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Colonial modernity and urban space: Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo

ABSTRACT

This article explores the spatial dimension of colonial modernity in Naguib Mahfouz's 1947 novel Midaq Alley. *I begin by discussing the way in which modernity reconfigures urban space in Cairo so that the radical disjunctures and discontinuities it initiates become encoded within the topography of the city itself. I then address the impact this reconfiguration of space has on the inhabitants of Midaq Alley, forcing them to engage with modernity as a concrete presence in their daily lives. In other words, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's terminology, modernity in the novel takes on a chronotopic quality – fusing time and space, history and geography – and as a consequence, those characters who aspire to move from one temporality to another are required to do so by following a particular spatial trajectory. They must traverse a number of significant boundaries and interstitial zones, before entering those chronotopic sites whose function it is both to signify and shape colonial modernity: in this case, specifically, the brothel and the bar.*

It is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space.

(Foucault 1986)

INTRODUCTION

Set in Cairo during World War II, Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992) introduces the reader to a small circle of characters living in an alleyway just off Sanadiqiya Street in the old quarter of the city. Although it is described as an 'ancient relic and a precious one', Midaq Alley has clearly seen better days. It is cramped and dingy, a place of fumes and flies. One of the alley's 'sides consist[s] of a shop, a café, and a bakery, the other of another shop and an office. It ends abruptly, just as its ancient glory did, with two adjoining houses, each of three stories' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 1). In what follows, through a close reading of Mahfouz's novel, I shall be exploring the relationship between this 'ancient' quarter and the modern city that was constructed alongside it in the latter stages of the nineteenth century. Over the course of *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992), we are able to trace the process by which colonial modernity 'temporalizes' urban space (or equally, one might say, by which it 'spatializes' history) so that the radical disjunctures and discontinuities it initiates become encoded within the topography of Cairo itself. As we shall see, this reconfiguration of space has a direct impact on the inhabitants of the alley, forcing them to engage with modernity as a concrete presence in their daily lives. In other words, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's terminology, modernity in *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992) takes on a chronotopic quality – fusing time and space, history and geography – and as a consequence, those characters who aspire to move from one temporality to another are required to do so by following a particular spatial trajectory. They must traverse a number of significant boundaries and interstitial zones, before entering those chronotopic sites whose function it is both to signify and shape colonial modernity: in this case, specifically, the brothel and the bar. As Edward Soja observes in *Postmodern Geographies*, western critical discourse has traditionally 'separated time from space and intrinsically prioritized temporality to the point of expunging the ontological and epistemological significance of spatiality' (1989: 119). In my analysis of Mahfouz's novel, however, I shall be focusing on the elaborate interplay *between* these two categories, and suggesting that both time and space are to be regarded as fundamentally constitutive of social being.

COLONIAL MODERNITY IN CAIRO

In 1867, following a visit to the Universal Exposition in Paris, the Khedive Isma'il made the decision to modernize his capital by constructing a European-style quarter to the west of the old city. Although Isma'il was deposed before this project could be completed, the reconstruction of Cairo would continue under the British, who officially occupied Egypt from 1882 until 1936. During these years, André Raymond writes,

> the trend first manifest in Isma'il's urban projects of creating two cities side by side intensified. Before 1882, the dividing line separated a 'traditional' sector from a 'modern' one, but after Egypt's colonization the line [also] marked a boundary between different nationalities. […] One could now speak of a 'native' city and a 'European' one.
>
> (2000: 333)

