

Humanities and Educational
Sciences Journal

ISSN: 2617-5908 (print)



مجلة العلوم التربوية

والدراسات الإنسانية

ISSN: 2709-0302 (online)

Corruption, Poverty and Immorality: An Analytical Study of New Cairo and Middaq Alley^(*)

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تاريخ قبوله للنشر 28/6/2020.

<http://hesj.org/ojs/index.php/hesj/index>

(*) تاريخ تسلم البحث 13/6/2020

(*) موقع المجلة:

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Abstract:

This research paper aims at giving a realistic image of the exploitation and suffering of the low middle class in the realistic novels of Naguib Mahfouz Al-Qahira al-Jadida (New Cairo, 1945) and Zudaq al-Midaq (Midaq Alley, 1947). The two novels within their multipart of thematic formation and methodology invite huge possibilities of insights and investigations. Mahfouz focuses attention on the triple threats facing Egypt at that time, poverty, corruption, and unemployment. The study tries to show how Mahfouz argues through these novels that the existence of poverty and corruption in a society violates widely shared moral values and affects the poor people's dignity as human beings. Using specific examples from the novels, the researcher points out that poverty often does serious harm to poor people's bodies, relationships, morality, and social relationships. The themes dealt with in these two novels are still valid in today Egypt and the Arab World.

Keywords: corruption, poverty, Middaq Alley, New Cairo, Novel

Introduction:

A realistic novel presents life as it is, deleting nothing that is gruesome or agonizing, and romanticizing nothing. However, this is not the only task of a realistic writer. Great literature is the result of a combination of two realities, the external reality and the reality created by the writers. According to Walter Allen, "good writers are, so to speak, mediumistic to the deepest stirrings of life of their time while they are still unknown to, or at any rate, unsuspected by, the public, the politicians, and current received opinion" (18-9). The greatness of a work of art lies in not only the ability of its writer to discern the truth of his times and his society, but also but also foresee the future. Lukács says, that, "a people can, however, be represented by different types of writers. There are 'representative' writers, who are prophets of the future, and others whose genius and mission is to be mirrors of the world" (*Historical Novel* 14). Mahfouz, as we shall see, is both a prophet of the future and his "genius and mission" is to present a mirror in which we can see the political and social life of his country. He not only reflects reality in his work but also analyses it and foresees the direction in which the political and social wind will blow.

Fiction, of all literary forms, is closely connected with social aspects and values, and at this time, Egyptian society, galvanized into a new social and political awareness, was seeking creative expression for its new consciousness and the novel was the most suitable instrument for this purpose. Mahfouz took to writing at a time when Egypt was suffering from adverse circumstances. Along with the struggle for political freedom started another struggle for freedom on the social filed in the form of a fight against poverty and corruption. Mahfouz started his career with writing historical novel based on the ancient Egyptian history but he did not continue to write historical novels. He shifted his attention to contemporary life in modern Egypt and this shift emerged not only as a pure literary exercise but also as an artistic response to the socio-political situation in the country. The struggle for independence was an all-pervasive experience that became a part of the life of all enlightened Egyptians. This is the most crucial phase of Mahfouz's literary career and it began with the publication of his novel "New Cairo" in 1945. Mahfouz published seven more novels between 1945 and 1957, all of which were written in the mode and style of social realism.

“Many commentators on Mahfouz’s career have suggested that it was precisely the dire impact of the war on contemporary Egyptian society during the early 1940s that led Mahfouz to abandon his plan” to finish his series of Ancient Egyptian novels (Allen 295). Mahfouz models his novels on the European novelists, borrowing “social realism from Zola, Dickens, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky who have on a large scale concentrated on the problems of their respective societies. He depicted the troubled lives of the suppressed Egyptians and pointed out to the readers the living conditions of people like a clerk, a worker, and a student who suffered exploitation, conditions of poverty and bad treatment. His great sympathy and intensity of narration produced exceptional vigor in his novels as in the novels of Marxism Gorki and other European masters. Even in a random reading of Mahfouz’s novels, the reader becomes immediately aware of such problems as injustice and its social, moral and economic consequences, exploitation of various kinds of the poor by the rich, quest for identity, and quest for freedom. Mahfouz’s political ideology was influenced by Salama Musa’s ideas on socialism. He was also influenced by the liberating ideas of Taha Hussain and Abbas Mahmud alAqqad who played a role in shaping Mahfouz’s way of thinking.

