

***Midaq Alley* by Naguib Mahfouz:
An analytical appraisal based on Mohd. Affandi Hassan's theoretical framework,
Persuratan Baru ***

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Abstract

Midaq Alley by the Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz has been hailed as a powerful and faithful portrayal of the working classes of Cairo society. In analyzing the text, the article has availed itself of a homegrown analytical framework, *Persuratan Baru*, which is capable of transcending specificities of not only areas and regions but also cultures and religions. *Persuratan Baru* argues that a story is a vehicle for purposes of developing discourses and disseminating ideas. Against the backdrop of this concern, the article contends that *Midaq Alley* prioritises story over knowledge, at the same time as its narrative space is given over to details, embellishments and an absence of a moral centre. Thus, whilst *Midaq Alley* may come across as a powerful realistic novel, it nevertheless falls short of the key concern that stories develop discourses and disseminate knowledge, congruent with the Islamic literary tradition of using the pen to teach.

Keywords: story, knowledge, *Persuratan Baru*, priority, dominance

Introduction

Naguib Mahfouz had established himself as a prominent writer in the Arab language, both in his native Egypt and abroad, even before being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. However, with this new recognition, Mahfouz, who was earlier

known, in the words of Said, “largely as the author of picturesque stories about the lower-class Cairo”¹ became a fictionist of international stature, thus making his works academically respectable and legitimate for serious study. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka’s (The National Literary Centre) decision to hold a workshop specifically to discuss the author’s works is further testimony to Mahfouz’s stature in the literary world. Mahfouz’s works are now not only studied in the Arab countries but also in the West using different analytical frameworks and perspectives. In the face of the abundance of works related to Mahfouz’s fiction, what is it that a literary analysis undertaken in Malaysia, can contribute to the scholarship?

In the context of literary criticism in Malaysia, a critical tool that has found favour locally is the ‘theme-and-structure’ framework.² This form of criticism devotes itself largely to examining the issues and problems raised in a work (with the two terms ‘issues’ and ‘problems’ being applied synonymously to refer to content or theme), its form, or alternatively style, characters, characterization, background, language and the like. Complying with the mainstream ‘theme-and-structure’ form of criticism, this paper would devote itself to examining the content of *Midaq Alley*. Aside from that, this paper will look at not only what the novel focuses on but also what is left unsaid or ignored. To this end, this paper will apply the *Persuratan Baru*³ framework advanced by Mohd. Affandi Hassan (MAH 1999). However, before doing that it is necessary to discuss *Persuratan Baru* briefly.

Analytical Framework and Its Coverage

Numerous frameworks – both from the East and the West - have been employed to study Mahfouz's novel *Midaq Alley* and *Persuratan Baru* (hereafter PB) can be viewed as just another in the long list of frameworks utilized for a critical analysis of the novel. The use of PB, however, takes on a greater relevance, for in the context of Malay literature there have been persistent calls for the use of homegrown frameworks to study local works since Western critical tools are deemed rather inappropriate to do justice to local fiction. The use of PB for this purpose, therefore, is an answer to the aforementioned call. However, *Midaq Alley* is not a product of a Malaysian writer and the novel does not feature Malaysia as its fictive background. Under such circumstances, how would it be possible to apply PB to *Midaq Alley*, an Egyptian novel, when homegrown tools are thought fit only for local works? The choice of PB is, however, not a random one, for unlike other local tools, PB is open, in that, it is not tied down to local or regional specificities or matters identifiable to particular areas or regions.⁴ With its emphasis on knowledge, as we shall soon witness, PB is capable of transcending specificities of not only areas and regions but also cultures and religions.⁵

The fact that PB is capable of transcending religious barriers is one of its strengths. Even if PB were unable to transcend the religious barrier, it should, however, not be viewed as unsuitable for analyzing *Midaq Alley* as the novel is a creation of an Islamic writer, and as such both the novel and PB, also advanced by an Islamic writer and based on *tauhid*⁶, should find a common ground. The use of PB becomes even

more defensible when one notes that the active application of other frameworks originating from different cultural and religious milieu is not contested. Thus, the use of PB as a critical tool to evaluate *Midaq Alley* is not without academic merit.

It must, however, be noted that PB is rather ‘young’ and MAH is working on refining some aspects of his concept, including the *stylization of ideas*.⁷ That again does not prevent the core ideas of PB being applied to evaluate Mahfouz’s novel. Keeping in mind the limitations of a paper, one would not find a comprehensive exposition of PB. Furthermore, it has been dealt with elsewhere.⁸ This paper attempts to call attention only to some pertinent aspects of PB that are relevant to the explication of *Midaq Alley*.

