

Narrative Discourse in Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*

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Apart from his Trilogy and *Children of Gebelawi*, one can venture to say that perhaps none of Naguib Mahfouz's other works has received so much critical attention as *Midaq Alley*. Similar to Mahfouz's two other Cairene novels *Kham al-Kalili* and *al-Qahira al-Jadida* – *Midaq Alley* is set in Cairo, particularly in an isolated alley which is part of al-Husayn picturesquely quarter of Cairo.

However, Mahfouz's choice of Cairo as a setting is not only limited to these three novels. The Trilogy, for example, Mahfouz's masterpiece, reveals the writer's fascination with Cairo, so much so that some critics dubbed him the chronicler of Cairo.¹ But the choice of Cairo as a setting is not a haphazard one. By this choice "Cairo becomes a protagonist whose existence is indispensable for the existence of the narratives themselves and for our own reading and decoding of these narratives."² Mustafa al-Tawati has this to say about the significance of place in Naguib Mahfouz's writings:

- 1) By restricting himself to Cairo, the capital of Egypt, with its streets, neighbourhoods and squares, Mahfouz places his characters within a purely Egyptian context. He is consequently telling us that the crisis these people are experiencing is above all else an Egyptian one. The touches of realistic detail relating to place are carried forward from the realist phase of his art. These are not gratuitous, but are used to construct his novel and to underline the specifically Egyptian nature of his characters.

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¹ Mona N. Mkhail, *Studies in the Short Fiction of Mahfouz and Idris* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p. 12.

² Samaa Mehrez, "Re-Writing the City: The Case of *Khitat al-Ghitani*," *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction* (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 1994), p. 59.

2) In these novels the element of place is not a single device to satisfy the requirements of any academic definition of the art of the novel. It has become an independent, self-sufficient element, playing a role like that of a character in centering attention on the novel's pivotal figures.³

This is indeed true if we take a closer look at some of Naguib Mahfouz's other works, particularly the Trilogy and his other two Cairene novels paying special attention to the relation between history, character, and place. But the fascination with place is, above all, a psychic factor. People develop a liking to place just as they develop a liking to other people. This is indeed true in the case of Naguib Mahfouz who always professes his fascination and love for old Cairo. However, in the case of *Midan Alley* the choice of a confined place plays both a technical and a symbolic function. Technically speaking, the confined alley gives the story a glaring focus on character growth and development. On the symbolic level, the choice of place-within-place, like in the case of Zaita and Dr. Booshy's graveyard adventures, denotes the impossibility of making a living unless one violates the sanctity of the dead. Thus, life is so harsh in the alley among the living that the only source of sustenance in it lies in the realm of the dead.

‘Abd al-Muhsin Tāhā Badr argues that the crisis experienced by the characters of *Midan Alley* is not entirely an Egyptian one. According to him, the genius of Naguib Mahfouz shows in the manner he sketches the immorality of the Second World War and how it destroys the lower middle-class life in an isolated alley in old Cairo. To him, it is this clash between the alley and the Second World War, which is the major theme in the novel.⁴ Others see Hamīda, the major female "protagonist" in the narrative as a symbol for Egypt. Thus they see Hamīda's prostitution of herself to American and British soldiers as a symbol of Egypt under occupation.⁵

³ Mustafa al-Tawati, "Place in Three Novels by Mahfouz," *Critical Perspectives on Naguib Mahfouz*, ed. Trevor Le Gassick (Washington D. C: Three Continents Press, 1991), p. 82.

⁴ ‘Abd al-Muhsin Tāhā Badr, *Naguib Mahfouz: al-Rū’ā wal ‘Adā’* (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqāfa li-Tibā’ā wal Nashr, 1978), p. 413.

⁵ Fu’ād Dwarah, *Naguib Mahfouz: Min al-Qawmīyyā itā al-Ālamīyya* (Cairo: al-Hay’ā al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma li-l-Kitāb, 1989), p. 22.

