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## **The Journey from Tradition to Modernization in Naguib Mahfouz's novel "*The Midaq Alley*"**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the cultural norms which are constantly challenged throughout the novel and what is and what isn't socially accepted is a theme. *Midaq Alley* displays a historical period of Egypt in the most intimate sense as it is presented through the lives of the characters that inhabit the alley. In this novel, the characters struggle through questions of morality, ethics, and traditions in which the answer shape their behavior all perceived through the eyes of the ageless alley. The era which the story took place is an era where societal norms began shifting towards modernity due to the impact of western colonization. Naguib Mahfouz depicted a portrait a society within a larger society, which allows for analysis and comparison of both. He portrayed three of the themes in *Midaq Alley*, they are Class, love and marriage. The theme of "*Midaq Alley*" cuts to the heart of Arab society. Namely, it shows how a group of characters living in the same slum neighborhood responds to the combined promise and threat of Western-influenced modernization.

**Keywords:** modernization, modernity

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### **1. Introduction**

The novels of Naguib Mahfouz in general perspective depicts the modern social issues in the Egyptian society that is complicated and sophisticated in its fabric, such a multicultural community has in its spectrum different layers. The poverty, backwardness, and malfunctioned norms have affected the behavior of the individuals. Life during the first four decades of the twentieth century has drastically changed due to the enhancement of life amenities and technological leaps; such advancement has contributed to the deteriorating of the life of certain individuals. The manifestations of such collapses, disintegrations and regression have all been portrayed in the *Midqa Alley* (1947) Naguib Mafouz has portrayed all these existentialist aspects in an approach that allows the reader to stand on a ground that is desolate and waste. The human predicament is the theme that the novelist tries to pursue as the central task in this work, the female protagonist Hamida directs the motive of the novel from the beginning to the end along with Abbas, Hussein, Kirsha and other minor characters who share the same motive of assuming to journey from the *Midaq* to the world of wealth and money. In their journey, they endure odds and burdens that the researcher takes for here in this section of the study to enable the reader assess the predicament of man and women in a conservative society that is hit by the wind of change through the British Colony.

Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* is originally published in 1947 and later was translated into English by 1966. In 1994, it was also adapted as a film. It has won a Special Mention in the 45th Berlin International Film Festival. *Midaq Alley* is a portrayal of the society of Cairo during the 1940s, that juxtaposes in its fabric the whole social class structure of the Egyptian community in a time of transformation from tradition and modernization. Such a combination calls upon hardships and deficiencies that the

researcher in this paper attributes to the existentialist discourse that evaded the English literature as well as the stream of modernism. Apparently there is the category of the rich people like the shop owners, landlords, and the traders, and on the other hand there are the poor such as, street vendors, porters, barbers, and servants. There are other newly discovered class that has emerged under the influences of colonialism, like clerks, soldiers, westernized professionals, and civil servants. Besides, the novel exhibits the declining traditions of the Cairo society and the presence of colonizing authority that influences the consciousness of the main characters in the novel. The train of the Alley refers to the world of its envelopes. It transfers the reader to the end of the shrunken alley and of its dwellers. It is connected to the external world through its exit that is narrowed and tight. By "narrow exit", the novelist shows the gulf that separates tradition and modernization with a bit of hope to achieve a successful pass. The novel depicts the mysterious episodes of a repressed traditional alley in a time of modern Cairo. Thus Mahfouz utilizes an eloquent satire to build characters from human imperfection like Hamida, an arrogant and insatiable stepdaughter who basically indulges with a barber, a businessman, and a pimp. *Midaq Alley* is a panorama of the futility and chaos of the modern times as it deals with notable poverty and despair of the inhabitants of the Alley and existential portrayal of these agonizing impacts, through the themes that surpasses the Cairene settings. The novel also displays the collapsing system and its deconstructed traditional institutions and the distorted type of relations. To explain these topics and to have an overlook on the social and cultural grandeur of the novel, Mahfouz employs an ingenious and complex symbols to closely examine the *Midaq Alley*.

Regarding Mahfouz and the use of women in the novel as the main characters represented by Hamida, the researcher's aim in this part of the study is to critically examine the transformation from traditionalism to modernism and the odds that co-occur alongside that shift. This section of the study also provides an argument of male and female situations and the multiple types of their social issues and approaches and social struggles they face. To handle these issues, this section of the study can be classified into sub cases.