PB has its origins in MAH’s study of the developments in Malay literature in general, and in particular, his astute observations on what came to be known subsequently as Islamic Literature.⁹ MAH argues that the role and position of Islam in the history, culture, and literature of the region has not been well understood. According to MAH, who subscribes to Syed Naguib Al-Attas’ views,¹⁰ the coming of Islam to this region had situated knowledge and rationalism as the key component of literary activity. This indeed is a radical shift from the Hindu period with its emphasis not on knowledge but on superstition, magic, rituals, and the like. The focus on knowledge, however, became gradually eroded with the coming of the Western concept and philosophy of literature, which, amongst others, celebrated unlimited freedom in literary production. Literary criticism was not left unaffected. With this shift, literature was now free to explore and broach any subject (including the sacred and the transcendental) and to present it in any way thought fit (including being crude and offensive). Criticism could now justify

whatever creative works offered based on the “authority and strength” of the Western understanding, philosophy and concept of literature.

Taking off from this rather befuddled state of affairs, MAH advanced PB to shed new light on the question of production and appreciation of literary works. Skipping the discussion on the cosmogony and belief in *tauhid* that form the basis of PB, the paper will quote MAH himself on what constitutes the basic tenets of PB.

Firstly, PB gives priority to knowledge, ideas and wisdom... Secondly, PB opts for a writing style that is scholarly, academic, but beautiful. The style is academic because the content is knowledge-oriented, but beautiful because it is presented artistically. Thirdly, PB prioritises ideas, dwells on those ideas in detail by employing characters who are strong-willed, morally upright, religious, knowledgeable and so on. Not women of the street or meek and ineffectual characters as has been the practice in the past... These are exemplary characters who can be emulated, characters who are wise, bold, knowledgeable, willing to make sacrifices to attain noble goals and exhibit other positive values. Fourthly, PB gives precedence to outstanding creativity that is both restrained and refined. Thus, matters that are marked by superstition and fantasy that often flourish in the works of today’s Malaysian writers have no place in PB. What is prioritised and accorded pre-eminence in PB, amongst others, is the stylization of ideas, not aimless imagination as portrayed, for example, in magical realism.

(Dewan Masyarakat, September, 1994, pp.11-12).

A novel does not merely tell a story, it articulates ideas and thoughts...

I am not inclined to merely tell a story because as I understand it, in the al-*Qur'an* stories are never told solely for the purpose of story-telling. Stories are employed to articulate ideas or thoughts, or to serve as reminders or exhortations.

(Dewan Masyarakat, September, 1994, p. 30).

Without meaning to oversimplify PB, the thrust of its argument can be conceived of as being divided into two parts; firstly, affirmation of 'knowledge', and secondly, rejection of 'story'. Of the two, MAH pays greater attention to the affirmation, and his treatment of this aspect is more cogent and systematic. However, the part on rejection of 'story' is not so well presented though he does discuss it. Perhaps MAH sees no necessity to dwell upon what does not constitute the main thrust of a creative and critical writing. However, in our discussion that deals with both these competing aspects, it would be necessary to clear the field before venturing further. This becomes even more pertinent, for MAH has consistently reminded us that the secondary aspect appears to be prevalent and in fact, has become a regular feature of Malaysian creative works, and he has argued that it has no place in our creative writing tradition.

As stated earlier, MAH's ideas on 'story' are not so well-developed, and at times, they appear as fragmented ideas waiting to be crystallized. In my endeavor to understand and write about PB, I have pieced together MAH's ideas on 'story and have

presented them here in as systematic a way as possible. I also intend to introduce two concepts to complement the ideas of PB. The two concepts are ‘priority’ and ‘dominance’. I now turn my attention to KNOWLEDGE and STORY, and in explicating my ideas on STORY, I have benefited from other ideas regarding the concept of STORY in general, and my personal evaluation of Malay novels and their story-telling features.

Knowledge

According to MAH, Islam places great emphasis on knowledge - true knowledge - as the basis of all activities, including literary activities, both production and criticism. Any activity not grounded on true knowledge is thus futile. MAH identifies three sources of knowledge in Islam; revealed knowledge, the mind and experience. Revealed knowledge is absolute and not open to debate, whilst the mind and experience only serve as sources of true knowledge when they are based on revelation. This thus marks the boundary between knowledge on the one hand, and information and skills on the other. True knowledge cultivates and fosters goodness and Allah’s blessings, whilst *pengetahuan* (mind-based knowledge) and skills not based on true knowledge lead to *kemungkaran* (religious, moral, and ethical transgressions). This in turn means that any activity, including literary, only receives Allah’s blessings if it is grounded in true knowledge. On the other hand, if the literary work is grounded on experience and skills it does not receive Allah’s blessings.

With reference to the nature and function of literature, MAH explains that Islam associates the *Qalam* (which literally means Pen)¹¹ with knowledge. Hence literature, which is similarly associated with *qalam* (rendered into Malay as *kalam*), thus necessitates the presence of and preoccupation with knowledge.