Although the actual boundary between these 'two cities' may have been invisible, their profound differences were plain to see. Old Cairo was composed of labyrinthine and introverted alleyways and cul-de-sacs, while the design

of the European city was based on a grid pattern of intersecting vertical, horizontal and diagonal avenues. The old city was 'still essentially preindustrial in technology, social structure, and way of life' (Abu-Lughod 1971: 98), while the European city contained all the usual signifiers of western modernity: expensive department stores and shopping arcades, belle-époque apartment buildings with elaborate stucco facades and wrought-iron balconies, racecourses and movie theatres, consulates and ministries, large squares dominated by the statues of important public figures, and Parisian-style cafes with names like Groppi's, Sans Souci and L'Americaine. The colonial state also introduced different regulatory codes for traffic, parking, construction, begging and vagrancy in the modern city, thus creating new legal boundaries between the two Cairos. In 1891, for instance, the state limited access to the Azbakiya Gardens, located near Opera Square, by establishing an entrance fee and stipulating that those who used the park must be 'appropriately' dressed. Such legislation reflected a more general concern on the part of the government with 'security and law and order' in the modern city, and also with the threat posed by 'the spread of a growing number of poor [Egyptians], with their poverty and dirt, into the clean and orderly core' (Hanna 2002: 198).

Of course this dual quality is typical of colonial urban planning – and in Cairo, as elsewhere, it reflected (and served to reinforce) deeper social, cultural and economic disparities.[1] While the European quarter was being developed, the old city was largely abandoned: 'its streets were neglected, cleaning was haphazard, [the] water supply was only partial, and the sewers were poor or insufficient'. This deterioration was 'exacerbated by the rapid increase in [a population] whose density weighed heavily on the crumbling infrastructure and inadequate public services' (Raymond 2000: 334). In an editorial published in February 1902, the *Egyptian Gazette* wrote that

> [t]he poorer classes are being more and more crowded into 'slums' of the worst type. No new houses are being built for their accommodation and the rising rent roll is constantly limiting the numbers that are still within their reach. Hence, in the byways and backstreets of [the old city] there is an ever enlarging number of houses in which families are packed together in numbers and under conditions that render these places the exact counterpart of the slums of Europe and America.
>
> (quoted in Mitchell 1991: 164)

As the old city went into a rapid decline, the upper classes relocated to the European quarter – where political power, business activity and capital were now concentrated – further contributing to the economic disparity between the two cities. In 1872, to cite one particularly revealing statistic, the modern district of Azbakiya paid 33 per cent of the city's taxes, while Darb al-Ahmar, situated in the old quarter, paid a mere 2.7 per cent (Berque 1972: 94). Not surprisingly, this economic gulf also created significant social and cultural disparities. By the end of the nineteenth century, Janet Abu-Lughod notes, 'Cairo consisted of two distinct physical communities, divided one from the other by barriers much broader than the single street that marked their borders'. The disjuncture between 'Egypt's past and future, which appeared as a small crack in the early nineteenth century, had widened into a gaping fissure by the end of that century', and the city's 'physical duality was but a manifestation of the cultural cleavage' (Abu-Lughod 1971: 98).[2]

1. For more on the duality of colonial urban planning, see King (1976) and Wright (1991).

2. AlSayyad (2011: 224–26) also describes in some detail this 'gaping fissure' between the old and modern cities.

3. Naturally, this image
of a divided city is not
unique to Cairo. After
the revolution of 1848,
as David Harvey notes,
Paris was also divided
into 'two classes and
two spaces':
'[E]veryone knew
where the barricades
had been erected,
what part of the
city belonged
to "the other." A
barricade makes for
a simple dividing
line. The experience
of 1848 lived on in
simplified, polarized
representations of
social and physical
space' (2006: 280).

4. For more on this
deliberate 'othering'
of the old city, see
Naaman (2011: 17–33).

5. This process was
supported on the
ground by the Comité
de Conservation des
Monuments de l'Art
Arabe, founded in
1882, whose selective
conservation and
restoration practices
in the old city served
to 'medievalize'
it – privileging this
period, this style,
over all others, and
thus creating a Cairo
that in many ways
conformed to the
European image of the
typical Oriental city,
an image popularized
by the large number
of *expositions
universelles* held
during the late
nineteenth century (see
Bierman 2005).