Concern with social issues is prevalent in Mahfouz’s realistic novels, many of which bear the names of the very quarters of historical Cairo in which Mahfouz grew up, e.g. "Khan al-Khalili" (1946), "Midaq Alley" (1947), "Qasr al-Shawq", (1956) and "al-Sukkariyya" (1957). The central focus of these novels are the lower middle class and the historical time is that of 1930s and second world war in which poverty was prevalent and people used to go to graves to seek solace from the hardships of life. According to Siddiq, Mahfouz’s fictional characters in these novels come largely from the lower-middle-class stratum of Cairene society and many of them bear clear autobiographical marks. (Siddiq, 1988) it was the political reality of the time and Mahfouz’s awareness of his role as a writer that made him gave up his plan of writing historical novels and turn his attention to the contemporary reality. These novels had a theme of conflict between the old and the new, or the past and the present. In other words, the conflict between two value systems is prevalent in these novels. The novelist has also tried to show the way the people get affected by the socio-economic and politico-cultural environment and how this environment degraded their moral values. A study of these novels provides a vision on the real situation during that period based on historical context and its literal sense in which the reader comprehend the novel’s messages remembering the historic moment along with the novel events.

Wellek and Warren see that literature is a social document that can "yield the outlines of social history" (P.103). A dispassionate study of these novels unfolds meticulously inlaid themes of social morality, cultural conventions, obsolete and obtuse social mores etc; strongly manifesting Egyptian society in superb realistic fictional form. One of the most remarkable features of *New Cairo* and *Middaq Alley* is their penetrating psychological insight, delving deep into psyche of the ordinary people. These novels present a painstaking study of the effects of the Western civilization on the sensibility of the colonized people, resulted from interaction with the Europeans' open culture and too liberal religion. The strength of the two works is driven from the quality of their writer's comprehensive understanding of the social forces at work at the time and the way he used this knowledge of human psychology to develop his characters. The backgrounds of the stories are photographically realistic. Every event is described accurately and precisely so that the details are correct and the event is psychologically convincing. The life in pre-independence Cairo is put before us in a detailed and accurate way. Mahfouz is conscious of the sociopolitical problems of his society. The political and the social are intricately woven into the designs of his novels. Mahfouz's depiction of the Cairene life during the first half of the last century is authentic and historically true. He captured the subtle transitional period in which political conditions and social values were rapidly changing and affecting the moral values of the individuals. What is remarkable about these novels is "a pessimistic, often fatalistic outlook" (Somekh, *Changing* 65). This pessimistic vision of life in Egypt was only the result of the political and social conditions of the country under a corrupted system. It has "its roots in the stifling conditions prevalent in Egypt at the time" (Somekh, *Changing* 65). Time has proven that his pessimism was justified and rose from his acute awareness of the political and social reality. Being government employee, Mahfouz had first-hand experience of what was going on in the government offices and the various types of corruption plaguing the country at all levels.

Objectives of the study:

The study aims at investigating Mahfouz's portrayal of life in Egypt in the 1930s and 1940s and how he used realism to give a genuine picture of the social, economic and political conditions at that time. Using two of his novels *New Cairo* and *Middaq Alley*, the paper tries to examine the relationship between the three triple threats that face any society: corruption, poverty and unemployment.

Understanding the relationship between corruption and poverty on one hand and the relationship between the two and moral corruption can help in solving many of the social evils that society faces. Poverty and corruption are becoming increasingly significant and widespread problems in a large number of countries across the world at the present time. This means that the problems discussed in Mahfouz's two novels are still prevalent in contemporary Egypt and the rest of the Arab world.

Methodology:

The researcher used the analytical approach to examine the thematic structures of the two novels especially the themes of corruption, poverty and moral degradation and the connection between them. These triple social evils are discussed through the stories of the three main characters Mahjub, Ihsan and Hamida. Using specific examples from the novels, the researcher points out that poverty often does serious harm to poor people's bodies, relationships, morality, and social relationships.

