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"A Raging Sirocco": Structures of Dysphoric Feeling in *Midaq Alley*

Bede Scott
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Abstract
This article explores the crisis initiated by colonial modernity in Naguib Mahfouz's 1947 novel *Midaq Alley*. I begin by discussing the significance of anger within the narrative, arguing that this dominant structure of feeling could be read as a collective response to wider social and historical forces. In other words, rather than understanding emotion as the "subjective property" of the individual, I regard it here as a relational practice embedded within and determined by quite specific sociocultural circumstances. I then proceed to discuss the role of rumour in the novel and the significance of its pronounced melodramatic qualities. In the first case, I shall argue, the circulation of rumour provides a way of containing or quarantining the negative feelings produced by modernity, while also reinforcing the boundaries of a community facing the very real possibility of its own demise. In the second case, I would like to suggest that the narrative's tendency to privilege the melodramatic mode creates a sense of social order and moral intelligibility by channelling these feelings into a stable and predictable generic structure. This latter project is ultimately frustrated, however, when the forces of evil emerge to destroy the novel's principle representative of virtue.

Keywords
Egyptian novel, Naguib Mahfouz, *Midaq Alley*, anger, modernity, structure of feeling, rumour, melodrama, tragedy

> The most difficult thing to get hold of, in studying any past period, is [the] felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living.... The term I would suggest to describe it is *structure of feeling*: it is as firm and definite as "structure" suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity.
>
> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 1961

> A moment arrives when one can no longer feel anything but anger, an absolute anger.
>
> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, 1993

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I

Set in Cairo during the Second World War (1939-1945), Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* (*Zuqāq al-Midaq*, 1947) introduces the reader to a small circle of characters living in one of the city's more dilapidated alleyways. It traces their interwoven lives, and focuses, in particular, on the accelerated processes of social transformation many of these characters are forced to undergo. As one historian has put it, the 1940s were "a decade of sharp contradiction" (Baraka 87) in Egypt, and the war served to increase many of the disparities already evident in Egyptian society. For some, the presence of 140,000 Allied soldiers in Cairo led to greater employment opportunities and many local businesses flourished. The average earnings of the young men employed by the British army at Qantara and Tel el-Kebir increased tenfold (Cooper 137), while for a privileged minority the war proved even more lucrative—between 1940 and 1943, to cite one particularly revealing statistic, the number of (sterling) millionaires in the country rose from fifty to 400 (Lacouture 99). But needless to say, there was another side to this story; and in many ways, during the early forties, Cairo was becoming an increasingly divided city. While fortunes were being made in the financial district, in the poorer quarters of the city they were storming the bakeries for bread (Vatikiotis 347). Between August 1939 and September 1941, the cost of living index rose by 45 per cent, and during the same period the price of food showed an average increase of 94 per cent (Cooper 136, 161). This sudden rise in the cost of living was aggravated by a scarcity of basic commodities such as sugar, flour, fuel, and bread (Vatikiotis 347)—leading one Member of Parliament to accuse the Allied forces of "starving the people" (Lacouture 99). Economic disparities of this kind were also reflected in the topography of Cairo itself. "While the 'European' city developed," André Raymond writes, "the old city… was more or less abandoned: its streets were neglected, cleaning was haphazard, water supply was only partial, and the sewers were poor or insufficient. The deterioration of these quarters was exacerbated by the rapid increase in [a population] whose density weighed heavily on the crumbling infrastructure and inadequate public services" (334). And this, of course, precisely describes the setting Mahfouz has chosen for his novel—a small alley located just off Sanadiqiya Street in the old quarter of the city, where continuity collides with change, and ordinary Cairenes struggle to maintain a fragile sense of social order and stability.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the tension between tradition and modernity has tended to dominate critical readings of *Midaq Alley*, with many commentators approaching the novel from a broadly sociocultural perspective.[1] In what fol-

[1] See, for instance, El-Enany, Moosa, Deeb, Somekh, and Moussa-Mahmoud.

lows, however, I would like to trace in greater detail the affective, formal and generic consequences of this encounter. I shall begin by discussing the significance of anger within the narrative, arguing that this dominant structure of feeling could be read as a collective response to wider social and historical forces. In other words, rather than understanding emotion as the "subjective property" (Grossberg 79) of the individual, I regard it here as a relational practice embedded within and determined by quite specific sociocultural circumstances.[2] Only thus can we hope to account for the curious ubiquity of such negative feelings in *Midaq Alley*, their hyperbolic nature, and the insufficient explanatory force of the localized causes we find distributed throughout the narrative. I shall then proceed to discuss the role of rumour in the novel and the significance of its pronounced melodramatic qualities. In the first case, I shall argue, the circulation of rumour provides a way of containing or quarantining the negative feelings produced by modernity, while also reinforcing the boundaries of a community facing the very real possibility of its own demise. In the second case, I would like to suggest that the narrative's tendency to privilege the melodramatic mode creates a sense of social order and moral intelligibility by channelling these feelings into a stable and predictable generic structure. As we shall see, however, the latter project is ultimately frustrated when the forces of evil emerge to destroy the novel's principle representative of virtue—thus ensuring that the trajectory of the narrative itself, the melodramatic logic of its unfolding, should also be severely disrupted by the intervention of colonial modernity.