Although there were indisputable differences between the old and modern cities, it is also important to acknowledge the discursive process that reinforced these differences and gave them a broader semiotic significance. During the late nineteenth century, a discourse emerged around the construction of the modern city that insisted on the complete incommensurability of the two Cairos, a discourse that sought to establish the old city as the 'other' of the European city and divided Cairo into two 'wholly separate spheres of urban culture: traditional versus modern, native versus foreign, Egyptian versus European, old versus new, *baladi* ["of the country"] versus *ifrangi* (Western style)' (Reynolds 2012: 3).[3] In essence, this meant that the European quarter was constructed both literally, as a material reality, and discursively, as a semiotic entity; and in order to achieve this latter objective, it was necessary to create a 'system of differences' that would give the modern city a clear significatory presence within the colonial symbolic order. Under these circumstances, as Timothy Mitchell observes,

> the argument that the native town must remain 'Oriental' did not mean preserving it against the impact of the colonial order. The Oriental was a creation of that order, and was needed for such order to exist. Both economically and in a larger sense, the colonial order depended upon at once creating and excluding its own opposite.
>
> (1991: 164)[4]

So while the European city was being (materially) constructed, 'pushing westward toward the Nile from the edge of the premodern city', traditional, Islamic Cairo was 'concurrently being branded a primordially "medieval" city' (AlSayyad et al. 2005: 2), permanently estranged from modernity and its defining values.[5] In 1909, for instance, two visitors to the city noted that

> European Cairo is divided from Egyptian Cairo by the long street that goes from the railway station past the big hotels to Abdin [Palace]. […] And it is full of big shops and great houses and fine carriages and well-dressed people, as might be a western city. […] The real Cairo is to the east of this [and] is practically what it always was.
>
> (Augustus Lamplough and R. Francis quoted in Fahmy 2002: 163)

And not long afterward, in 1911, Henri Pieron declared that the old city 'must be preserved to show to future generations what the former city of the Caliphs was like, before there was built alongside it an important cosmopolitan colony completely separate from the native quarter'. According to Pieron, '[t]here [were] two Cairos, the modern, infinitely the more attractive one, and the old, which seem[ed] destined to prolong its agony and not to revive, being unable to struggle against progress and its inevitable consequences' (quoted in Mitchell 1991: 163).

What is interesting here is the way in which the division of colonial urban space takes on a semiotic quality – so that topographical differences, differences on the spatial plane, acquire a temporal significance. The European quarter comes to signify modernity, teleological progress and the future, while the 'native' quarter invokes their antitheses: tradition, entropy and a kind of stigmatizing antiquity. Of course, as Roland Barthes has suggested, 'human space […] has always been a signifying space' (1988: 191), we have always attributed meaning to the spaces we occupy; but in the case of the colonial

city these semiotic qualities become particularly pronounced, assuming a more intensely charged and clearly articulated socio-political significance. Thus, in colonial Cairo, every street light, every stucco facade, every right-angled avenue, carried an underlying symbolic meaning that the inhabitants of the city were obliged to make sense of if they were to negotiate the various social, cultural, political and economic forces that had concretized themselves in this way. 'In the nineteenth-century rebuilding of Cairo', Timothy Mitchell writes,

> the layout of the new streets was designed to give the appearance of a plan. Such a plan was not merely a device to aid the work of the urban reconstruction but a principle of order to be represented in the layout of the city's streets and inscribed in the life of its inhabitants. The new city remained, like the old city, simply a certain distributing of surfaces and spaces. But the regularity of the distribution was to create the experience of something existing apart from the physical streets as their non-physical structure. The order of the city was now to be grasped in terms of this relation between the material realisation of things themselves […] and their invisible, metaphysical structure.
>
> (1991: xii)