## 2. Predicament Frustration

The relationships among the characters that are represented in the *Midaq Alley* are all false and built on an interests. Hence, the researcher in this section would like to refer to the main character Hamida and her futile series of relationships that she strokes multiple times. *Midaq Alley* drags us back to the places of the old Cairo whereas the country is meddled with the confusions of the World War II. During the course of the novel, the war concludes. In its realist and existential phase, *Midaq Alley* provides us with a fascinating representation of human agony, decadence, and the autocracy of social relationships. "A decisive factor in the ongoing war against Arab peoples is the general lack of knowledge about and sympathy for their culture. To destroy a people, it is much easier to do so under a cloak of ignorance and misrepresentation." (Proyect, 2003.p.1) 2003 *Midaq Alley* is mirror to the life of Egypt during the 1940s whereas Mahfouz traces certain individuals to echo all facets of livingness in an existential approach to address the anguishes that he witnessed in Egypt during the 1940's. Therefore, he uses an influential characterization as the major literary factors as most of the characters are essential for the plot. The majority of the individuals in the alley are shallow in their relationships with each other's, and they are kept minded in the futile effort to fleet from the boring tradition and severe poverty. Hence, they consider the British colony as a shelter to get rid of their Psychological and financial problems. This "war is not the disaster that fools say it is. It is a blessing! God sent it to us to rescue us from our poverty and misery" (Mahfouz, 1947. *Midaq Alley*.p.31). With the impact and the spreading of colonization culture the novelist draws a clear picture of the class system in the alley community as the place that combines the two contradictory elements i.e. the traditional and the modern. This performs an important role on the characters' behavior towards the fresh change for materialistic gains. And consequently on the characters, who build their natures on greed and thirst for financial profit, the communication grows dry and futile and money replaces the sincere connections within the family as well as the society, "Money covers all blemishes" (Mahfouz, 1947. *Midaq Alley*.p.107). Money and power have become the major tools that world capitalism can enforces the local resistance with, "If money is the aim and object of those who squabble for power, then there is clearly no harm in money being the objective of the poor voters" (Mahfouz, 1947. *Midaq Alley*.p.130). Particularly women are the most exploited in this predicament and dilemma, they think that money can assist them to overcome the patriarchal restrictions, "money might be a dead tongue in other places, but in *Midaq Alley* it was very much alive language" (Mahfouz, 1947. *Midaq Alley*.p.137) At the time of the second world war, the West performed a crucial role in the life of the Egyptians. They had an influential impact on the young generation. This is evasive

in the story when the British forces offered vacancies to the young people only as a way to obtain good living conditions as well as to be part of a higher class people through becoming a part of society. Thus the British colonization has contributed to the clashes in the Egyptian society members. Lindsey Moore notices: Due to the complexity of national cultures and the influence of Europe, nationalism tended to be secularist and constitutionalist...nationalist politics across the region varied between calls for reform and power sharing, and ousting of the colonial power. However, European nations did not formally or fully relinquish control of the Arab world until after World War Two. (Moore, 2008.p.27) <sup>[7]</sup>