Discussion:

Mahfouz's city was Cairo, and his characters were its ordinary people: bureaucrats and civil servants, poor retirees, workers and housewives. He also was interested in the dark side of Cairo life with its thieves, prostitutes, criminals and corrupted civil servants. His vivid portrayal of citizens of Cairo and their social, political and economic life makes him the Egyptian Balzac. Critics compared his vividly detailed Cairo with the St. Petersburg of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the London of Charles Dickens, and the Paris of Émile Zola. All characters of Mahfouz's novels are remarkable for intimate touches of fidelity to life and intense realism. They are drawn from the circles that Mahfouz intimately knows. Most of them are middle class or from the low middle class. In Middaq Alley, we find largely working-class characters in living and working in a typical Cairene ḥāra, while in New Cairo and Khan al-Khalili, protagonists are university students, middle-class families, and civil servants. The absence of "the aristocracy, the upper middle class" is easily noticed. The Egyptian aristocracy and the non-Egyptian elites of foreign background are virtually absent in these novels except for some scenes where characters of middle class who are trying to climb the social ladder meet people from Egyptian aristocracy. The British do not appear

directly in the novel but we are always kept aware of the devastating effects of their occupation on Egypt.

The two novels deal with the pervading unquenchable drive of lower middle class men and women to acquire wealth by perversion as well as the destruction of self and morality. Their ambition is portrayed as leading to a total disregard for the value of morality and individual dignity. In the world of the novels, wealth and power have become the principal pursuits and the inevitable result the situation is a complete disregard of any moral or social considerations in the march to satisfy individual desires. The story of the characters of Mahfouz's realistic novels is the microcosm and the macrocosm in the life of the whole nation. The individuals, who are presented in these novels as victims of a corrupt social and political system, are symbols of a whole suffering nation. *Al-Qahira al-Jadida* (New Cairo) has the life of a young boy, who wants to make a good living by attaining university education, along with three other boys; first one was communist, second one a capitalist and the third one is an Islamist. Through these three characters, the novelist has attempted to project the three ideological and intellectual movements in the Egyptian society in the thirties and forties and exposes the hopes and dreams of the lower middle class, who are fully aware of their own problems and the problems of their society. In this novel, Mahfouz presents a vigorous and scrupulous picture of the lower middle class in Cairo of the 1930s and the years of the Second World War. It deals with what can only be called the conflict between modernity and tradition and how Egypt's traditional mores are being increasingly undermined by Western influences. Mahfouz wanted to focus on "the circumstances of his fellow countrymen during this appalling period of political chaos, rampant corruption, and threat of imminent invasion" (Roger Allen "Naguib Mahfouz and the Arabic Novel" 35).

In New Cairo, Mahfouz attempts to explore the social and political evils of his time and show how the moral and social degeneration is a direct result of a political system that is thoroughly corrupt. The Cairo of New Cairo is a city full of social and moral corruption, hypocrisy, bribery and above all political corruption. Young men and women of the lower middle class are falling victims to unscrupulous politicians who use them to satisfy their own pleasures. Mahjub Abd al-Dayim is one of the university students who belongs to the lower middle class, he tries to improve his lot but found that all avenues to success are

closed. Education cannot solve the problem because in a corrupted society your degree is not sufficient to secure your success in life. Mahjub is told this fact by one of his friends who tells him, "“Forget your qualifications. Do you have a recommendation? Are you related to someone in power? Can you marry the daughter of a government official?” (New Cairo, 6) The only way in front of him is to compromise his class social values and embrace the immoral principles of the upper class. Mahfouz wants to tell the readers that if someone desired to enter the aristocratic society of Egypt of the 1930s and 1940s, he had to play the game by its rule. He had to sacrifice his own soul and moral principles to please those in power.