This farfetched notion of taking the prostitute as a symbol for Egypt has been refuted by the author himself. When asked why the prostitute features so prominently in his writings Naguib Mahfouz's response is:

Because the character of the prostitute is a useful tool for harsh social criticism. It is a means I use in juxtaposition. For, while a woman may be driven by poverty to prostitution, in a fictional work she plays the role of revealing the moral and physical corruption of others.⁶

Focusing on the character of Hamida, which is more central to the narrative, Rasheed el-Enany, sees the conflict of old and new, East and West, religion and secularism, as the major theme of the story. In this conflict he sees the war as representative of the West with its modernity and power. To him, Hamida, with her shamelessness, bellicosity, and practical atheism is a symbol of the values of the modern West. Thus, it is only by shedding all traces of the "past" can Hamida (and, of course, a few other characters in the story) satisfy their hunger for modern Western materialism.⁷

Perhaps closer to my own reading of *Midaq Alley* is Trevor Le Gassick's when he comments on Naguib Mahfouz's three aforementioned Cairene novels:

All these works have a common undercurrent of sadness and express Mahfouz's essentially tragic vision of life. Few of their large cast of characters are happy or successful, their failures sometimes resulting from their own faults of character or conduct, sometimes from the callous and unkind hand of fate.⁸

I do not think that Naguib Mahfouz set out in *Midaq Alley* to express his tragic vision of life. It is true that a few of his characters are happy or successful but this is because (as the narrative shows) of their own human imperfections, or because of external factors beyond their control. In my view, and as I will try to explain a little later, the recurrent theme in the narrative is

⁶ Ahmed Mohammad, 'Afyya, *Ma 'a Naguib Mahfouz*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dâr al-Jil, 1983) p. 23.
Rasheed El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 54-61.

⁷ Le Gassick, *Critical Perspectives*, p. 3.

that of self-fulfillment. Action in the narrative centers around this theme and on the ability of characters to realize their dreams. Some do despite the odds, and others, owing to some flaws of character, fail to do so. In this context war as an external factor presents either a challenge or an opportunity to some. A few others seem to be remote from any impact of war either because they lack ambition or because they seek self-realization solely in metaphysical domains.

Our focus now will be on how Naguib Mahfouz explores and develops his subject matter and what kind of technique does he apply in order to achieve a work with richness and thrill. To this we proceed with the full knowledge that the writer's understanding of his subject, no matter how great, cannot alone produce a work of grand and compelling effect.

Generally speaking, narration in most of Naguib Mahfouz's novels is characterized by editorial omniscience. Even though the story in *Midaq Alley* is told in the third person and hence escapes the personal stamp of first person narratives, it does however abound (although much less in degree than in Naguib Mahfouz's other novels) in authorial commentary and interjections. But the author makes up nicely for that with a host of other techniques. Our objective here will be to see if the techniques adopted help the purpose of the writer. In his definition of technique, Mark Schorer points to this factor as the essence of technique. According to him technique is:

Any selection, structure, or distortion, any form or rhythm imposed upon the world of action; by means of which, it should be added, our apprehension of the world of action is enriched or renewed. In this sense, everything is technique which is not the lump of experience itself, and one cannot properly say that a writer has no technique, or that he eschews technique, for, being a writer, he cannot do so. We can speak of good or bad technique, of adequate and inadequate, of technique which serves the novel's purpose, or disserves.⁹

Thus, when we speak of technique, we are actually speaking about everything, because technique is the tool by which a writer's experience, or subject matter, is rendered to us. Hence, technique becomes the only means

⁹ Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," *The Theory of the Novel*, ed. Philip Steiv (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 67.

the writer has of discovering, exploring, and developing his subject matter and of conveying its meaning to us. With this we proceed to examine how Naguib Mahfouz employs technique to produce a work with thickness and resonance.

To begin with, the choice of an isolated alley as a center of action gives the story a close focus on character and place because life in this closed setting centers exclusively around five shops and two houses each having only three apartments. In this confined space the notion of the protagonist as the center of action declines resulting in an almost equal attention given to each character in the alley. It is true that Hamida is more central to the story, but this is only because her story is interconnected with the lives of so many other characters in the novel. The fact that action is shared by all characters in the narrative provides a unique dramatic element. It is that the story of each character is told from his own angle, and this results in a body of protagonists-narrators each giving his own perception of things. In this way each character sets apart and illuminates in its own right.