Abbas is an example of the urge for a new orientation. He works as a barber and resides happily in a half of the flat rented from an old woman. He is sincerely in love with main character in the novel Hamida, who also lives in the building where Abbas lives too but different flat with her mother Umm Hamida. Here is a lack of self-confidence on the account of the barber, who does not think that she would accept to marry him without being rich to afford her a prosperous life. So he directed his attention towards the British colony as a way to change and make money. Thus, the love is built on greed and not on joy and sincerity, rather Abbas is caught in a predicament, hence the first character in the novel who struggles to move out of the narrowness of the life in the *Midaq alley* is Hamida and Abbas sees in a job with the British Colony and out of the premises of the alley is a good chance to achieve his goals. Alongside the World War comes the dramatic changes to the inhabitants of the *Midaq Alley* (a slum and poor zone of Cairo city) such as radio (in Kirsha's cafe), electricity, jobs, and money that threatened the traditional principles system. More than that, not a single individual of the Alley endures these impacts at any way in which "self-indulgence" becomes one of the prominent themes. The dreams these characters have backfires on them and destroy their regular life too. The characters eventually encounter tragic consequences to accomplish their ambition for monetary gains and sexual pleasures. Western colonialism/modernity has affected the employees economically and culturally. For example, Sheikh Darwish teaches English in a charitable school that belongs to the Department of Religious Endowments, by the act of modernization, the schools of the Endowments are appropriated by the Department of Education, "Lacking the qualifications required by the more stringent standards of the new employer". (El-Enany, 1993.p. 61) <sup>[2]</sup> Therefore, his job is to be reduced to a clerical job and his payment is also reduced. Such reduction of his status and financial support broke his pride. Thus, he gradually abandoned from his work and deserted his family and eventually become a victim of modernity. In the novel even the poet wasn't able to survive the ruins of modernity. As he loses his work as Kirsha's café is now uses Radio technology. Kirsha informs the singer, "We know all the stories you tell by heart and we don't need to run through them again. People today do not want a poet. They keep asking me for a radio and there's one over there being installed now. So go away and leave us alone and may God provide for you." (Mahfouz, 1947. *Midaq Alley*.p.5). The novel provides sincere details of the reality coffee shop, where antiquity is under attack from all directions. Once more, the poet tries to pluck his music instrument's strings and started a prayer for the prophet, the coffee-tender yelled at him: "Are you going to force your recitations on us? That's the end - the end! Didn't I

warn you last week?" (Mahfouz, 1947. *Midaq Alley*.p.5). Being ruthless casted away by an act of refusal of the old fashioned ways, the present status doesn't allow the old and the new coexist, Mohamed-Salah Omri has made it crystal clear as he confirms, "Colonist literature had not contend only with 'native' culture but also to disassociate itself from oriental's representations of the colonies and assert its difference." and, he adds, "foreign literature reveals a search for new ways to handle these traditions within the emerging national culture."(Omri, 2006.p..32,36) the reader observes many characters tries to escape from the alley in quest of a better life however their attempts are frustrated and destroyed by the despairing existential manifestations. As in the case of Hussain Kirsha who left the Alley and served with the British forces in attempt to improve his poor living conditions. At any rare, as his service is terminated; he was compiled to return with the cage of the alley. Hussein come back in the same way he left, but this time his predicament is more manifested in his struggle to feed his newly formed family. He has to take care of a wife and a brother-in-law, he runs out of choices and he is in a very awkward situation, he is forced to ask his father's help. Hussain is crushed under the dark human conditions, and due to his lavish way of spending which he inherited from his father, now he has to surrender but to deplorable circumstances of Midaq Alley. The same fate is for Hamida in the novel. Although she departs her locality with a hope to enjoy the outside world to achieve material gain, instead it loots her identity and spins her out as a prostitute; she is a woman with staggering predicament, to leave the Midaq despite of all the odds, eventually she is frustrated and disappointed by the man she met, later on she also was compelled to return to Midaq Alley. One more character who is Abbas also leaves the alley for the purpose of improving his life is deprived of existence on the hands of the British soldiers when he is on vacation.

Midaq Alley is an ultimate depiction of the fortunes, pleasures, and grieves of the inhabitants of an alley that merely suggests a banal existence with a bit of hope of change in life. Men are representatives the conventional and the static lives of this lower middle-class people in an era when the external world and wart are alarming to devastate them. The brilliant depiction of the life of the marginalized instigated Taha Hussein a well-known critic to denounce that, "Indeed, I cannot think of a better book to recommend to all ministers of social affairs, and their research and survey teams." (Mohd, 2010.p.85) <sup>[6]</sup> Mahfouz combines character- description and common dialogue and association to construct his characters concurrently and advance the movement in the Alley. The central character, at any cost, is Midaq Alley, and the other characters are on different plain compliant to the alley. In his article, "Midaq Alley by Naguib Mahfouz: An Analytical Appraisal Based on Mohd. Affandi Hassan's Theoretical Framework, *Persuratan Baru*", Ungku Maimunah Mohd quotes that, "In the novel, the alley serves as a constant in the story. Whilst the main characters strive for change, the alley itself does not change..." (p.58) The people reflect the traits that form the impression about the life in the *Midaq Alley*. Uncle Kamil is an aged and unconscious man who sleeps most of the time in a chair in his shop. Abbas used to wake him up and reminds him about the time to close; Mahfouz in such pessimistic image visualizes the state of nothingness and the restlessness of the alley and that contributes in general perspective to the main theme of existentialism. Despite the fact that Abbas, is a young