This linkage between knowledge and literature, therefore, necessarily makes literature didactic in nature as opposed to, for example, serving to entertain or providing detailed descriptions or functioning as propaganda. That being the case, literature that is not didactic transgresses its nature and function. The core of PB's argument in relation to the position of knowledge is that knowledge should form the essence of a creative work (and that criticism should take cognizance of this need). PB rejects works that are not grounded in knowledge and do not seek to disseminate knowledge. The paper next examines how knowledge is 'realized' in a creative work.

Story

As stated earlier, apart from MAH's views on 'story', this section also looks at the views of others on 'story' and my own observations on story telling in Malay novels. MAH's main premise – as it pertains to "story" - is that there has been a shift in the concept of *kalam* in the Malay literary world. Whereas Islam associated *kalam* with knowledge, Malay literature replaced it with creativity. This has many implications. Firstly, this shift negated the links between knowledge and literature that was the main consideration of Islamic literature. Secondly, the ascendancy of creativity as the prime attribute of literary activity made possible the inclusion of new elements (either in terms of the issues and

concerns raised or their presentation), all of which were deemed justifiable on the premise of their creativity or as manifestations of the writer's creativity and the resultant product. The basis of the story is mimesis.

According to MAH, a story is developed based on imitating man's actions (realism), nature (naturalism), emotions (romanticism). The story is the product of the actions (man, nature and emotions) that is subsequently copied, manipulated (to suit the story to be developed), and transferred to the narrative world to make it believable.¹² This differs from a creative work that is based on knowledge as advanced by PB. For PB, the components of the fictive world (man, nature and emotions) are brought together not to project an event, atmosphere or episode but as a medium to put forward an idea. As I have noted elsewhere, "In PB the emphasis is not on action, emotions, or the physical environment, but on thoughts, ideas, and propositions which cannot be copied and transferred to the narrative world. Ideas need to be understood, debated, analyzed, and contested. It is in this context that PB is said to be based not on mimesis but the generation of thoughts and ideas."¹³ In other words, fictive characters who occupy fictive worlds serve as agents to channel ideas, propositions, and knowledge.

MAH further turns our attention to a number of other features that serve as ingredients to a story. Amongst them is what can be termed as 'minutiae'. This refers to excessive and detailed data on a particular object, place, character, event, emotions etc, and the manipulation of such data. PB argues that the manipulation of such data to document a narrative world that is accurate, precise, photographic, graphic and realistic does not, however, alter the main thrust of the creative work from story-telling to

promoting knowledge. This is because the detailed accounts are merely a device to construct a believable narrative world. Thus, the creative work remains an imitation and not an original presentation of ideas by the writer.

In addition to the explanation on ‘story’, and related to the question of realism, MAH asserts that the depiction of a fictive world largely revolves round description or manipulation of that which can be perceived by the senses. This is understandable given that that which can be perceived by the senses can be replicated for purposes of imitation. This focus automatically means the marginalization of ideas, which are abstract and cannot be perceived by the senses.

As noted in the quotation above, MAH also touches on characters who occupy the fictive world. PB rejects outright weak and ineffective characters, and insists on the need for characters that are knowledgeable, strong, wise, and morally upright in line with the demand for a creative work that has the promotion of knowledge as its objective. The story, however, does not necessarily have to limit itself to strong characters; there is place for little characters too. However, in the context of modern Malay literature what MAH finds objectionable is its predisposition towards weak characters.

MAH’s ideas on ‘story’ and ‘knowledge’ are not limited to the points raised above only. This paper has chosen to avail itself of certain points that are deemed relevant to explicate and evaluate *Midaq Alley*. As stated earlier in the section on the framework for analysis, I propose to introduce two concepts to complement PB’s ideas. The two concepts are *priority*, and in relation to that, *dominance*.¹⁴ In other words, whilst basing my discussion on PB that advances the issue of story and knowledge, the question

raised throughout would be, “is the novel structured to give priority to story-telling or promoting knowledge.” In addition, in analyzing the text, the focus would be on identifying the dominant components and the role it plays in the novel: is it aimed at merely telling a story or presenting knowledge.

***Midaq Alley* : A Content Analysis**

Soliman Fayyad, writing on the recurrent themes of Naquib Mahfouz’s works, observed: Mahfouz’s principal concern is with the dichotomy of the ruler and the ruled: the state-endorsed authority, the framework of a bureaucratic hierarchy, the power struggles of the popular neighbourhood, the domain of the family patriarch; these are his most prevalent themes. Power and its workings, in a social context, over time, is the fundamental percept of Mahfouz’s project.¹⁵