II

If we agree with Sianne Ngai that "every literary work has an organizing quality of feeling akin to an 'atmosphere' " (174), then the emotion which most clearly dominates *Midaq Alley* would have to be anger—the untrammelled rage that drives the narrative forward, providing it with its "psychic motor" and "dynamic shaping force" (Brooks, *Reading* 42, 13). Simply put, everyone in the novel is angry, and they seem to be angry all the time. Here are just a few, randomly selected examples of the anger to be found on almost every page:

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[2] This argument has a long and fascinating genealogy. In 1938, for instance, Emile Durkheim suggested that emotions are caused "not by certain states of the consciousness of individuals but by the conditions in which the social group in its totality is placed" (106); and in 1973, Clifford Geertz argued that our emotions are "cultural products—products manufactured, indeed, out of tendencies, capacities, and dispositions with which we were born, but manufactured nonetheless" (50). For more on the sociality of emotion, see Lutz and Abu-Lughod, Burkitt, Williams, Ahmed, and Brennan.

> Her temper had always, even in Midaq Alley itself, been something no one could ignore. (24)
>
> She was one of those alley women renowned for their tempers… and she was particularly famous for the furious rows she had with her husband concerning his dirty habits. (72)
>
> He was filled with scorn and his small eyes flashed in anger. (73)
>
> Anger seethed within her and she stared hard at him, her eyes red from sleeplessness and rage. (75)
>
> Kirsha was now standing behind the till, his anger having locked his tongue, his face pale with fury. (100)
>
> He always seemed overcome with rage, exasperation, and a desire to curse. (116)
>
> She turned her attention to the stage in angry exasperation.… Her blood boiled. (157)
>
> As soon as he was left alone Alwan's vindictive thoughts returned and, as was usually the case with him these days, his anger enveloped everyone. (176)
>
> She opened her mouth in horrified amazement and an awful look darkened her eyes as her face went white with rage. (196)
>
> The memory flowed through him like a gentle spring breeze, but, meeting the glare of his troubled heart, it was transformed into a raging sirocco. (238)[3]

And so it goes. Over the course of the novel this constant reiteration of anger comes to dominate the narrative, producing what we might call a surplus of dysphoric energy.[4] And at times even the characters themselves are surprised by the overdetermined, excessive nature of their anger. When, for instance, the wealthy businessman Salim Alwan learns that Hamida has become engaged to Abbas, he flies into an uncontrollable rage. Taken aback, the girl's mother replies: "Don't be angry with me, Mr. Alwan. You're the kind of man who only has to issue a command when you want something.… Please don't be angry with me. Why are you so angry?" (139). It is a question we will hear more than once as the novel progresses, and eventually we will be obliged to ask ourselves

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[3] I rely here on Trevor Le Gassick's (highly regarded) translation of *Midaq Alley*, first published by the American University in Cairo Press in 1966. Although in some ways this is clearly limiting, I would still argue for the validity of discussing literature in translation (which assumes, in the very process of translation, a certain "semantic autonomy" (Ricoeur 75)), and also take some comfort from Edward Said's defence of amateurism—which involves, he says, "an unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers", and a willingness to move beyond "one's immediate field" (76), whatever the shortcomings of such an enquiry may be.

[4] Envy also features prominently in *Midaq Alley*, however this minor emotion is subordinated to, and ultimately serves to generate, the novel's "organizing quality of feeling": anger.

the same thing. Yes, why *are* they so angry? Why are they always shouting at each other? Why must every encounter in the alley take on an adversarial quality?

The very overdetermined nature of the characters' anger, however, along with its striking ubiquity within the narrative, complicates many of the interpretive procedures we would ordinarily bring to bear on such issues. In other words, a reading of this dominant structure of feeling based solely on character, individual psychology or the contingencies of plot would seem to be inadequate—or at least incapable of accounting for the privileged position anger occupies within the novel's affective economy. The disparity between the intensity of the characters' negative feelings and the incidental causes scattered across the surface of the narrative is simply too great to sustain such a reading. Instead, I would like to suggest that the anger in *Midaq Alley* emerges out of much wider social and historical processes. As we shall see, the intervention of colonial modernity in the novel radically destabilizes the old social order, yet without implementing a new order that can be easily comprehended by the characters or assimilated into their lives. And because they are unable to understand fully the processes of transformation they are undergoing, because these processes are not entirely visible to their consciousness, many of the characters internalize a vague sense of social crisis which eventually resurfaces in the form of displaced anger. Ato Quayson, to whom this article is greatly indebted,[5] has used the term "systemic uncanny" to describe a similar phenomenon involving "*the conversion of the perception of a systemic disorder into a negative affect*" (*Calibrations* 80). In the face of social disruption of one kind or another, he writes, an "internalization of these perceived disorders takes place.... The internalized translation of disorder does not, however, remain merely internalized, but gets cathected into inchoate senses of guilt, inexplicable terror, or a general sense of disquiet that may or may not be consciously traceable to a direct source" (*Aesthetic* 142). To this list of dysphoric feelings we could of course add anger—the blind rage that drives (and disfigures) almost every social encounter in *Midaq Alley*.