and energetic, he is contented with running his shop and contemplating the religious and social traditions that the community always performs. Hamida lives in anguish as she watches the Jewish girls who work in factories and dress in fancy clothes. Moreover, the alley serves as a factor of the background, and it is opens up for the possible reading that goes further beyond its literal importance. Hence, the alley in the novel functions as an immutable and abiding motif in the novel. In the final chapter of *Midaq Alley*, Mahfouz enables the reader to have an outlook into the brief period of the collective life of the alley, which sounds to surpass the individuals who reside it. Despite of the fact that its dwellers maintain abject burdens as they stumble from one crisis to another, the alley abides to elate over all calamities. They anticipate certain alliterations to better life and prosperous future, yet, things persist without any change. Matti Moosa relates "this changelessness of the alley not to the fortuitousness but rather to the natural reflection of the behavior of its inhabitants whose lives are inextricably intertwined with it". (Moosa, 1994.p.89) <sup>[8]</sup> Hussain, who has no passion for Midaq Alley nor its people, is enthusiastic to abandon the house and its problems once and for all. The conclusion of the war, at any rate, diminished his good fortune and he is bound to the alley again, his aspirations demolished by power way beyond his authority. On the occasion of his return, Hussain informs Abbas "I left the Alley forever, but Satan pulled me back to it. I know, I'll set fire to it. That's the only way to free myself from it" (Mahfouz, 1947. *Midaq Alley*.p.38). As a result, the novel envisions the life in two different worlds: the alley world and the world beyond.

### Modernity versus Antiquity

The readers can observe how the characters are distracted from their regular roles due to their yearning for material achievement by joining the Colonial authorities represented by the British Army. In fact, the novel studies the behavior and moral codes in one hand and on the other hand the encounter between modernity and tradition. As in the examples of the manifestations of the existential characters who are afflicted with their own predicament respectively as follow Kirsha's addiction to homosexuality and drugs, Hamida's aspirations to attain power, Alwan's middle-aged fantasies of Hamida, and Hussain's unhappiness are limited neither to place nor to time. Besides, the opinions that are indicated in endless optimism by Radwan Hussainy and the attitudes of his neighbors about him, "remind one of the place of men of religion in all societies today". (Gassick, 1975.p. viii) <sup>[4]</sup> But in the novel it is a condition coated/created by history. Mahfouz starts with introducing Kirsha's cafe, which symbolizes the social centre of the alley, and sweeps through several of the ever-present characters within: "Many things combine to show that Midaq Alley is one of the gems of times gone by and that it once shone forth like a flashing star in the history of Cairo. And then there is its coffee-shop known as Kirsha's. Its walls decorated with multicolored arabesques, now crumbling, give off strong odors from the medicines of olden times, smells which have now become the spices and folk-cures of today and tomorrow..." (Mahfouz, 1947. *Midaq Alley*.p.1). When the night begins, the men assemble there for drinking tea, smoke, and chat. Radwan Hussainy is such brilliant man and the most dedicated one among Midaq Alley's characters. Others see him for spiritual advice in times of conflict and misunderstanding, his religious credibility and wisdom come

into play. On the other hand, the owner of the cafe Kirsha, who "had always lived a most irregular life, and he had rolled in its dirt so long that it appeared to him a perfectly normal one" (Mahfouz, 1947. Midaq Alley.p.39). He shows no shyness and never asks for an atonement or remorse, he would rather persist on the evil deeds "a veil of darkness", and becomes a victim to his perversions. It seems that his morality is not functioning well; hence, he is thrown into a dark place and condition where he sees no way out. In Islam, homosexuality is forbidden and is regarded as one of the biggest sins, Yet, the society of the alley seems to tolerate it like anything else. Mahfouz materializes these wrongful deeds in Kirsha's character. Kirsha engages himself multiple illegal behaviors that are despised and denounced by the society. However, Hussain tries friendly with him to convince him stop these ill practices by saying, "You know, Mr. Kirsha, I have not brought the matter up to offend you, or to make you feel shame. I just want to offer my advice for whatever good it will do." And he adds, "this boy is immoral and has an evil reputation...I am appealing to you for your own good and the good of your home. Give up this boy; he is just filth created by Satan" (Mahfouz, 1947. Midaq Alley.p.82, 83). Kirsha's response is that "he was free to do as he wished and that no one had any authority over him" (Mahfouz, 1947. Midaq Alley.p.83). Desperately, Hussain nods his head and says the words from the wholly Qur'an, "You cannot lead aright whomever you wish; it is God who leads whomever He wishes" (Mahfouz, 1947. Midaq Alley.p.80).