Ihsan Shihata is another example of the victims of social exploitation and the moral corruption of the upper class. She was a student at the higher institute for physical education in Cairo. Mahfouz presents Ihsan as a symbol of Egypt new women, a lover of Goethe and Italian painting who planned to go to the University and have a career. Yet the threat of poverty is threatening to destroy her youthful radiance and her future dreams. She lived in poverty and abject misery with her parents and seven brothers and sisters. Conscious of her family’s poverty, she has only her beauty to help them. She is forced to become the mistress of a Cabinet Minister. Mahfouz links the stories of Mahjub and Ihsan when Mahjub marries Ihsan to allow his employer and cabinet minister Qasim to visit her on certain nights. Talking about their weird situation, Mahfouz says, "She had no more reason to condemn him than he had to condemn her. Actually, something else united them. He was apparently a victim of poverty and ambition like her. Each of them was the victim of a single evil. "(New Cairo, 31) One of the facets of corruption is abuse of power when people who have power try to influence and control the life of other people. The Cabinet Minister represented on the one hand the corruption of the political system and on the other the injustice in the distribution of wealth in the country. Through the story of Mahjub, Ihsan and Qassim, Mahfouz depicts the relation between political corruption and poverty on the one hand and between poverty and moral corruption on the other. Mahfouz also shows that political ideologies such as socialism and Islamic Fundamentalism are in their early stages in Egypt at that time and appear unable to offer an alternative to the prevalent corrupt system.

Hamida in Middaq Alley is another example of Mahfouz's characters who revolt against their social status. She was born in a poor alley in Cairo and has devoted her life towards achieving two things, money and freedom. Hamida will do what she can to better her opportunities to be free from her current life and gain more wealth. Like, Ihsan, and Mahjub, Hamida is ambitious, selfish, and offensive, with a totally twisted sense of values. Like them, she dislikes her poverty and low social status and believes that the only way out of misery is to achieve luxury and prestige, even at the expense of selling her soul to the devil. "She almost suffocates in the alley and is forced into a brutal struggle for survival, seeking breathing space outside her street." Amyuni, 30" Hamida's lust for money and power leads her to sell herself to Faraj, a flesh trader who turns her into a whore whom he sells to British and American soldiers. In the world of the alley, money becomes very important and seeking it becomes a priority for most people. Mahfouz tells us " Money might be a dead tongue in other places, but in Middaq Alley it was very much a live language. (Middaq Alley, 82).

An important theme in this novel is the repercussions of the Second World War on the life of the Egyptian society. He shows Egyptian people found themselves having to pay a heavy price politically, socially and economically for a war in which they had no say or interest. The story takes place during World War II and we are introduced to that through the characters of Abbas and Hussain Kirsha, who are making a good living working for the British Army. Mahfouz explores how poor people are attracted to war because of the financial incentive and through this, he again links poverty and the theme of exploitation. Born in a poor alley forgotten by the government and lacks all basic needs, Hamida decides to escape from her environment but she ends up a prostitute who entertains British, American and Australian soldiers. Hamida loses her identity and agrees to be called "Titi" a name that "will amuse Englishmen and Americans and one which their twisted tongues can easily pronounce." (217) Mahfouz shows that Hamida will give up anything in order to gain money. "She realized that he considered her name, like her old clothes, as something to be discarded and forgotten." (216) in order to escape her poor life, she has to sacrifice her morality, virginity and dignity.

Corruption and poverty:

Corruption has been a constant obstacle for countries trying to achieve the political, economic and social changes desired for their development. Corruption thrives where there is no strong moral principles. The questions of what is the relationship between corruption and poverty and which is the cause and which is the consequence have been discussed in many social and economic studies. These questions were raised in Mahfouz's novels, which were published in 1940s. The country was still under British influence and ruled by the corrupt King Farouk, along with a degenerate bureaucracy of Turks and Circassians, while unemployment was rampant and corruption was prevalent in all sectors. He deals with the issues of corruption, poverty, moral degradation, and colonialism. His characters are from the low middle class who are the victims of poverty and corruption in a society controlled by corrupt upper class and British colonial rule. Mahfouz's skill is manifested in the way he was able to link these themes in the stories of his main characters.