Despite the plot's episodic structure, the temporal order of events does follow a linear sequence. It is true that the major story of Hamida and Abbas Hilu provides the general framework of the book. Nonetheless, there are plenty of other stories, which, though they lead to a fragmented approach to the general account of events comprising the major story, in the final analysis they contribute in some way or another in emphasizing the major theme of self-fulfillment. There are (to give a few examples) stories dealing with Kirsha, the coffeeshop owner's marital life and homosexual adventures. There is the account of Hussain Kirsha's life indulgence experiences; and there is the compelling story of the rich Salim Alwan's unsuccessful attempts at self-fulfillment. Even the story of Mrs. Saniya Afif's quest to find a husband is rendered in the narrative in a discontinuous fashion scattered here and there in the novel. In all of this Naguib Mahfouz succeeds through dialogue, scene, description, and summary narrative in presenting the viewpoints of all his characters on what they think of each other, and what they think of the crisis that Hamida and Abbas Hilu experience toward the end of the narrative.

Our study of technique in this work would be incomplete without some focus on plot and character. Critics have argued continuously over the priority of plot over character (or character over plot) and over whether distinctions can indeed be made for the terms story, plot and action on the one hand for

plot and character on the other.¹⁰ In general, a novel cannot escape being in one sense a composite of characters, with their emotions and different states of mind, in another sense a composite of words comprising the linguistic medium giving life to these characters, and in yet a third sense a composite of technique embodying the above.¹¹ Those who define plot as the material continuity of the story and those who define it merely in terms of action ignore the synthesizing element of character, action and thought, which are actually the essential ingredients of a good plot. As R. S. Crane has aptly put it:

No plot can be judged excellent merely in terms of the unity of its action, the number and variety of its incidents, or the extent to which it produces suspense and surprise. These are but properties of its matter, and their achievement, even to a high degree, in any particular plot does not inevitably mean that the emotional effect of the whole will not still be diffused or weak. They are, therefore, necessary, but not sufficient, conditions of a good plot, the positive excellence of which depends upon the power of its peculiar synthesis of *character, action, and thought*, as inferable from the sequence of words, to move our feelings powerfully and pleasurable in a certain definite way.¹²

This power, which is an essential element in the form of the plot, is the most important dramatic element any novel can have. From an artistic point of view, it is this power, which most sharply distinguishes works of imitation from all other kinds of literary productions. This does not mean that we cannot derive pleasure from other causes such as the manner of representation, or from the various conditions of suspense and surprise. The same can be said about powers of language as a literary form. This simply means that the foremost element in moving our feelings powerfully in certain way lies in the plot's synthesizing employment of character, action, and thought. Additionally, such an approach to plot evaluation is a technical necessity, especially now, since our old evaluation of plot on the basis of a summary of events is incapable of accommodating the different manifestations of technical

¹⁰ Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 207.

¹¹ R.S. Crane, "The Concept of Plot," *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 141.

¹² Crane, pp. 143-144.

artistry. Furthermore, there are advantages in dealing with character, action, and thought as one comprehensive unit.

Without disregard for other fictional characters in the narrative, I will focus here on the characters that undergo the major change and around whom the plot revolves. I will attempt to analyze these characters and the nature of their change, their responsibility in that change or in whatever they undergo, and the nature of cause and effect that contributes to that change. In this manner the sequential flow of events is not isolated from its means and causes, from its effects and ends, for it is

...the desire to arouse our sympathy or aversion, for example, which dictates to an author the kinds of people he portrays and the things he has them do; the desire to provoke our pity or indignation, for example, which determines the sort of fate he designs for a certain character. In this case, the form of a plot is a matter of the relationship between two things: the unified sequence of events involved in the process of change, which depends upon whether the synthesizing change is one of action, character, or thought; and the particular sequence of emotions aroused as we read, which depends upon the moving power invested in these events.¹³

Thus, our evaluation of plot in a novel cannot be based on plot summary but on constructing a synopsis of the unique combination of action, character, and thought. It is based on the writer's choice of the kind of protagonist(s) he wishes to create, what changes he exposes them to the degree of their responsibility in that change, and the essential stages of cause and effect bringing about this change.

We now proceed to consider the artistic essence of plot both by analyzing the interplay of desire and expectation and the relation of this interplay to the incidents and by examining the capacity for the synthesis of character, action, and thought in moving our feelings powerfully in a certain definite way.¹⁴ In doing so, I will be employing Norman Friedman's methodology for the study of plot in which – as I have stated above – there are

¹³ Norman Friedman, "Forms of the Plot," *The Theory of the Novel*, ed. Philip Stevick (New York: The Free Press, 1967), pp. 145-166. This specific quotation is on pages 151-152.