During the colonial period, this 'invisible, metaphysical structure' served to emphasize the existence of two different cultures in Cairo, two different ways of life, and two different temporalities – with greater value being attached, as ever, to the European side of the binary, to the 'surfaces and spaces' of the modern city, where a beguiling future could be located without difficulty or delay.[6] Although, in Barthes' words, the two halves of Cairo were 'contiguous if [one relied] on the map, i.e., on "reality," on objectivity […] from the moment they receive[d] two different significations, they [were] radically split in the image of the city' (1988: 195). By dividing the city in this way, such a discourse also insisted on the radical incommensurability of the people who inhabited these separate zones. While the European city contained the colonial and Egyptian élite (who were characterized by their urban mobility, their licence to move freely throughout the city, entering and leaving the picturesque old quarter whenever it pleased them to do so), Islamic Cairo was where the vast majority of ordinary Egyptians lived, and that was where they were destined to stay, confined within these restrictive spatial coordinates. As we shall see, however, Mahfouz's novel ultimately challenges this dualistic image of the city and the incarcerating discourse it produces. Although the city was undeniably divided – socially, culturally, politically and topographically – *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992) also gives us an insight into the spatial practices by which ordinary people were able to negotiate these differences. At one level, that is to say, the novel clearly acknowledges the binary structure of colonial Cairo, yet at another level it challenges this image of the city by emphasizing the mobility many of the characters enjoy, their ability to move fluidly from one part of the city to another, and by focusing our attention on the interstitial spaces that defy (or at least complicate) this dualistic understanding of Cairo's urban geography.

URBAN SPACE IN *MIDAQ ALLEY*

Right from the outset, *Midaq Alley* emphasizes the temporal dimension of colonial urban space: the eponymous alley being associated with 'times gone by' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 1), and the city beyond being associated with

6. This distinction has been most famously and eloquently described by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. 'The colonial world is a world divided in two', he writes.

> The settler's town is a strongly-built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly-lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt and the garbage-cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. […] The town belonging to the colonized […] is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness, men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. […] The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs.
>
> (2001: 29–30)

7. Needless to say, the dividing line between these two categories is not entirely imporous, and from time to time 'modernity' does manage to penetrate the recesses of the alley. This is demonstrated at the very beginning of the novel when we see a radio being installed in the local cafe, displacing the old poet who has recited his stories there for many years. 'Public reciters still have an appeal which won't disappear', the poet announces as he is leaving. 'The radio will never replace us.' To which the cafe 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!' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 6).

8. According to Artemis Cooper (1995: 137), there was a tenfold increase in the average earnings of the young men employed by the British army at Qantara and Tell el-Kebir during the early 1940s.

9. The square was known by this name from 1938 to 1948. When King Farouq divorced his queen after ten years of marriage, however, it reverted to its original name – El-Ataba el-Khadra, which, given its liminal position within the city, rather appropriately translates as 'the green threshold'.

10. For a useful summary of this concept, see Ryan (2005).

modernity.[7] Although the alley 'lives in almost complete isolation from all surrounding activity', we are told, 'it clamors with a distinctive and personal life of its own. Fundamentally and basically, its roots connect with life as a whole and yet, at the same time, it retains a number of the secrets of a world now past' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 1). Once space becomes 'temporalized' in this manner, those characters who aspire to enter modernity are required to do so by following a clearly defined spatial trajectory – by leaving Midaq Alley, that 'graveyard of decaying bones' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 195), and making their way into the outside world. Take Abbas for instance. After becoming engaged to Hamida (one of the novel's central focalizing figures), he is forced to leave the alley in order to earn money for their future together. '[S]miling broadly', he promises his fiancée that he will be able to find a job working for the British Army at Tell el-Kebir, where he will receive a daily wage of 25 piastres:

> Everyone I have asked has said that this is only a small part of what people working for the Army really get. I will do all I can to save as much as possible. When the war is over […] I will come back here [and] make a luxurious home for us together.
>
> (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 86)[8]

Or consider the young women who have gone to work in the newly built factories, women whose 'freedom and obvious prosperity' Hamida envies, and 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.
>
> (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 40–41)