Although the narrator of Mahfouz's novel describes the eponymous alley as an "ancient relic... liv[ing] in complete isolation from all surrounding activity" (1), it soon becomes clear that this is not altogether true. In the opening scene we witness a radio being installed in the local café, displacing the old poet who has been allowed to recite his verses there for as long as anyone can remember. "Public reciters still have an appeal which won't disappear," the

[5] It was Quayson who first drew my attention to the preponderance of anger in *Midaq Alley* and suggested that this structure of feeling could be related to the disruptive pressures of modernity.

poet announces as he is leaving. "The radio will never replace us." To which the café owner, Kirsha, replies: "That is what you say, but it is not what my customers say and you are not going to ruin my business. Everything has changed!" (6). And this is just the first of many such disturbances; over the course of the novel the characters will continue to grapple with the contradictory social forces, the radical disjunctures and discontinuities, initiated by colonial modernity.[6] Indeed, in *Midaq Alley* every effort is made to bring these contradictory tendencies to the fore, reminding us that modernity can be at once emancipatory *and* repressive, dignifying *and* degrading. When Hussain Kirsha leaves the alley to work for the British Army, for example, his wages increase from three piastres to thirty, and his lifestyle changes accordingly: "He bought new clothes, frequented restaurants, and delighted in eating meat, which he considered a luxury reserved especially for the rich. He attended cinemas and cabarets and found pleasure in wine and the company of women" (33). We are also told that Hamida envies "the freedom and obvious prosperity" of the young women who work in the factories, women whose very bodies come to signify the invigorating pleasures of modernity:

> They were girls from the Darasa district, who, taking advantage of wartime employment opportunities, ignored custom and tradition and now worked in public places just like the Jewish women. They had gone into factory work exhausted, emaciated, and destitute. Soon remarkable changes were noticeable: their once undernourished bodies filled out and seemed to radiate a healthy pride and vitality. They imitated the Jewish girls by paying attention to their appearance and in keeping slim. Some even used unaccustomed language and did not hesitate to walk arm in arm and stroll about the streets of illicit love. They exuded an air of boldness and secret knowledge. (40-1)

But of course this is only one side of the story. Hussain will eventually lose his job and be forced to return, destitute and disillusioned, to Midaq Alley, while Hamida, for whom the outside world held so much promise, will only be able to fulfil her "dreams of clothes, jewelry, money and men" (255) by prostituting herself to the Allied forces.

It is perhaps not surprising, given these contradictory qualities, that modernity should generate a strong sense of ambivalence in many of the novel's

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[6] On the one hand, as Perry Anderson writes, this form of modernity "tears down every ancestral confinement and feudal restriction, social immobility and claustral tradition", bringing about a "tremendous emancipation of the possibility and sensibility of the individual self". On the other hand, the very same system "generates a brutally alienated and atomized society, riven by callous economic exploitation and cold social indifference, destructive of every cultural or political value it has itself brought into being" (98).

characters. They simply don't know what to make of it, and so they respond, for the most part, with profound equivocality—torn between feelings of repulsion and attraction, between "phobic strivings 'away from' [and] philic strivings 'toward' " (Ngai 11). In Hamida's case these feelings attach themselves most obviously to Faraj, the predatory pimp who offers to rescue her from the "graveyard of decaying bones" (Mahfouz 195) in which she lives. His arrogance, we are told, "infuriated" her, and yet his "respectable appearance and his handsome masculinity attracted her" too. Try as she might, "she could not sort out her feelings for him" (161). Over the course of the novel Hamida's libidinal impulses toward Faraj are repeatedly disrupted by surges of anger, animosity, and a "bestial desire to fight" (184). Consider the following passage for instance:

> She noticed [Faraj] had snuggled close to her, and she began to sense the effect of his touch creeping over her. This enraged her, and she pushed him away more forcibly than she intended. He glanced at her to see what was the matter and then took her hand and gently placed it between his own. He was encouraged by her permissiveness and searched for her lips with his mouth. She seemed to resist and drew her head back slightly. However, he did not find this a sufficient restraint and pressed his lips to hers. (189)

It is also worth noting the vacillations of meaning that occur here. Almost every sentence produces a collision of contraries—sliding from one antithetical category into another, weaving its way through a series of equivocations and inconsistencies, "ceaselessly posit[ing] meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it" (Barthes, "Death" 147). Force fades into delicacy without quite losing its coercive qualities. Resistance becomes "permissiveness" under the guise of continued defiance. Phobic strivings "away from" give rise to philic strivings "toward". And all of these minor slippages ultimately testify to the presence of much deeper instabilities and equivocalities, circulating just beneath the surface of the narrative. For many of the novel's characters, as we have seen, modernity is a source of considerable ambivalence. They are "moved at once by a will to change—to transform both themselves and their world—and by a terror of disorientation and disintegration, of life falling apart" (Berman 13). And it is this underlying tension, I would like to suggest, this sense of cognitive dissonance, that contributes more than anything to the novel's dominant structure of feeling, transforming a vague sense of disquiet into full-blown "loathing and rage" (Mahfouz 99).