¹⁴ Friedman, p. 152.

distinguished three kinds of plot, each having different varieties.¹⁵ While this approach is based on Friedman's study of Western novels, I find it applicable to *Midaq Alley*, the novel I am addressing here in this work.

In my view *Midaq Alley* falls under plot of fortune (or action) category. However, the misfortune, which the body of characters undergoes, gives the story a "pathetic plot" quality. Throughout the novel Naguib Mahfouz's impressive concise use of language conveys a great deal to the reader about his pathetic characters. Indeed the genius of Naguib Mahfouz shows in his ability to explore his characters emotionally and psychologically in an outstanding and rich way. This creative hand passes through all characters in three different ways. First, and in what I call "outer character", he will introduce a physical description of a character usually in a manner not lacking in humor. Consider this passage, for example, about Uncle Kamil:

He is a hulk of a man, his cloak revealing legs like tree trunks and his behind large and rounded like the dome of a mosque, its central portion resting on the chair and the remainder spilling

¹⁵ Actually, this methodology is presented in a complementary fashion by both R. S. Crane and Norman Friedman in *Theory of the Novel*. In his short article, "The Concept of Plot" (on pages 141-145), Crane introduces the concept of the three kinds of plots. He defines "plots of action" as those in which "the synthesizing principle is a completed change, gradual or sudden, in the situation of the protagonist, determined and effected by character and thought" (p.141). He defines the second category, "plots of character," as those plots in which "the principle is a completed process of change in the moral character of the protagonist, precipitated or molded by action, and made manifest both in it and in thought and feeling" (p.142). In "plots of thought," "the principle is a completed process of change in the thoughts of the protagonist and consequently in his feelings, conditioned and directed by character and action" (p. 142). Friedman adds more to the above definitions. For him, "action" or "fortune" "refers to the protagonist's honor, status, and reputation, his goods, loved one, health, and well-being. Fortune is revealed in what happens to him -- happiness or misery -- and to his plans -- success or failure" (p. 156). Character "refers to the protagonist's motives, purposes, and goals, his habits, behavior, and will, and may be noble or base, good or bad, sympathetic or unsympathetic, complete or incomplete, mature or immature. Character is revealed when he decides voluntarily to pursue or abandon a course of action and whether he can indeed put his decision into effect" (p. 156). According to Friedman, "Thought refers to the protagonist's states of mind, attitudes, reasoning, emotions, beliefs, conceptions, and knowledge. Thought is revealed either omnisciently, as in most novels, or in what the characters say when stating a general proposition, arguing a particular point, or explaining his view of a situation" (p.156). The different varieties in each one of these kinds of plots will be addressed as we examine the novel.

over the sides. He has a belly like a barrel, great projecting breasts, and he seems scarcely to have any neck at all. Between his shoulders lies his rounded face, so puffed and blood-flecked that his breathing makes its furrows disappear. Consequently, scarcely a single line can be seen on the surface and he seems to have neither nose nor eyes. His head topping all this is small, bald and no different in color from his pale yet florid skin. He is always panting and out of breath, as if he has just run a race, and he can scarcely complete the sale of a sweet before he is overcome by a desire for sleep. People are always telling him he will die suddenly because of the masses of fat pressing round his heart. He always agrees with them. But how will death harm him when his life is merely a prolonged sleep?¹⁶

The above passage about Uncle Kamil reveals this "outer character" approach by the author. But even here, the gross physical description of this heavy mass of flesh called Uncle Kamil is not without psychological significance. He is presented as someone whose sole objective in life is physical survival. The fact that his life is a state of "prolonged sleep" denotes his lack of ambition and the absence of any zest for living.

Thereafter, and in what I call "inner character" the writer tells us about the character's temperament or inner thoughts. Let us consider, for example, the rich Salim Alwan's passion for poverty-stricken Hamida (who is young enough to be his last-born child); his inner thoughts as he seriously considers taking Hamida as a second wife, and his reasons for doing so:

He was naturally eager to preserve his honor and dignity. After all, he was Salim Alwan, whereas she was only a poor girl and the alley overflowed with sharp tongues and roving eyes. He stopped his work and thoughtfully drummed the top of his desk with his forefinger. Yes, she was indeed poor and lowly, but unfortunately desire could not be denied, could it?