In order to enter modernity and partake of its pleasures, these young women are required to traverse the same boundary every day – a boundary that is given precise topographical coordinates in *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992) and can be located quite easily on any map of the city published during the 1940s. It lies on the western periphery of Queen Farida Square, where a single street divides the old city from the European quarter.[9] This is the point at which Hamida's 'familiar world' comes to an end, for she knows 'nothing of life beyond [the square]' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 40), making it one of the most semiotically charged sites in the narrative – a place where routine and familiarity encounter their opposites, where the everyday dissolves into the extraordinary, and where the story itself suddenly takes on the heightened tellability of the picaresque. (By 'tellability' I mean, very simply, the quality that makes stories worth telling, the 'prolonged deviance from the quiescence of the "normal"' [Brooks 1992: 103] that characterizes all successful narratives.[10]) And so, when Hamida does finally cross this boundary in the company of Ibrahim Faraj (the predatory pimp who has promised, in Abbas' absence, to rescue her from Midaq Alley),

it represents a critical juncture in both the novel and her life: 'They arrived at Queen Farida Square without saying a word. Because she did not know where to go now, she stopped. She heard him call a taxi and suddenly he opened the door for her to enter. She raised a foot to step in and that one movement marked the dividing point between her two lives' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 206). Not just the dividing point between two lives, either, but, as we have seen, the dividing point between two significatory spaces, two temporalities and two ways of being in the world. In fact, one could regard this boundary as a key chronotope in the novel – what Bakhtin would call a 'chronotope of the threshold'. This type of chronotope, he argues, 'can be combined with the motif of encounter, but its most fundamental instance is as the chronotope of *crisis* […] [It] is connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life' (Bakhtin 2002: 248, original emphasis).

In this scene of crisis and transition, Mahfouz manages to acknowledge the dualistic nature of colonial Cairo while also challenging the incarcerating discourse that surrounded this division of urban space. Or to put it another way, in this key passage he simultaneously delineates *and* ruptures the boundary separating the two cities – establishing a clear binary structure within the novel only to complicate it with the very same representational gesture. A scene of this kind thus conveys two conflicting messages. On the one hand, it encourages the reader to accept the material reality of a divided Cairo, while on the other hand, it emphasizes those spatial practices and transitional zones that serve to contradict this dualistic understanding of the colonial city. The city may be divided in two, it says, but one can still travel between these separate zones, following the 'well-worn grooves and pathways' (Reynolds 2012: 46) of everyday routine.[11] Indeed, during the colonial period, Queen Farida Square itself served to complicate this dualistic image of Cairo, for this was where the city's different cultures and different temporalities encountered one another in a promiscuous and syncretic intermingling. As I have suggested, the square functioned as a boundary between the two cities, separating one from the other in a sustained and undeniable project of divergence; yet at the same time it also served as a contact zone, enabling a considerable degree of social and cultural convergence.[12] In one direction a road led to the Jewish quarter (*harat alyahud*); in another, two major thoroughfares ran directly into the old city; and to the west, crossing Opera Square or following another street, Abd el-Aziz, towards Abdin Palace, one could enter the European city (Reynolds 2012: 33). Queen Farida Square was also where many of Cairo's tramlines originated, connecting diverse localities and further facilitating the mobility of ordinary people. For some European observers, however, this social diversity, this collision of cultures, could be unappealing. Writing in 1911, one such traveller described the square as

> the epitome of the unmedieval and unlovely native life. Here, instead of spending their lives in doing next to nothing for next to nothing in a digni-fied and picturesque way, everyone is hurrying or touting. There are a few immense shops kept by German Jews, which tempt the native issuing from the Musky with resplendent European hosiery; a jostle of nearly all the trams in Cairo – this being their chief starting-point; a crowd of *arabeahs* (carriages) and donkeys; and an ever-changing crowd of natives trying to sell European articles to each other, or to clean each other's boots.
>
> (Douglas Sladen quoted in Reynolds 2012: 29–32, original emphasis)

11. We can find clear evidence of this contradiction embedded within the introductory passage cited above. Midaq Alley, we are told, 'lives in almost complete isolation from all surrounding activity', *and yet* 'its roots connect with life as a whole' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 1).

12. The term 'contact zone' was first used by Mary Louise Pratt 'in an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect'. According to Pratt, the 'contact' perspective allows us to view the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized 'not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power' (2006: 7).