Although the characters themselves may not always know why they feel the way they do, it is difficult for us as readers to ignore the connection between modernity and its affective consequences. Let us focus, by way of illustration, on one case in particular. In the opening pages of the novel we learn that the

eccentric Sheikh Darwish had once been "a teacher of the English language". When the religious foundation schools merged with the Ministry of Education, however, "his position changed, as did that of many of his associates, who, like him, lacked higher qualifications". As a consequence of this restructuring, Sheikh Darwish became a clerk in the Ministry of Religious Endowments, and "went down from the sixth to the eighth grade, his salary adjusted accordingly". It was only natural, the narrator says, that "he was hurt by what happened to him", and so he began "a continuous rebellion" against those in authority:

> Occasionally he rebelled openly; at other times he felt defeated and concealed his rebellion. He had tried every method, issuing petitions, appealing to his superiors, and complaining about his poverty and the size of his family. All without success. At last he gave way to despair, his nerves almost in shreds. His case became famous in his ministry and he became notorious as a rebel, always complaining, extremely stubborn and obstinate, and very quick tempered. Scarcely a day went by without his becoming involved in an argument or quarrel. (13)

We can see quite clearly here the way in which the forces of modernity enter into, and ultimately disrupt, the novel's affective economy. Sheikh Darwish's life has been transformed by "processes of structural change" (Soja 26) he can neither control nor fully understand. At first he strives to master these processes by "issuing petitions, appealing to his superiors, and complaining about his poverty and the size of his family", but when all this proves futile he finally "[gives] way to despair". The profound sense of social instability he experiences is thus internalized, only to resurface almost immediately in the form of displaced anger and irascibility: "[H]e became notorious as a rebel, always complaining, extremely stubborn and obstinate, and very quick tempered." Once his career at the ministry comes to an end, Sheikh Darwish loses his mind altogether, "desert[ing] his family, friends, and acquaintances, and wander[ing] off into the world of God, as it is called" (14). And by the time we are first introduced to him in the novel's opening pages, he has become a kind of sacrificial figure "with no home and no purpose" (12)—other than to bear the burden of the contradictory social forces discussed above, and to provide choric commentary on the vicissitudes of the other characters' lives.

In *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Ato Quayson makes another point that is of some relevance to our discussion here. "The systemic uncanny," he writes, "may be social as well as personal, public as well as private" (142). And that would certainly seem to be the case in *Midaq Alley*, where the feelings of anger and animosity we have been exploring take on an intersubjective quality, transgressing the boundaries of individual consciousness. Roland Barthes has

argued, quite persuasively, that literary characters are essentially composed of semes (or units of meaning) clustered around a single proper name. According to Barthes, "[w]hen identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created.... The proper name acts as a magnetic field for the semes; referring in fact to a body, it draws the semic configuration into an evolving (biographical) tense" (*S/Z* 67-8). But in *Midaq Alley*, curiously enough, the characters all seem to share the same basic seme: anger. We have a diversity of proper names, in other words, yet they all produce a semic configuration that resists being drawn into anything like an "evolving" or biographical tense. Simply put, despite their superficial differences, the novel's characters all feel the same basic emotion, and they are made to feel that way in perpetuity. What we eventually come to realise, then, is that the intersubjectivity of the "repressed negative energy" (Quayson, *Calibrations* 81) in *Midaq Alley* makes it very difficult to distinguish *between* individual subjectivities. (It is apparently difficult for the narrator too, whose struggle to say the same thing differently moves the narrative more than once toward repetition and redundancy: "rage and anger, spite and malice" (271).) Indeed, we could even go so far as to argue that the novel only *has* one subjectivity, one "character", for although we are presented with a wide range of proper names, they all tend to cluster around the same affective seme.

The narrative's use of variable focalization also contributes a great deal to this sense of communality.[7] Rather than privileging any one character or seeking to individuate emotion, it offers us what Teshome Gabriel has called a "hetero-biography" of the collective subject. In his influential analysis of Third Cinema aesthetics, Gabriel distinguishes between two different types of autobiographical narrative: (1) "autobiography in its usual Western sense of a narrative by and about a single subject", and (2) "a multi-generational and trans-individual biography, i.e., a symbolic autobiography where the *collective* subject is the focus" (58). *Midaq Alley* provides us with a particularly good example of this second type of autobiographical narrative—deliberately blurring the distinction between the individual and the collective, between the private and public spheres, until one category appears to collapse into the other. As a consequence of this shift in emphasis, emotion becomes detached from the individual consciousness, circulating freely within the larger community and within the structure of the novel itself. It becomes, to quote Mikel

[7] In *Narrative Discourse*, Genette has drawn our attention to two different types of internal focalization—fixed, where the point of view is restricted to one particular character, and variable, "as in *Madame Bovary*, where the focal character is first Charles, then Emma, then again Charles" (189).