The question is: Are Mahfouz's characters victims? Mahfouz presents Mahjub, Ihsan and Hamida as the direct result of a corrupt socioeconomic reality that limits their choices and determines their fate. As a result, they are totally indifferent to morality. Compared to the social novels of Mulk Raj Anand whose novels mostly portray the tragedy of those who are free from moral wrongs under external and wicked forces, Mahfouz's characters are not completely innocent. They are not free of moral wrongs. Unlike, Munoo in Mulk Raj Anand's *The Coolie*, Mahfouz's characters could not stand all the negative and destructive forces of life and their innocence remains unaffected. They are always revolting against society, with its values and moral principles. They cannot understand why they were born poor while others were born rich. They are ready to sell their souls to the devil, if the devil will help them attain the niceties of life and reach the top of the social ladder. They tried to play according to the requirements of the system, but they are in the end destroyed by the system.

Mahfouz's social novels clearly point out that poverty erodes the moral values of people as desperation to make a living gives them an incentive to be immoral. They are too poor to stick to moral values in

a corrupted society. If immoral behavior leads to financial success and social power it might become so much more difficult for people to return to a moral lifestyle rather than slipping even deeper into immoral and criminal behavior. We can say that Mahjub, Ihsan and Hamida fall into immoral behavior not only because they are poor, but also because they are unprincipled. Yet who knows how they would have behaved if the society offers them legal channels to achieve their goals and improve their life.

Mahfouz shows us that poverty can have a devastating impact on interpersonal and family relationships. In any society, the mix of stress about inadequate resources for the satisfaction of needs and the feeling of personal powerlessness can have devastating consequences on interpersonal and social relationships. Family relations can become particularly strained when families suffer from poverty. Almost all family relationships in New Cairo and Middaq Alley are distorted in one way or another. Hamida, Ihsan and Mahjub are good examples of individuals who are negatively influenced by the corruption in the society. Their relationships with their families is an evidence of the negative influence of poverty on family relationships. Hamida hates the whole alley in which she lives calling it "Nothing Alley" and the people of it are nonexistent in her eyes. She has no strong feelings for her foster mother Um Hamida. Mahjub's relationship with his family is strained especially after his marriage. Ihsan's parents are totally corrupted and her father is willing to sell her body to feed his family.

A major cause of poverty is unemployment in cases where people have no social or family support. The inabilities of poor people to procure sufficient resources to satisfy their basic needs make them more vulnerable. Middaq Alley is an epic of misery giving us a heartrending real account of the suffering and misery of the Egyptian poor who are the victims of social colonial and capitalistic exploitation. Mahfouz's picture of the poor and their suffering is both pathetic and realistic. There is sincerity and immediacy in his realistic approach to his problems. A shocking example of social exploitation is in the character of Zaita in Middaq Alley. People came to him who wanted to become beggars and he would cripple each customer in a manner appropriate to his body. They came to him whole and left blind, rickety, hunchbacked, pigeon-breasted, or with arms or legs cut off short.

Many economic and social studies have examined the relationship between corruption and poverty. Corruption is defined as the misuse of public affair for private gain, including but not limited to: corruption, nepotism, bribery, extortion, influence peddling and fraud (Chetwynd et al, 2003). Poverty is simply defined as "the inability to attain a minimal standard of living (Meier 1995:26). Mahfouz tries to assert the existence of a relationship between corruption and poverty through the stories of his characters. He tries to show that corruption creates inequality in the distribution of wealth and forces the poor to forsake their principles and fall into moral corruption. He suggests that corruption and poverty are closely related in Egypt of the 1940s. Corruption has exacerbated conditions of poverty in a country struggling with the strains of economic growth and the effects of World War II. For those without money and connections, petty corruption can have debilitating consequences as seen the fate of Ihsan, Hamida and Mahjub.