But of course this syncretic quality is what makes Queen Farida Square such a significant space within *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992), providing a point of connection between all the opposing categories the city (and the novel) otherwise generates: traditional/modern, native/foreign, Egyptian/European, old/new, *baladi/ifrangi*. Here, each individual category collides with its opposite – creating, in the process, a kind of pathway between the two, a transitional zone that at least partially defies the strict binaries imposed on, and by, the material reality of the colonial city.

It is also, I might add, the place in the novel where the plot becomes far more active and where the discourse assumes greater symbolic intensity. As Hamida crosses the boundary between the two cities, several major plotlines, or proairetic sequences, are initiated – sequences we might label 'seduction', 'betrayal', 'disgrace', 'revenge', 'murder' and so on.[13] In other words, Queen Farida Square is the place where things really start to happen in the narrative, where its tellability, its deviance from the quiescence of the normal, suddenly increases. It is, as Franco Moretti writes, 'the site of *adventure*: one crosses the line, and is face to face with the unknown […] the story enters a space of danger, surprises, suspense' (2007: 35, original emphasis). But something else transpires here too. As Hamida moves from the old city into the European quarter, the discourse itself undergoes a transformation – one that could be said to mirror, stylistically, the sudden change in her socio-economic circumstances. In *Atlas of the European Novel*, Moretti argues that stylistic choices in literature are often determined by 'geographical' considerations, and this is particularly so during instances of border-crossing. 'Although the [realist] novel usually has a very low figurality', he observes, 'near the border *figurality rises*' (2007: 43, original emphasis), the discourse takes on a metaphorical intensity that subsides only once the border has been left behind. This is the case, Moretti says, because only metaphors 'can simultaneously *express* the unknown we must face [in crossing a border], and yet also *contain* it'. They 'express it, they "say" it, via the strangeness of their predication', yet since they use a familiar field of reference, 'they also give form to the unknown: they contain it, and keep it somehow under control' (Moretti 2007: 47, original emphasis). In *Midaq Alley*, this shift in register is especially pronounced:

> The taxi started and she tried to forget everything for a while, even the man sitting so close to her. Her eyes were bewildered by the dazzling lights as *a splendid, laughing new world* appeared through the windows. The movement of the taxi had an effect on both her mind and her body and a delightful feeling of intoxication stole over her. She seemed to be *riding in an airplane, high, high above everything*. […] The taxi moved slowly, making its way through *the sea of carriages, motorcars, trams, and people*. Her thoughts traveled with it. Now her willpower deserted her and her emotions were as intoxicated as *her heart, her blood, and all her feelings danced within her*. She was suddenly aware of his voice whispering in her ear, 'Just look at the fine ladies in their superb clothes!' Yes, they were *swaying and dancing along like luminous stars* … how beautiful they were, how wonderful.
>
> (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 189, emphasis added)

A splendid, laughing new world, a sea of carriages, luminous stars. As it crosses this border between the two cities, the discourse experiences a crisis of representation that forces it to shift its generic allegiance. The sober,

'objective' language of literary realism is no longer deemed capable of representing the reality of this 'new world'. Instead, it is necessary to employ more intense, more poetic language – language that may better express the unknowable quality of what lies beyond the border, but in so doing inevitably undermines the generic imperatives (objectivity, transparence, lucidity, etc.) that have thus far dominated the narrative. Up until this point, *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992) has been grounded, like any 'good' realist narrative, in a careful representation of the familiar and commonplace; yet this movement across the border introduces an element of the unknowable, of 'danger, surprises [and] suspense'. Suddenly, like Hamida herself, the discourse is forced to confront what it *does not know*, and in order to make sense of what it discovers 'out there' it is obliged to rely – excessively, deliriously, unrealistically – on metaphor and metonymy.[14] Of course in many ways it is entirely appropriate that this should be the case, for the border is also a kind of metaphor, located 'midway between the unintelligible and the commonplace' (Aristotle quoted in Lodge 1977: 112). And like the chronotope, it too carries additional symbolic meaning, gesturing towards a deeper level of significance that it serves to condense and concretize, to 'make real'. As Bakhtin notes, 'the chronotope of the threshold is always metaphorical and symbolic, sometimes openly but more often implicitly'. In Dostoyevsky, for example,