Dufrenne, "a supervening or impersonal principle in accordance with which we [might] say that there is an electric atmosphere or, as Trénet sang, that there is joy in the air" (168). Only in *Midaq Alley*, of course, the dominant structure of feeling is one of anger rather than joy; the atmosphere is not "electric" but full of animosity and belligerence. And this affective quality, I would like to argue, is what motivates many of the characters to spend their time gossiping about each other's lives. For only by narrativizing their experiences in this way, only by arranging them into a "governing pattern of significance" (Bersani 52), can they hope to assert some control over the dysphoric energy that has been released into the novel's atmosphere.

III

On 15 January 1934, the Indian province of Bihar was struck by a catastrophic earthquake measuring 8.4 on the Richter scale. Some 30,000 people are believed to have died in the disaster, and the urban centres of Monghyr and Muzaffarpur were almost completely destroyed. In the days following the earthquake, according to the psychologist J. Prasad, various rumours began to circulate throughout the province. The river Ganges had disappeared, it was said, leaving bathers embedded in the sand. The grounds of the High Court in Patna had been "rent into wide fissures" and "big holes of immeasurable depth" (1) had appeared there. Thirteen thousand dead bodies had been discovered when clearing the debris of the main street in Monghyr. Local astrologers had predicted "evil days for the world from the beginning of 1934 until the end of the year" (3). There would be another severe earthquake on the night of the lunar eclipse (21 January), Patna itself would "cease to exist" (4) on 26 February, and within twenty-four hours of that disaster the men and women of the province would change gender.

For Prasad, writing in 1935, these rumours represent "attempts on the part of the popular mind to comprehend a strange phenomenon in such forms of thought as are inherited by, and prevalent in, the group, and acceptable to all its members" (7). He goes on to describe rumour more generally as a "response of a cognitive nature" to an event which has "set up an emotional disturbance, and contains many unknown parts" (9). This "distracting sense of incompleteness", he argues, "arouses a tendency to try to understand the meaning of the changed situation by a process of completing the incomplete" (7). As Prasad observes, however, such rumours not only constitute a collective response to a "widespread emotional disturbance" (6), but also seem to "alter the character of the effective social bonds between the individuals belonging to the group

concerned" (13), provoking what he describes as "an intensification of the comradeship response" (14):

> The moment a rumour spreads about a matter of even private and personal importance… the matter is at once converted into a social situation which is of interest and importance to the group, and is no longer a merely private affair.… [A] well-known reaction of the individual on hearing a rumour [is] his almost uncontrollable impulse to pass it on to another person.… This impulse is of fundamental importance in group psychology, since the communication of a report to other members of the group implies an underlying bond of community among the members.… Thus rumour, both in its rise and in its communication, is properly treated as a social phenomenon. (8-12)

In this study Prasad raises a number of issues that have some bearing on the role of rumour in *Midaq Alley*. As things begin to fall apart in Mahfouz's novel, the characters are increasingly given to discussing each other's lives, "fill[ing] the air" (9) with gossip and hearsay. Like anger, I would like to suggest, these micronarratives could be read as a collective response to the crisis of colonial modernity. Narratives of one kind or another have always served as a way of structuring, ordering and plotting reality—offering, in the process of their unfolding, "a line of intention and a portent of design that hold the promise of progress toward meaning" (Brooks, *Reading* xiii). And this, of course, is precisely what the characters in *Midaq Alley* hope to achieve by producing their own narratives: a sense of order, stability, coherence, and above all, intelligible meaning. Confronted by a "strange phenomenon" which defies complete understanding, they attempt to clarify the "meaning of [their] changed situation" by translating it into narrative, by telling and retelling the various stories to which it gives rise. So when the characters gather to discuss Hamida's sudden disappearance ("[S]he didn't just run away, she ran away with a strange man. In English they call that an 'elopement' " (244)) or Abbas' death ("[The police] carried his body off to Kasr el-Aini Hospital and took the whore off for first-aid treatment" (283)), they are not simply indulging in idle gossip; they are, in fact, attempting to understand and lay claim to the larger historical forces which have had such a decisive influence over their lives.

Many of the rumours in the novel could also be seen as a response to the "widespread emotional disturbance" created by colonial modernity—for only by narrating these stories are the characters able to achieve some degree of control over the negative feelings which have come to dominate their social reality. Take Umm Hamida for instance. Her tongue, we are told, "was hardly ever still and she scarcely missed a single report or scandal concerning anyone or any house in the neighborhood". So when she is visited by Mrs. Aifify in

the novel's opening pages, it isn't surprising that she should provide the latter with a comprehensive "résumé of the news of the alley":