¹⁶ Naguib Mahfouz, *Midaq Alley*, trans. Trevor Le Gassick, 5th rep. (Cairo: The American University Press, 1989), p. 2. All further page references are to this edition.

She was poor and humble, but what about her bronze-colored face, the look in her eyes and her lovely slender body? He quite frankly desired that pretty face...¹⁷

And in an unspoken – kind of – soliloquy the narrative continues in revealing Salim Alwan's inner thoughts:

Salim Alwan continued to nourish his admiration until at last it grew into an all-consuming desire. He acknowledged this and no longer attempted to deny his true feelings. He often said to himself: "If only she were a widow like Mrs. Saniya Afify." Indeed if she were a widow like Mrs. Afify, he would have found a way long ago. However, since she was a virgin, the matter must be considered most carefully. Now he asked himself, as he had so often done in the past, what he could do to win her. But, in the back of his mind lingered thoughts of his wife and family. His wife was a worthy woman, possessed of all a man could desire as far as femininity, motherhood, tenderness and household ability were concerned. In her youth she had been pretty and fertile and he could not make a single criticism of her. Apart from that, she came from a noble family, far above his own where ancestry and position were concerned. He had a sincere affection for her. In fact all he had against her was that the youth and vitality were gone and she could neither keep up with him nor bear his attentions. In comparison he seemed, with his extraordinary vitality, an eager youth unable to find in her the pleasures he yearned for.¹⁸

Naguib Mahfouz's revealing of the inner thoughts of characters such as Salim Alwan, as the above passage shows, enables him to achieve the individual status for each character. It is true that characters like Uncle Kamil and Salim Alwan may not be capable of surprising us in a new way each time they appear in the narrative, yet they are fully delineated and individualized, and they are convincing.

¹⁷ *Midq Alley*, p. 59.

¹⁸ *Midq Alley*, p. 60.

This "inner character" technique in Naguib Mahfouz's writing gives special attention to the psychological dimension of character. Perhaps in one of the most remembered parts of the novel, the narrative actually "shows" us through descriptive statements the unspoken feelings of Zaita, the deformity-maker, and the intense hatred he harbors towards all those who treat him as a virtual outcast:

One reason why the people in the alley avoided him was his offensive odor, for water never found its way to either his face or body. He happily reciprocated the dislike people showed for him and he jumped with joy when he heard that someone had died. He would say, as though speaking to the dead person: "Now your time has come to taste the dirt, whose color and smell so much offend you on my body." No doubt he spent much time imagining tortures he could inflict on people and found a most satisfying pleasure in doing just this. He would imagine Jaada the baker as a target for tens of hatchets striking at him and leaving him a smashed heap. Or he would imagine Salim Alwan stretched on the ground while a streamroller ran over him again and again, his blood running down towards Sanadiqiya. He would also imagine Radwan Hussainy being pulled along by his reddish beard towards the flaming oven and being eventually pulled out as a bag of ashes. Or he might see Kirsha stretched beneath the wheels of a train crushing his limbs, later to be stuffed into a dirty basket and sold to dog-owners for food! There were similar punishments that he considered the very least people deserved. When he set about his work of making cripples at their request, he was as cruel and deliberately vicious as he could be, cunningly employing all the secrets of his trade. When his victims cried out at his torture, his terrifying eyes gleamed with an insane light. Despite all this, beggars were the people dearest to him and he often wished that beggars formed the majority of mankind.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Midaq Alley*, pp. 48-49.

In my view, the range of individual variety with respect to character is a basic criterion by which we should judge the greatness of a novel. And it is here that Mahfouz excels in creating vivid characters like Zaita – whose notoriety and evident sadism fascinate us because he lurks in our consciousness as an interesting and complex character with his own code of living, and because we cannot fit him into any of our stereotyped modes of living.