As we shall soon see, *Midaq Alley* is no exception. *Midaq Alley* revolves around Hamida - a young woman of uncommon beauty who seeks material comforts, and with no alternative in sight, agrees to be engaged to Abbas, a humble barber who, in the hope of securing a lucrative employment, enlists in the army. In Abbas’ absence, Hamida accepts another suitor, Salim, an elderly wealthy businessman. When Salim is struck down by a heart attack, Hamida does not hesitate to leave Midaq Alley at the invitation of Ibrahim Faraj, a pimp. Persuaded and tamed by the pimp, Hamada ends up as a prostitute in his service. When Abbas who returns to Midaq Alley on vacation is told of Hamida’s absence, he goes out in search of her. At Hamida’s appeal, Abbas resolves to “rescue” her from Ibrahim Faraj. However, Abbas later sees Hamida entertaining British soldiers, her

clients. Enraged, he gets into a fight with one of the soldiers and is killed. Hamida, who is injured later recovers and returns to her foster mother in Midaq Alley. Besides Hamida, one gets to meet an array of characters, all from the lower strata of society.

Set in an alley, the locale for a group of poor residents in the city of Cairo, Mahfouz peoples the 250-page novel (the English translation)¹⁶ with a wide range of characters, all of them representing the poorer sections of society. These characters – about twenty of them - each with a distinct and recognizable identity inhabit a narrow and overcrowded area – an alley named Midaq (note the connotation of being cramped in the term ‘alley’ as opposed to ‘street’ or ‘road’). Against this background, Mahfouz recounts the lives of a group of impoverished residents occupying an alley of Cairo. We encounter amongst others, Abbas, a barber with meager earnings, Zaita, who deliberately inflicts injury on beggars so that the public would donate generously to them, Booshy, an unqualified “dentist” who gets his regular stream of clients unable to afford better treatment, Krishna, the owner of a coffee shop who has a fancy for young men. The story intensifies with descriptions of the physical environment characterized by filth, congestion, insufficient amenities, and the diversity of characters, not only in numbers but also in their actions, conduct and hopes and aspirations. The lives of these unfortunate characters can indeed be easily grasped at the literal level. *Midaq Alley* is unquestionably an excellent portrayal of the fortunes, joys, and sorrows of the occupants of an alley that only offers a mundane existence with little hope of a better life. It was this excellent portrayal of the lives of the marginalised that prompted Taha Hussein, a scholar and

critic, to declare: *“Indeed, I cannot think of a better book to recommend to all ministers of social affairs, and their research and survey teams.”*¹⁷

Apart from serving as the background to highlight the suffering and degradation of the residents, the alley itself opens up the possibility of a reading beyond its literal significance. 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, cannot be changed despite attempts to do so. As the story progresses we witness the various characters trying to flee the alley in search of a better life but none succeeds. Hussain Krishna leaves the alley hoping for a new life and material wealth that he is convinced is only possible outside of the alley. However, later he is forced to return to the “bosom” of the alley when his service with the British army is terminated. Now the prospects of him leaving the valley becomes even slimmer as he returns with additional responsibilities – a wife and a brother-in-law -, and he is left with no choice but to seek the help of his father who from the outset had disapproved of his intention to leave Midaq Alley. The father, Krishna, is delighted at the son’s return, though he does fake displeasure, and Hussain, who has nothing, has to surrender to the will of Midaq Alley. A similar fate awaits Hamida. Though she leaves the alley voluntarily to embrace the world beyond, and in fact does end up acquiring material wealth, she too is destined to return to Midaq Alley. Abbas who also leaves the valley to work for the army is killed when he is back on vacation. Radwan Hussainy who travels to Makkah to undertake his pilgrimage also heads back to the alley. In other words, all those who dream of a life beyond the alley fail to realize

their goal. With the additional idea of incarceration as seen above, the theme of despair and poverty, so vividly depicted at the literal level, is reinforced.

Equally significant, and complementary to the theme considered above, is the question of 'life force' that permeates the lives of the residents of the alley. The novel is structured to foreground money as an overpowering dominant force. The conduct of many of the characters would attest to this. Mrs. Afify, the wealthy fifty-year-old widow, consciously utilizes her fortune to 'buy' a husband much younger than her; Abbas convinces himself of the need to venture out of the alley, to which he is deeply devoted, to work for the army solely for the purpose of winning the heart of Hamida, who lusts after material comforts; Salim Alwan, a rich businessman who wants to take the much younger Hamida as a second wife, though the proposal falls through because he suffers a heart attack; "doctor" Booshy who digs graves in search of fortunes; Zaita, who deliberately mutilates beggars so that the deformity would get the public to donate more generously to them. To reinforce the dominant role of money, the novel has as its central character the beautiful Hamida who, without hesitation, becomes a whore to satisfy her need for wealth. Money, then, acts as the dominant force that shapes and decides the values and actions of the inhabitants of Midaq Alley. Mahfouz himself has admitted his preoccupation with this and his attempts to treat it in his novels: *this is true of all my novels...When I read my novels, or rather when I remember them since I never re-read them, I find that I have always had two preoccupations: both a powerful interest in reality and an attempt to get at the forces that that surface reality hides.*¹⁸ Without doubt,

Midaq Alley is a powerful portrayal of the joys and pathos of a small community of Cairo residents whose lives are determined by the power of money.

