Interpretation,”
Arab Studies Quarterly II.1 (Winter 1980), pp. 1–18.

4 As Joseph Frank puts it, in his important essay, “Spacial Form in Modern Literature,” The
Mahfouz's use of Tell-el-Kebir adds an ironic level to the sociopolitical satire. A highly strategic point which controls the Suez Canal area, it became an important base for the British after they crushed the Nationalist Revolution of 1882 led by Colonel 'Arabi. The Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936 "confined" British presence in Egypt to Tell-el-Kebir. Later, in July 1954, under Abdel Nasser, a phased evacuation of the British garrison occurred over a period of 20 months, quickly followed by the nationalization of the Canal. In Mīdaq, Tell-el-Kebir, symbol of national defeat and oppression, becomes a source of income for the poor people of Cairo (see for example pp. 10, 30, and 31).


The reader should keep in mind that our paper focuses on the lower strata of society in Cairo and on village customs in the Sudan, i.e., on the poor and traditional groups in both countries. The status of middle- and upper-class Arab women is influenced by education and economic life in ways not available to the social strata here studied.

In an interview Tayeb Salih gave around 1972, he appreciated Mahfouz's deep sympathy for the woman, as he puts it, and more precisely for the fallen woman one often encounters in his novels. "When concepts of shame and sin overload a culture," Salih remarks, "society faces a huge problem." Reprinted in Al-Tayyib Sāliḥ, ʿAbqarat al-Riwaʿayāt al-ʿArabīyya, ed. A. S. Muḥammediyya (Beirut: Dar al-Awdā, 1976), p. 214. Salih adds in later interviews given in 1976 and 1977, "Violence against the woman is violence against civilization and against life... I am deeply compassionate towards the woman... Some thought Season depicted the Sudanese village as unreal. Their evidence is that it is not realistic for a Sudanese woman to kill a man. But, I am not speaking of the actual murder. I speak of the charge of violence present in our temperament, in spite of the moderation of that temperament, and our noble morals. I have observed this tendency towards violence on a scope which is wider than that of the village." Reprinted in Tāyyib Sāliḥ Speaks: Four Interviews with the Sudanese Novelist, trans. and ed. C. E. Berkley and O. H. Ahmed, Sudanese Publication Series, No. 8 (Washington, D.C.: Offices of the Cultural Counsellor, Embassy of the Democratic Republic of the Sudan), pp. 21 and 30.


See my previous article, op. cit., pp. 13–14.