Additionally, the above passage exhibits Naguib Mahfouz's satiric style, which he masterfully uses in depicting the people who populate the alley. They also reveal a noticeable feature in Mahfouz's writing which sets him apart from so many Arab writers; and that is his ability to penetrate into the character of the commoner and present him and his inner life in highly vivid human terms. This creative hand is passed over all characters in the novel. In this way characters remain in our memories because they possess many traces of individuality and because they are not merely embodiments of ideas. Anyone who reads *Midaq Alley* will remember vividly characters like Umm Hamida, Uncle Kamil, Dr. Booshy, Zaita, Jaada and his wife — to all of whom self-fulfillment simply means physical survival, means living through another day to see the sun rising and setting. This is their only ambition in life. To Mrs. Saniya Afify, the rich property owner, self-fulfillment means finding a husband to share her life and wealth with. But to Salim Alwan wealth does not bring with it inner happiness and content. To him self fulfillment lies in breaking away from boredom and routine by gratifying one's physical needs. Similarly, to Kirsha and his son Hussain self-fulfillment is to enjoy the pleasures of life to the fullest – if and when they can.

In the world of the alley Radwan Hussainy and Sheikh Darwish present a total contrast to the other cast of characters in the sense that they are completely detached from material concerns. To them the pleasures of life lie in enduring the tribulations of God and seeking His pleasure through kindness and caring which one must show to His creation.

We now turn our attention to Hamida and Abbas Hilu whose story provides the general unity of the novel. From the beginning Abbas appears to us as a sympathetic character. He is attracted to Hamida because she is the only girl suitable for him in the alley. Despite his contentment and lack of ambition in the beginning, he sets off seeking better opportunity because he realizes that this is what Hamida wants in life. Our sympathy for him comes from the fact that his good-naturedness and easy-going personality, his respect

to tradition and popular culture, is in direct contrast to Hamida's aggressive, pagan-like quality. His naïvety comes from the fact that he does not know the real Hamida. Thus, to the reader Abbas's will is in some way weak and his thought naïve and deficient. This is what keeps the reader in fear throughout the narrative that misfortune will happen to him. Finally, the reader's intermittent short-range hopes for Abbas disappear and his long-range fears for him actually materialize when Abbas tragically dies.

Hamida is the most appealing character in the narrative to the reader. The author's masterful use of the technique of interior monologue and unspoken (and sometimes spoken) soliloquy in a lyrical style proves to be very successful in revealing her inner feelings in a very moving way. Additionally, the novel abounds with descriptive narrative statements, dialogue and scenes about her thoughts and feelings with respect to others (especially to Ibrahim Faraj who woos her to vice) in such a tone that the reader is made to feel a distinct sense of futility hanging over the novel. Her background reveals an illegitimate child who has no family to speak of. Being practically orphan, and living in abject poverty, she yearns to satisfy the basic necessities of life, like a bed to sleep in, shoes and clothes to wear, even a decent meal of meat once in a while. Her vexatious, quarrelsome nature is coupled with the fact that she has no sense of morality at all. Thus, she is determined to break away from the vicious circle of poverty at all cost. Her fulfillment-driven sentiments lead her to accept Salim Alwan's offer to take her as a second wife despite being engaged to Abbas Hilu. This, however, does not materialize owing to Salim Alwan's sudden heart attack, which makes him change his mind about the whole issue. This being the case, Hamida – who is free from the shackles of tradition – turns to her youthful looks (the only asset she has in life) to achieve self-fulfillment.

Hamida's unfortunate end leaves the reader in a confused state of emotion. On the one hand, he is aware of her inexperience in life and of the options she has in realizing her dreams – given her social background. On the other hand, the reader wonders whether the misfortune she and Abbas undergo is through a particular fault of their own. But the misfortune Hamida and Abbas experience gives the plot a "suffering" character. The sadness the reader experiences as a result of seeing the misfortune of Abbas and Hamida and their failure in fulfilling their dreams confirms the reader's long-ranged fears and leaves him with a sense of sadness engrained in his psyche. Seeing this happen to these two characters not only illuminates the tragic

consequences of a character's human deficiency, but provides as well one of the most memorable illustrations of the dehumanizing quality of poverty. In all of this the writer masterfully employs plot, characterization, and setting to focus upon the major theme of self-fulfillment. The fact that the reader is left with a brooding sense of human frailty, of pity and sorrow for what happens to the major characters in the novel, underscores the most outstanding feature in Naguib Mahfouz's writings, his ability to craft memorable characters.