Midaq Alley and Persuratan Baru : An Evaluation

Having analyzed *Midaq Alley* from the perspective of the theme-structure formula, this study would now identify the dominant component of the novel, and in relation to that, what is prioritized through the exploitation of the dominant component. In addition, this is undertaken based on the PB framework.

The literature review on this novel or for that matter on the entire body of Mahfouz's novels would inevitably point to realism as a distinctive feature of his works. Given below are the observations of a number of critics:

*The description is exhaustive and faithful (sic); it documents every aspect and detail, however small or insignificant, sparing nothing.*¹⁹

*There are, undoubtedly, very precise descriptions which render these works an honest record of the physical aspect of a place at a precise time when the events take place.*²⁰

There are literally hundreds of thousands of objects used in daily life - in work, for entertainment, in brawls, for embellishment or medical treatment - by his myriad of characters on different occasions, depending on their modes of living - from feeding bottles and children's charms to the shrouds of the dead. Though the gallery is obviously vast, covering as it does the infinite variety of objects needed

in the life of a Cairene people (the various origins and types of their dress, cuisine, drinks, furniture, musical instruments and means of transportation)...²¹

Realism is such a pronounced trait of Mahfouz's works that Soliman Fayyad was prompted to remark: *And to say that the realism and immediacy of these books struck me is to contribute nothing new.*²² And Said neatly surmised thus: *Realism, yes.*²³ This paper concurs with the above-stated views, and the quote below serves to illustrate the kind of realism the novelist favoured:

In the wall facing the entrance, there is a small, wooden door which opens on to a grimy little outhouse, smelling of dirt and filth, for it has only one tiny window in the opposite wall overlooking the courtyard of an old house. About an arm's length from the window there is a lighted lamp, placed on a shelf, throwing a dim light on the place, with its dirt floor covered with various and indeterminate rubbish; the room looks like a garbage heap. The shelf supporting the lantern is long and stretches the entire wall; on it are bottles, both large and small, various instruments and a great number of bandages, making it look just like a chemist's shelf, were it not so extraordinarily dirty.

On the ground, almost directly beneath the little window, something is piled, no different from the floor of the room in colour, filthiness or smell, but possessed of limbs, flesh, and blood, and which therefore,

*despite everything, deserves to be called a human being. It was Zaita, the man who rented this hole from the bakeress Husniya.*²⁴

The realism evident in Mahfouz's novels is the product of his meticulous descriptions, covering minute information from feeding bottles to shrouds. Thus, one can confidently state that realism – engendered through meticulous descriptions – is the narrative device that is dominant in the novels. Moreover, such detailed descriptions, argues PB, are part of realism's repertoire, which in turn serve as the basis of the story.

No less important as a dominant component as well as a tool of realism is action and its manipulation. Throughout, the novel operates on a physical level (the physiological level, though present, is less visible). Even a cursory reading would attest to this. One can list a number of episodes in the novel which highlight physical action (and emotions): Hamida walking up and down Midaq Alley every day, the antics of those who patronize Krishna's coffee shop, the suave Ibrahim Faraj's courting game to entice and ultimately entrap Hamida, Zaita trudging along the dark alley to meet his 'protégé', the beggars, to collect his share of the day's collection, Hamida entertaining British soldiers, Abbas' brawl with a British soldier, Booshy and his companions digging up the graves in search of valuables, the homosexual Krishna trailing young men, and so on. The presence of episodes such as these, which constitute a major portion of the novel, underlines two issues that are crucial to understanding *Midaq Alley*. First, it establishes realism as the central characteristic of the novel. Second, the focus on physical action naturally reduces the narrative space for mental action. In fact, it would

not be indefensible to say that the text exhibits little evidence of the precipitation of ideas resulting from the ‘clashing’ of minds. As PB argues, physical action is in line with the demands of realism that imitates human action.²⁵

The presence of meticulous details and physical action that foregrounds realism as the main characteristic of the novel, and the prioritising of realism in the structuring of the text, need to be seen together with another aspect, namely the scheme of values. In *Midaq Alley*, moral ambiguity is unmistakable, especially as reflected in the main character, Hamida, who, being conscious of her uncommon beauty, has no qualms about exploiting it. She is portrayed as an opportunist for whom material comforts and wealth are the primary goal. She accepts Abbas’ offer of marriage hoping to flee from her foster-mother’s home, then discards Abbas for a new suitor - the aged Salim- who promises a life of luxury, is upset when Salim suffers a heart attack for that destroys her dream of luxury, then enticed by Ibrahim, leaves her home ending up as a whore with no regrets, makes use of Abbas to avenge Ibrahim and feels relieved that her fiancé Abbas decides not to continue his marriage plans. Throughout this, Hamida is not shown to regret her deeds or contemplate on her morality. Additionally, Abbas perishes whilst Hamida recovers from her injuries. The moral ambiguity becomes even more marked when Hamida’s foster mother who is reunited with her daughter is seen making plans on how to spend her daughter’s ill-gotten wealth.