> Had she heard of Kirsha's new scandal? It was just like the previous ones and the news got back to his wife, who had a fight with him and tore his cloak. Husniya, the bakeress, the day before struck her husband so hard that blood had flowed from his forehead. Radwan Hussainy, that good and pious man, had rebuked his wife most strongly, and why would he treat her in this way, the good man that he was, if she were not a vile and wicked hussy! Dr. Booshy had interfered with a little girl in the shelter in the last air raid and some upright citizen had struck him for it. Mawardy, the wood merchant, had run off with her servant, and her father had informed the police. Tabuna Kafawy was secretly selling bread made of pure flour—and so on. (16-17)

By integrating these disputes and episodes of violence into a clearly demarcated narrative structure, Umm Hamida does her best to quarantine the dysphoric energy she senses within the alley—energy that might otherwise prove severely disruptive to the community at large. And seen in this light, the seemingly casual "and so on" with which she concludes her narrative assumes a far greater significance. According to Roland Barthes, if the "classic text has nothing more to say than what it says, at least it attempts to 'let it be understood' that it does not say everything". This allusion to meaning, he suggests, is "coded by pensiveness, which is a sign of nothing but itself: as though having filled the text but obsessively fearing that it is not *incontestably* filled, the discourse insist[s] on supplementing it with an *et cetera* of plenitudes" (*S/Z* 216-17). In this case, similarly, Umm Hamida's final *et cetera* expresses a deep anxiety about all the negative energy that has *not* been contained within the structure of her narrative, all the anger and animosity that continues to exceed its boundaries. Prasad, you may recall, described rumour as a "process of completing the incomplete", and that is precisely what Umm Hamida is attempting to achieve here. She is attempting to "fill" the narrative, to compensate for the "parsimony of its plural" (Barthes, *S/Z* 217), by gesturing vaguely (and desperately) toward everything it is incapable of accommodating.

As well as enabling the characters to assert some control over modernity and the negative feelings it generates, such rumours also serve to delineate and reinforce the contours of a community in peril. In his article on the 1934 Bihar earthquake, as we have seen, J. Prasad consistently emphasizes the social significance of rumour, arguing that the impulse to communicate in this way is of "fundamental importance in group psychology". For Prasad, rumour reinforces the "underlying bond of community" by initiating the individual into a larger collective whose boundaries it also serves to define, and by instilling in them "an almost uncontrollable impulse to pass [the rumour] on to

another person". This transitive quality is what makes rumour a particularly effective unifying or interpellatory device, for the movement it traces is, in Peter Brooks' words, "one of 'contamination': the passing-on of the virus of narrative, the creation of the fevered need to retell" (*Reading* 220-21). None of the characters in *Midaq Alley* can resist exchanging gossip with each other, and every time they do so they are unconsciously performing their own communality—marking the difference between self and other, inside and outside, foreground and background, those who have heard and those who haven't, those who belong here and those who belong elsewhere.

Near the end of the novel, moreover, we witness the process by which the narrative we have been reading is itself transformed into gossip. Hussain Kirsha has just arrived back in the alley, having witnessed Abbas' violent death at the hands of the Allied soldiers: "He came slowly and heavily up the alley, went over to his father, and threw himself into a chair facing him. Without a greeting he said hoarsely, 'Father, Abbas has been killed…' " (283). The story that follows leaves Hussain's father, Kirsha, possessed by a "fevered need" to retell everything he has heard—thus ensuring its transition from mimetic novelistic discourse (280-1) into the diegetic discourse of rumour. "The news soon spread as Kirsha told his son's tale repeatedly to people who came to ask. Their tongues in turn circulated the story, along with many additions and variations" (284). Indeed, one could go even further and argue that the narrative itself becomes a part of this process, disseminating Hussain's tale far beyond the parameters of Midaq Alley.[8] And as a consequence of this transformation, the novel's literary discourse also becomes "contaminated" by the rhetorical features of rumour, taking on many of the qualities we would tend to associate with the latter. For one thing, there is the narrative's indeterminacy, the periodic recession of the narrator's field of omniscience: "In explanation *it was said* that Uncle Kamil preferred to share his dwelling with Dr. Booshy rather than continue to endure unaccustomed loneliness" (285; my emphasis). Then there is the anonymity of its source to consider, for although the narrator is apparently located within the community, it is never made clear to us which character (if any) he or she might be.[9] And perhaps most significantly, we have the

[8] I am naturally reminded here of Truman Capote's claim that "*all* literature is gossip, certainly all prose-narrative literature" (337).

[9] One may recall that in the closing pages of Albert Camus' *The Plague*, the hitherto anonymous narrator finally decides to reveal his true identity: "This chronicle is drawing to an end, and this seems to be the moment for Dr Bernard Rieux to confess that he is the narrator." He does so in order to reassure the reader that he has given "a true account of all he saw and heard" and "confined himself to describing only such things as he was enabled to see for himself" (246). In *Midaq Alley*, by contrast, no such disclosure takes place and no such assurances are offered—preserving to the end the novel's gossipy quality.

narrative's hyperbolic impulses, its tendency to overdo everything, to charge every encounter and every state of being with heightened emotional intensity. In Prasad's article he identifies exaggeration as one of the defining characteristics of rumour, and this is something the historian Gyanendra Pandey has also commented upon. "Rumour," Pandey writes, "is marked characteristically not only by indeterminacy, anonymity and contagion, but also by a tendency to excess" (70). This hyperbolic register is of course typical of all narratives produced in the melodramatic mode. Only in *Midaq Alley*, I shall contend, such tendencies take on additional significance—representing one last attempt to contain and control the dysphoric energy released by colonial modernity.