Hussain the son of Kirsha is also another character in the novel he is caught in a plight and he dislike the living conditions the alley and its people. He is another character with the predicament, to stay is to suffer the anguish to move out of the alley is to enter the unknown. He joins the work in the British army, where he gets money, yet the amount he earns does not cover his spending, to balance the things, he doubled his income by selling stolen items. By such behavior of getting illegal cash Hussein struggles in his predicament to survive, eventually he resembles his father, Hussain is undisciplined type of fellow he purchases extravagant food, hashish and liquors, all of these items are not allowed to Muslims. Lane mentions that "this pernicious and degrading custom is adopted in Egypt before the middle of the thirteenth century". (Lane, 1993: P.341) <sup>[3]</sup> Hussain's motive of leaving the alley is applicable to his childhood friend, Abbas al-Hilu, who also is tempted by fortune to leave his barbershop and find some job with the British. Hussain argues Abbas, "Everyone in this alley is half dead, and if you live here long, you won't need burying" (Mahfouz, 1947. Midaq Alley.p.31). However, Abbas is a quite gentle and modest man; he does what right only, and saves money his plan to marry Hamida the protagonist. However, his virtue causes his tragic end as he attempts to protect the honor of his fiancé Hamida.

There are two characters in the novel that Mahfouz uses to show the extent of the predicament of the regular people of the alley, in fact these two characters contribute to increasing the suffering of the alley poor inhabitants. Doctor Bushl and Zaita represent the dirt and ugliness, which characterize the Midaq Alley. Zaita instead of changing the conditions of the poor, he worsens the living of people by the act of mutilating them and reduces them to beggars, "... I am the best of people, not the worst, regular beggars don't earn a penny, whereas if I give them a deformity they can earn their weight in gold? It's a man's worth, not his

appearance that counts" (Mahfouz, 1947. Midaq Alley.p.113). Beggars are in patiently waiting to see him; they flock together under cover of darkness to the 'wasteland' where Zaita is, in order to have themselves distorted by his evil art. Such types of people are sons of the world of ignorance, sickness, and poverty. Begging is the only way to survive; their case is a metaphor of an entire nation that also survives by culturally begging from the West. However, deformity is necessary for the practice of begging and so are cultural transition requires pain and deformity. Hamida is the protagonist of the novel represents the moral ambiguity that grows clear, as Hamida grows conscious of her extraordinary beauty, and she shows no compunction about using it. She approves to Abbas's proposal, then changes for another suitor (the old man Salim Alwan who would provide luxury). However, her ambitions of luxurious life are abolished when Salim Alwan gone through heart attack. Later on, Hamida is allured again by a man of high class Ibrahim Farag who abandons her as a whore with no remorse. In the end of the story, she takes advantage of Abbas' sincere love to take revenge from Ibrahim Farag. Abbas accepts to protect her "honor" just as he knows that her honor has been sold and bought many times among the British soldiers. She eased in mind that her fiancé Abbas determines to cancel his plans of marriage, "...what you did will always stand between us..." (Mahfouz, 1947. Midaq Alley.p.228). However, Hamida does not look like to bewail her misfortunes or contemplate her morality. The worthless death of Abbas makes an impression on the mind of the readers to see him as the representation of villain character by sacrificing his life for Hamida's mistakes. "More significantly, the sexual politics, however, rise to its peak towards the end of the novel, when the enraged drunken soldiers in the tavern fall on Abbas from all sides like "wild animals", killing him with blows, kicks, and glasses fly in all directions, while his friend Hussain is paralyzed and watch impotently" (Mahfouz, 1947. Midaq Alley.p.241-242). Midaq Alley manifests its moral ambivalence obviously in the framework of the story, that revolves around a punch of the Midaq Alley's residents in an improvised quarter of Cairo, for them money counts as everything, the morals issues detail professionally with the existential requirements, the events contribute to the main theme of the existential predicament Throughout tensed situation between the life of the alley and the temptation of the modernity. Those who really leave the Alley motivated by working for the British, such a manifestation of modernity leads to one man penniless, another dead, and a woman prostitute. Zaita trudges in the dark alley to see his beggars to get his share of the day work of collection. Hamida engaging with British soldiers, Abbas brawls with British soldiers, Booshy and his friends are to dig up the graves for valuables, the perverted Kirsha following young men, and so on. Gassick asserts that "these universal problems of behavior and morality the novel examines remain the same". (Gassick, 1975: P. viii) Hence, the theme that underlies the collision between modernity and tradition is the only between the social and economic status. Mahfouz personified Midaq Alley as the place of two dissimilar cultures through two domains: the life of the Midaq Alley (the inhabitants) and the world outside the Alley (the Western colonization). Every world has its own traditions and culture that distinguishes it from the other. For example, the Arab woman does not put on revealing or tight cloths publically because it is thought-out to be shameful and coarse in Arab