The moral ambiguity, glaringly clear in the novel, needs to be viewed in the context of the propriety of didacticism, mooted as a distinguishing feature of an Islamic work that is based on knowledge as propagated by PB. Didacticism is generally seen to

operate when goodness is rewarded and evil punished. If this scheme is applied, then the moral displayed in *Midaq Alley* is open to two possible interpretations. Firstly, the fact that Hamida who is injured finally recovers indicates that the novel ‘*approves*’ of her conduct. This is strengthened by the fact that Hamida at the end of the novel makes peace with her foster mother who is seen preparing to spend her daughter’s money. This ‘happy ending’ certainly must be judged as the novel’s ‘affirmation’ of Hamida’s ways.

Abbas’ death, on the other hand, tempts one to interpret that he is presented as the villain of the novel who has to pay his price - in death. However, throughout the novel, Abbas is depicted as the good one, though naïve. This would mean that the novel does not ‘affirm Abbas’ virtues. By relegating Abbas to the place of a villain and “affirming” Hamida’s deeds, which are then rewarded with ‘happiness’ at the end of the story, *Midaq Alley* makes crystal clear its moral ambiguity. Seen from a didactic perspective, one would find it difficult to reconcile it with the moral ambiguity depicted in the novel.

If the morality in *Midaq Alley* is found wanting from the didactic angle, then how is one to view this novel? The answer must be “as a work of realism “because the principle “good rewarded and evil punished” is not a necessity in a realistic work and its absence in no way impairs the realistic characteristic that underpins the novel. Moral ambiguity as outlined above is indeed not in contradiction to realism that calls for presenting the world as it is. In the context of a story woven around a group of residents in a poor quarter of Cairo for whom money means everything, the morals depicted fit well with the demands of realism. Moreover, as argued by PB, realism is the main tool in structuring a story.

The above analysis makes a few pertinent observations about the novel. One, detailed descriptions and physical action appear to be the dominant component, and with the focus on physical action, there is evidently a dearth of ideas. Second, this preoccupation makes realism take centre stage in the novel. Clearly, the dominant components that constitute the main part of the novel have been employed to prioritize STORY as opposed to KNOWLEDGE. The moral ambiguity evident in the novel serves to confirm the priority accorded to STORY. In other words, in the structuring of the novel STORY-TELLING takes precedence over conveying knowledge. Taha Hussein's comment quoted below reinforces the argument that the novel prioritises story-telling:

For one thing, there is the sociological aspect of the novel which is of vital importance; it consists in the descriptions of the alley which delineates its character, imbues it with its own defining spirit, and endows it with its distinctive sweet-sour taste. The portrayal of the alley is certainly entertaining, but is also deeply disturbing, and constitutes, in fact, an urgent plea for immediate reform if we are to save this strong, young and fertile nation from corruption and dissipation.²⁶

Midaq Alley, without doubt, has had great success in painting a vivid picture of the lives of the poor in an alley in Cairo, but this brilliant portrayal, however, is not accompanied by any attempt to give voice to ideas on reforms or development, ideas from which the society portrayed would benefit.

In regard to this, we must admit that an argument commonly advanced is that the act of exposing the evils of society is in itself didacticism for it heightens a reader's sensitivity to social issues. Even if one reconciles oneself to this viewpoint, it would not negate the argument that *Midaq Alley*'s main objective is to tell a story and not to convey knowledge. In other words, the so-called didacticism (readers becoming more enlightened after reading about the evils) can be made available only *after* the story is developed and concluded. This means that the construction of the novel is still anchored on telling a story (and foregrounding certain components to dominate in the exercise). It does not venture to present and channel knowledge as its main objective, as demanded by PB.

Some Concluding Remarks

Mahfouz's reputation as a writer and his being awarded the Nobel Prize is testimony to the critical reception of his works. His novels are often described as being interesting, informative and filled with convincing characters, suspense, and conflict. His works, which generally feature the middle and lower classes of Cairo, are regarded as credible documentation of the lives of the city's residents. *Midaq Alley* exhibits all those ingredients, and testifies to the novelist's distinctive touch. Mahfouz has created a believable narrative world through his adept transfer of real peoples' actions and feelings into his creative work, *Midaq Alley*. This claim of merit notwithstanding, one has to reassert that *Midaq Alley* remains very much a story, albeit a powerful one. It is not,

however, a creative work capable of presenting and conveying knowledge, a concern that is at the heart of PB.