IV

As Peter Brooks has observed, the connotations of the term "melodrama" are probably similar for us all. They include: "the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, [and] breathtaking peripety" (*Melodramatic* 11-12). Needless to say, we don't have to look very hard to find these qualities in *Midaq Alley*. The strong emotionalism and extreme states of being we have already discussed in some detail ("She clung to him, her head raised toward his face, her mouth open and trembling with passion . . ." (223)); there are examples of "inflated and extravagant expression" on almost every page; many of the novel's characters, both major and minor, undergo episodes of "breathtaking peripety"; and the narrative does everything it can to establish a sense of ethical legibility and predictability. One of the ways in which it strives to achieve this last objective is through the schematic personification of moral absolutes, ensuring that characters are either good (Abbas) or evil (Faraj), and refusing to accommodate any intermediate states of ethical being. These qualities are almost always externalized, too, so that the reader has no difficulty distinguishing between the representatives of good and those of evil. And finally we are offered a plot trajectory that (ostensibly) promises to bring about the destruction of vice and the ultimate apotheosis of virtue, thereby restoring the natural order of things within the narrative.

In Mahfouz's novel, as I have suggested, these melodramatic tendencies could be interpreted as one more response to colonial modernity. Modernity obliges many of the novel's characters to inhabit a kind of floating world—a world in which they are surrounded by historical processes they cannot quite

understand and troubled by disruptive forces they cannot quite see, a world in which everything appears to be "pregnant with its contrary" and all that was once assumed to be solid "melts into air" (Marx 368, 248). Under such circumstances, melodrama serves to allay the threat of ineffability, rendering these occult forces legible, bringing them to the surface of the narrative where they can be more easily identified and apprehended. As Brooks writes,

> Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. It plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and it dissipates it with the eventual victory of virtue. It demonstrates over and over that the signs of ethical forces can be discovered and can be made legible.... Melodrama is indeed, typically, not only a moralistic drama but the drama of morality: it strives to find, to articulate, to demonstrate, to "prove" the existence of a moral universe which, though put into question, masked by villainy and perversions of judgement, does exist and can be made to assert its presence and its categorical force among men. (*Melodramatic* 20)

The "melodramatic imagination" is, then, essentially conflictual, motivated by a desire to reveal the agonistic forces operating beneath the surface of our daily lives. And this of course brings us back to the dominance of anger within the narrative, for it could be read not only as a displaced and pathological response to colonial modernity, but also as a strategy by which the novel's characters seek to reaffirm, through "heightened dramatic utterance and gesture" (Brooks, *Melodramatic* 14), a sense of social order and stability. In other words, one could argue that the characters in *Midaq Alley* are themselves responsible for determining the generic characteristics of the narrative they have been made to occupy—favouring, in their encounters with each other, "intense, excessive representations of life" which "push *through* manners to deeper sources of [social] being" (Brooks, *Melodramatic* 3-4). Here, as Brooks writes of Balzac, the "world is subsumed by an underlying manicheaism, and the narrative creates the excitement of its drama by putting us in touch with the conflict of good and evil played out under the surface of things". For the inhabitants of the alley, "[n]othing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; [they] stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship" (*Melodramatic* 4). And by doing so they render legible (at least in symbolic form) the underlying pressures and imperatives of modernity—bringing these forces to the surface of the narrative through a "metaphoricity of gesture that evokes meanings beyond its literal configuration" (Brooks, *Melodramatic* 10). All this anger, that is to say, all this animosity and conflict,

gestures toward or makes visible deeper social polarities that can only be articulated indirectly, by way of oblique metaphorical correlatives. Bringing these polarities to light also serves to delineate and reinforce the very boundaries that modernity threatens to destroy, making clear once more the distinction between tradition and modernity, self and other, good and evil. According to Brooks, melodrama "can offer no terminal reconciliation, for there is no longer a clear transcendent value to be reconciled to. There is, rather, a social order to be purged, a set of ethical imperatives to be made clear" (*Melodramatic* 17). But in the case of *Midaq Alley*, as we shall see, such ethical clarity and predictably is ultimately confounded when the forces of evil emerge to destroy Abbas, the novel's principle representative of virtue.