religion. Thus, it assumes one more phase of predicament of women in particular the Arab who is submissive, passive, and oppressed. On the other hand, Arab societies think about the Western women as lost and immoral. Yet still, in their predicament the Arabs grope for modernization. Mahfouz provides examples of the factory girls and Jewish women as the reflections of the Western tradition and feminist's opinion too, who are in the perspective of Hamida pretty, bold, rich, and knowledgeable; work freely with "a nice clothes." And he employs Hamida as a vivid image of Islamic feminism who later is hooked and sabotaged by the ideological impacts of the Western. Mahfouz through his characters, states that the world of the Midaq Alley is an ultimate description of the less resources, religion, tradition, joys, and moreover, agony of the people of an alley that only offers an earthly existence with glimpse of hope. It "was a place that did not treat its inhabitants fairly" (Mahfouz, 1947. Midaq Alley.p.32). The world beyond them is reflected in form of temptations of modernism, opportunities employment, secularism, fashion, money, and carefree. Due to the fact power and money could satisfy their lust, the inhabitants of the ally are overwhelmed with such predicament of to go out of the poverty and head to the unknown. Hamida is captivated by Western allurements due to her thirst for richness and authority meanwhile Abbas dies for defending her honor. Diulio makes it very clear as she announces, "...the reader will realize how not only the characters are entrapped in cages of subservience, but also readers of Mahfouz are trapped in cages of misunderstanding." (Diulio, 2007. P. xxi) Mahfouz's personas are representation of the poorer layers of the society in it he traces the tragedy and sadness of their lives. Their lives become miserable and unfortunate due to the two conflicting social approaches of thoughts, (modernity and tradition), both tradition and modernity don't solve their problems, rather, they make them more complicated. Giving these features, the readers come to understand that the alley doesn't any redemptive values. The reader realizes throughout the novel the disparity between the tradition and the modernity in Egypt during the 1940s, which stands for the reenactment of the East-West encounter and the values, whether aesthetic or moral, that each world displays.

### Conclusion

To sum up this section, there are several themes that contribute to the genera human predicament of man in Midaq Alley. For instance: poverty, despair, the dark human condition, the intense desire to embrace the western culture as well as the theme of sexuality. The researcher in this section has shown the predicament of Abbas, Hussain Kirsha, Kirsha, Salim Alwan and more importantly our protagonist in this novel Hamida. Every single character from the above mentioned has a common needs and desires to fulfill, like need of money, wealth, sex gratification and the yearning for a better life beyond the Midaq. Hamida unify all the characters in their various tendencies, she unifies the events of the novel. She represents the leader of the journey from darkness to light that is literally from the poor conditions of the alley to the promising land of the western culture that accompany the British colony to Egypt. In other words, for that dreams of a better life outside of the alley underwent the predicament that to confuse them and made the unable to achieve their aims. Mahfouz chooses to compose his novel about the poor people of Cairo who in the plight of poverty despair, and unchanging quality of

Egyptian society that grow as the predominant themes in *Midaq Alley*.

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