End Notes

* This is a revised version of my paper ‘*Lorong Midaq* by Naguib Mahfouz : An Evaluation based on Mohd. Affandi Hassan’s Theoretical Framework, *Persuratan Baru*, read to Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka’s Book Discussion series, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 26 April, 2003.

¹ Said, Edward. “Naguib Mahfouz And The Cruelty Of Memory”, Cockburn, A & St Clair, J (eds). *Counter*.<http://www.counterpunch.org/Mahfouz.html>, p.1.

² Elsewhere I have touched on the “theme-structure” framework. See, among others, “Bentuk Dominan Sastera Dan Implikasinya Terhadap Fahaman Estetik Sastera Melayu Moden”, *Dewan Sastera*, January, 1987, pp. 55 – 59; “Politik Sastera: Dominasi Kritikan Teks Dalam Sastera Melayu Moden”, *Dewan Sastera*, July, 1988, pp. 34 – 37; “Antara Penghasilan Dan Penghayatan: Satu Percanggahan Dalam Kritikan Sastera Melayu Moden”, *Dewan Sastera*, July, 1987, pp. 44 – 46.

³ Whilst its literal meaning is “new letters,” Mohd. Affandi Hassan has translated the phrase into English as “Genuine Literature.”

⁴ See comments by Rahman Embong (“Pembinaan Teori Tempatan: Antara Teori Sosial Dengan Bidang Sastera”, *Dewan Sastera*, June, 1997) and A Rahman Yusof (“Adakah Kita Memerlukan Teori Sastera Tempatan”, *Dewan Sastera*, November, 1999) on what is referred to as parochialism, nativism and essentialism in the context of home-grown theories.

⁵ This does not mean that PB is not rooted in this region. See Mohd. Affandi Hassan, *Persuratan Baru Dan Cabaran Intelektual: Menilai Kembali Kegiatan Kreatif Dan Kritikan*. Paper read to the Colloquium on Developing Local Theories, organized by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Hotel The Summit, Petaling Jaya, 6 – 8 December, 1999.

⁶ This is the Islamic belief in the Oneness of Allah.

⁷ The fact that the term *siratan makna* is temporary shows that MAH is working on refining PB.

⁸ See, amongst others, my writings on PB: Persuratan Baru Oleh Mohd. Affandi Hassan: Satu Sambutan Awal. Paper read to the Colloquium on Developing Local Theories, organized by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Hotel The Summit, Petaling Jaya, 6 – 8 December, 1999; *Pujangga Melayu* Oleh Mohd. Affandi Hassan: Satu Perbincangan Awal. Paper read to a forum on Book Discussion organized by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 27 February, 2002. Published in *Dewan Sastera*, August 2002, with the confusing title “Bagaimana *Pujangga Melayu* Harus Ditafsirkan”; *Hatiku Terluka Di Bukhara* Oleh Wan Hashim Wan Teh: Satu Tanggapan Awal. Paper read to a forum on Book Discussion in conjunction with the launch of the winning entry for the National Sako Prize for Novels. Organised by Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, 5 April, 2002; Fungsi Teori Dan Kritikan Dalam Pembinaan Kanun Sastera Melayu Serantau. Paper read to the regional Seminar on Malay Literary Criticism, organised by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 24 – 28 September, 2001.

⁹ For further information on PB, see Mohd. Affandi Hassan’s writings: *Pendidikan Estetika Daripada Pendekatan Tauhid*. 1992. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka; *Medan-medan Dalam Sistem Persuratan Melayu: Sanggahan Terhadap Syarahan Perdana Prof. Muhammad Haji Salleh (Sarjana Dan Sasterawan Negara)*. 1994. Kelantan: Penerbit Tiga Puteri; “Pemikiran Dan Pendekatan Dalam Kritikan Sastera Melayu Moden”, *Kesusasteraan Melayu Mitos Dan Realiti: Esei/Kritikan Hadiah Sastera Malaysia 1988/1989*. 1994. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka; “Mengapa Saya Menulis *Aligupit*,” *Dewan Masyarakat*, September, 1994, pp. 10 – 12; *Persuratan Baru Dan Cabaran Intelektual: Menilai Kembali Kegiatan Kreatif Dan Kritikan*. Paper read to the Colloquium on Developing Local Theories, organized by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Hotel The Summit, Petaling Jaya, 6 – 8 December, 1999; *Era Shit Dalam Politik Dan Sejarah Malaysia: Sumbangan Shahnnon Ahmad Untuk Rakyat Dan Negara* (unpublished).

¹⁰ See, for example, his *Islam Dalam Sejarah Dan Kebudayaan Melayu*. 1971. Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

¹¹ See the Quranic verse al-‘Alaq (The Clot of Congealed Blood): “He Who taught/ (The use of the Pen (Qalam)/ Taught man that/ Which he knew not.” (96:4 – 5).