Of course the predictability of melodrama is largely dependent on its formulaic structure, on the promise (and eventual delivery) of a certain narrative outcome. This structure, as Brooks observes, usually follows a very clear trajectory:

> In the typical case… melodramatic structure moves from the presentation of virtue-as-innocence to the introduction of menace or obstacle, which places virtue in a situation of extreme peril. For the greater part of the play, evil appears to reign triumphant, controlling the structure of events, dictating the moral coordinates of reality.… The third act… most often includes duels, chases, explosions, battles—a full panoply of violent action which offers a highly physical "acting out" of virtue's liberation from the oppressive efforts of evil. This violent action of the last act is possibly melodrama's version of the tragic catharsis, the ritual by which virtue is freed from what blocked the realization of its desire, and evil is expelled from the universe.… The play ends with public recognition of where virtue and evil reside, and the eradication of one as the reward of the other. (*Melodramatic* 30-2)

In *Midaq Alley*, however, despite the best efforts of the characters themselves, this standard plot trajectory is violently disrupted by the intervention of colonial modernity. Up until the novel's penultimate chapter everything has proceeded with reassuring predictability. In the opening pages we are introduced to Hamida, the innocent young girl whom our hero Abbas loves. They become engaged and Abbas leaves the alley in order to earn money for their future together. While he is away, however, Faraj, the representative of evil, makes his appearance—placing "virtue [Hamida] in a situation of extreme peril". Eventually he manages to lure Hamida away from the alley, ensuring the temporary ascendance of evil within the narrative, but our hero soon returns and everything looks to be heading toward a satisfactory (that is to say formulaic) conclusion. When Abbas discovers what has become of his sweetheart, he promises both her and the reader "a highly physical 'acting out' of virtue's liberation

from the oppressive efforts of evil"—"a panoply of violent action" that will restore, once and for all, the natural order of things. "I can never forget that you abandoned me and that people saw you with him," he says. "It's over between us.... But that monster must suffer. Where can I find him?... I'll smash the filthy pimp's head.... I'll break his neck; I'll strangle him!" (266-7). And those readers who are familiar with melodramatic conventions will be expecting nothing less—but unfortunately things don't quite work out that way. Before Abbas can confront Faraj he discovers Hamida entertaining Allied soldiers in a bar and flies into a terrible rage. Seeing him enter the bar, she too loses her temper, which only makes matters worse:

> Her anger and shouting acted like gasoline on flames, and Abbas' rage turned to sheer fury. His normal hesitancy and reserve disappeared as he felt all the sorrow, disappointment, and despair he had suffered in the past three days boil up within him to burst forth in a mad frenzy. He noticed some empty beer glasses on the bar, took one, and, not really aware of what he was doing, hurled it at her with all the force of the anger and despair within him. He acted so quickly that no one, neither the soldiers nor any of the tavern employees, could stop him, and the glass struck her in the face. Blood poured in a stream from her nose, mouth, and chin, mixing with the creams and powders on her face and running down onto her neck and dress. Her screams mingled with the enraged shouts of the drunks in the tavern, and angry men fell on Abbas from all sides like wild animals. (280-81)

This moment represents the fulfilment of all that has been threatened over the course of *Midaq Alley* and the refutation of all that has been promised. Although the Allied forces have always hovered on the periphery of the narrative, it is only at this late stage that they emerge into the light to destroy Abbas and erase the crucial distinction that has been established between the novel's foreground (the alley) and its background (everything else). At this point, too, the anger that has always threatened to spill over into violence finally does so, with a cataclysmic ferocity that leaves Abbas "quite defenseless" (281). This episode of violence is also particularly significant as it forces the novel we are reading to shift, without warning, from the melodramatic into the tragic mode, short-circuiting its generic wiring and subverting its project of ethical predictability. Instead of vice being punished and virtue rewarded, the reverse outcome is achieved, denying the characters (and the novel they occupy) their final opportunity to tame the disruptive forces of modernity. Rather than being safely contained within a melodramatic frame, the dysphoric energy produced by modernity leaks into the structure of the novel itself, disturbing its trajectory and forcing it to move abruptly from one generic mode into another. In an essay on Ben Okri's early novels, the critic Biodun Jeyifo argues that

> the narrative and stylistic organization of [Okri's] material is informed by a *problematic* which assumes that the work of fiction can no longer complacently proffer a fictional "reality" axiomatically at variance with the socio-historical reality of alienation, degradation, chaos and instability for the vast majority of its living generations. It is necessary to clarify that what is implied here in the aesthetics of these novels… is not merely a thematic exploration of social malaise but the insinuation of this sense of social disjuncture into the very form and structure of these novels. (qtd. in Quayson, *Strategic* 148)

I would like to suggest, in conclusion, that the very same process takes place in *Midaq Alley*. As we have seen, the radical disjunctures and discontinuities initiated by colonial modernity give rise to a dominant structure of negative feeling within the novel. This feeling, I have argued, could be read both as a response to modernity and an attempt to contain it through the enactment of various melodramatic tropes. But such a strategy ultimately fails, and as a consequence the structure of the novel itself becomes saturated by these dysphoric energies, depriving the characters of any genuine sense of social order and stability. The discursive universe they occupy has shifted its generic coordinates, just as the material world they inhabit has shifted its sociocultural coordinates, and there is simply nothing they can do to stop it from happening. They can only resign themselves to the inevitability of these historical processes, and to the inevitability of further disruptive change. For as Sheikh Darwish observes in the novel's final lines, "[A]ll things have their end.… Oh yes, everything comes to its *nihaya*. And the word for this in English is 'end' and it is spelled e-n-d…" (286).

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