The pervasive corruption has been blamed on colonialism and the upper class, which is of non-Egyptian origins. Like any other country under colonial rule, it is very difficult to erase the bad habits inherited while under a foreign rule and this affects the country politically, social, and economically. Mahfouz believes that the problems of Egypt could be attributed to corrupt leadership under colonial rule. Like many African writers, Mahfouz has a strong belief that corruption and poverty developed out of colonialism. In his novels, Mahfouz moved from building public awareness on corruption issues to understanding the nature of corruption and its effects on the individuals and society. When elites that are part of informal structures of power perpetrate much of the most harmful corruption, it exacerbates already serious levels of poverty and economic inequality. Mahfouz suggests that corruption and poverty are closely related. Corruption of the upper class is the cause of poverty of the lower middle class and the poor class in society. On the other hand, poverty is the cause of corruption and loss of moral values of the lower middle and poor classes. Novels like Middaq Alley, New Cairo, brought contemporary evils like degradation of values, corruption, and religious hypocrisies to the modern Egyptian psyche as they helped to form the national consciousness. Mahfouz's human interest enlivens the fictional world of his two novels and saves it from being a sapless abstraction. The issues discussed in these two novels are still valid in contemporary Egypt.

Conclusion:

Literature reflects the society in which it is written and thereby heralds its values and concerns (Bressler, 1999). The study is an effort to bring out some constituent of social image of exploitation and suffering in Mahfouz's Middaq Alley and New Cairo. Mahfouz is a reputed social realist and sensitive artist who used realism to present his vision of life in his country during a very critical period. He is very keen to explore the realities of life and the problems of contemporary Egyptian society. His success as a social realist artist is optimized in his creative vitality and his desire to use his writing to make the common people socially, politically and culturally conscious. In faithfulness to his ideological purpose, Mahfouz selected certain types of themes, which validated his material as being realistic. His novels are "protest against the established social, political and economic order and draw the attention of both the leaders and the public to the necessity for reform in almost every walk of life" (El-Sheikh 85-6) Mahfouz social realism is sustained by his faith that an artist can contribute immensely towards social change.

The significance of the study is that it deals with social ills that are still prevalent in many Third World countries especially in the Middle East. The issue of corruption is a very resonant one in developing countries. The reader of Mahfouz's novels becomes instantly conscious of such issues as the social, moral and economic consequences of a corrupt system and its injustice, exploitation of the poor by the upper class and moral corruption. Under colonial rule, a number of economic and social transforms took place and consequently a traditional society was changed into a capitalistic society especially in Cairo, which is the main setting of the two novels. One of the social concerns that recurs frequently in his novels is the inequality between the rich and the poor and the attempts of some members of the low middle class to climb the social ladder. He has pointed out social conflicts and ills, which he has seen and experienced intimately in his own surroundings. He expresses his deep sorrow and sympathy for the unfortunate poor and their inability to cope with the circumstances. The upper class enjoyed power, wealth, and prestige but was morally corrupt. The lower-middle-class struggled to change their lot but found that all ways to success were closed unless they compromised their principles and serve the upper class. In his novels, Mahfouz presents a moral dichotomy between these two classes; one adheres to traditional principles and values; the

other is very depraved and lack moral principles. Unlike Dickens' Oliver Twist and the heroes of Mulk Raj Anand's novels, Mahfouz's novels mostly portray the tragedy of those who are not free from moral wrongs but they are also victims of external and wicked forces. They try to change their lot in life but found that all doors are closed. Mahfouz exposes the hopes and dreams of the lower middle class through the stories of his characters.

Many studies have been carried out on Mahfouz's realistic novels but this paper focuses more on the writer's views on corruption, poverty and moral degradation than on the mere analysis of the social reality in the two novels. Mahfouz focuses attention on the triple threats facing Egypt at that time, poverty, corruption, and unemployment. He thinks that corruption exacerbates poverty and it is one of the causes of poverty and suffering of the people. He also links these triple threats to colonialism. The stories Mahjub, Ihsan and Hamida explore the close relationship between the three threats and their relationship with the presence of colonial rule. A close reading of the novels shows that Mahfouz moved from building public awareness on corruption issues to understanding the nature of corruption and its effects on the individuals and society. When the upper class are practicing corruption, it exacerbates already serious levels of poverty and economic inequality. Moreover, Corruption creates inequality in the distribution of wealth and force the poor to forsake their principles and fall into moral corruption. These conclusions reached by Mahfouz almost 80 years ago are still valid today and this is another evidence of the greatness of the Noble laureate.

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