¹² See my brief explanation of mimesis: “for a brief understanding of mimesis, the following example suffices: if we observe an angry person in real life, generally he would appear furious, and would not smile or laugh. In depicting an angry character in a work of fiction, an angry face can be seen as an imitation of real life. See *Pujangga Melayu* Oleh Mohd. Affandi Hassan: Satu Perbincangan Awal. Paper read to a forum on Book Discussion organized by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 27 February, 2002. Published in *Dewan Sastera*, August 2002, with the confusing title “Bagaimana *Pujangga Melayu* Harus Ditafsirkan.” Another example may be seen when Dustin Hoffman was offered to play the role of an autistic, he spent a year visiting clinics and autistic

rehabilitation centres to observe the behaviour of these patients to enable him to portray a believable autistic in the movie *The Rain Man*. Hoffman won the Oscar Award for his “realistic” portrayal.

¹³ See my “Bagaimana Pujangga Melayu Harus Ditafsirkan”, *Dewan Sastera*, August, 2002.

¹⁴ In relation to this, I have benefitted from G L Koster’s *Roaming Through Seductive Gardens: Readings In Malay Narrative*. 1997. Leiden: KITLV Press.

¹⁵ Soliman Fayyad. “Persistent Questions”. *Al-Arham Weekly On-line*, 13 – 19 December, 2001, Issue No. 564, www.ahram.org.eg/weekly.p.4.

¹⁶ I understand that the original Arabic version of this novel is considered long. This fact does not, however, impair the sense of congestion that the novel evokes. Furthermore, despite the multitude of characters, they are nonetheless well developed and come across as distinct and identifiable characters.

¹⁷ Taha Hussein. “A Work Of Modern Fiction (*Al-Midaq Valley*)”, Enani, M M (ed.). *Naguib Mahfouz, Nobel 1988. Egyptian Perspectives: A Collection Of Critical Essays*. Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organisation, 1989, p.160.

¹⁸ In Mohamed Barrada. “The Abstract Quality”, *Al-Arham Weekly On-line*, 13 – 19 December, 2001, Issue No. 564, www.ahram.org.eg/weekly.p.3.

¹⁹ Taha Hussein. “A Work Of Modern Fiction (*Al-Midaq Valley*)”, Enani, M M (ed.). *Naguib Mahfouz, Nobel 1988. Egyptian Perspectives: A Collection Of Critical Essays*. Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organisation, 1989, p.160.

²⁰ Gamal el-Ghitany. “The Alley In Naguib Mahfouz,” Enani, M M (ed.). *Naguib Mahfouz, Nobel 1988. Egyptian Perspectives: A Collection Of Critical Essays*. Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organisation, 1989, p.42.

²¹ Sami Khashbah. “Naguib Mahfouz And His Cairo: The Place, The Time, The People”, Enani, M M (ed.). *Naguib Mahfouz, Nobel 1988. Egyptian Perspectives: A Collection Of Critical Essays*. Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organisation, 1989, pp. 36 – 37.

²² Soliman Fayyad. “Persistent Questions.” *Al-Arham Weekly On-line*, 13 – 19 December, 2001, Issue No. 564, www.ahram.org.eg/weekly.p.4.

²³ Said, Edward. “Naguib Mahfouz And The Cruelty Of Memory,” Cockburn, A & St Clair, J (eds). *Counter*. <http://www.counterpunch.org/Mahfouz.html>.

²⁴ Naguib Mahfouz. *Midaq Alley*. Le Gassick, T (trns). Cairo: The American University In Cairo Press. 1989. P. 47. In relation to realism, Mahfouz admitted that when he called himself a realist he was in fact influenced by the critics who labeled him such.

Mahfouz's admission, which for him was a matter of labels only, does not undermine the argument that realism indeed dominates his writings, as exemplified in his own words: "The fact is I never consciously followed a particular school in my writing...If I had ever believed at one time or another that I was a realistic writer, it was only due to the influence of what critics had said" in Fouad Dawwarah, "A Journey In The Mind Of Naguib Mahfouz: On His 50th Birthday, Mahfouz Talks To Fouad dawwarah", Enani M M (ed.). *Naguib Mahfouz, Nobel 1988. Egyptian Perspectives: A Collection Of Critical Essays*. Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organisation, 1989, p. 25.

²⁵ It is possible to highlight several other narrative components that are in line with PB's notion of "story" such as characters from the lower classes (the whole novel is peopled by such characters who survive through devious means). Equally important is the use of chronological plot and cause-and-effect principle generally associated with realism. However, the scope of a paper does not allow for the full exploration of these components. However, the components examined here suffice as proof that story underpins the novel.

²⁶ Taha Hussein. "A Work Of Modern Fiction (*Al-Midaq Valley*)", Enani, M M (ed.). *Naguib Mahfouz, Nobel 1988. Egyptian Perspectives: A Collection Of Critical Essays*. Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organisation, 1989, p.163.

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