> the threshold and related chronotopes – those of the staircase, the front hall and corridor, as well as the chronotopes of the street and square that extend those spaces into the open air – are the main places of action [...] places where crisis events occur, the falls, resurrections, renewals, epiphanies [and] decisions that determine the whole life of a man [or woman].
>
> (Bakhtin 2002: 248)

The correspondences here are obvious, but precisely what does Bakhtin mean when he uses the term 'chronotope'? And how does this concept contribute to our spatial reading of *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992)? Generally speaking, Bakhtin employs this term to describe 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature'. In the literary chronotope, he writes, 'spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history' (2002: 84). In his celebrated essay on the subject, however, Bakhtin distinguishes between those chronotopes that are typical of entire genres and the 'minor chronotopes' (Bakhtin 2002: 252) that can be found embedded within specific narratives. The chronotopes belonging to this second category, he argues, act as 'graphically visible markers of historical time' (Bakhtin 2002: 247) and serve as 'organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel', providing 'the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied' (Bakhtin 2002: 250). This second type of chronotope is the one that will concern us here; and having briefly discussed the significance of the border (Queen Farida Square), I would now like to turn my attention to two other key chronotopic sites in the novel.

THE BROTHEL AND THE BAR

After crossing the topographical boundary that signifies the 'dividing point between her two lives', Hamida is taken directly to Faraj's brothel, a second-floor apartment located in a 'towering building with an entrance wider than

14. This strategy may relate, at some level, to what Ato Quayson has described as 'symbolization compulsion'. In *Calibrations*, Quayson uses this term to describe a tendency in certain postcolonial narratives to overuse figurative language. 'Symbolization compulsion', he writes,

> is the drive toward an insistent metaphorical register even when this register does not help to develop the action, define character or spectacle, or create atmosphere. It seems to be symbolization for its own sake but in fact is [...] often due to an unutterable traumatic occurrence, an occurrence that though having a clear referential locus in time, cannot be named except through symbolized digressiveness.
>
> (2003: 82)

15. Scenes of this kind, as Robert Alter indicates, can be found throughout Balzac and Flaubert, whose provincial ingénues also experience a strong sense of uncertainty and disorientation when entering unfamiliar (urban) spaces. 'Because the realist novel is to such a large degree about the encounter with new social and moral experience, he writes, and how it reshapes the protagonist, one of the defining novelistic scenes – a kind of central *topos* of the novel – is the entrance of the protagonist into unfamiliar space.' (2005: 32, original emphasis)

Midaq Alley' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 190). On arrival there, she is told that she will 'need nothing from the past'. 'Your lover is the headmaster of a school', Faraj says, 'and you will learn everything when the time comes' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 207). The first thing he does is give her a new name, Titi – a name that will 'amuse [the Allied soldiers] and one which their twisted tongues can easily pronounce' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 217). He then takes her on a tour of the facilities, beginning with the 'department' of western dancing:

> In size and décor [this] room was similar to the previous one, except that it was alive with noise and movement. A phonograph played music that was both strange and unpleasant to her ears. The room was filled with girls dancing together, and a well-dressed young man stood at one side, watching them closely.
>
> (Mahfouz [1947] 1992)

At this point, Hamida realizes 'that retreat [is] impossible and that the past [has been] completely erased' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 219). Faraj then takes her to another room, where she is mortified to discover a naked woman staring back at her:

> Hamida stood frozen, unable to take her eyes off the spectacle. The naked woman stood looking at them calmly and boldly, her mouth parted slightly as though greeting them, or rather him. Then voices suddenly made her realize that there were other people in the room. To the left of the entrance door she saw a row of chairs, half of them occupied by beautiful girls either half dressed or almost naked. Near the nude woman stood a man in a smart suit holding a pointer, its end resting on the tip of his shoes. Ibrahim Faraj noticed Hamida's confusion and reassuringly volunteered, 'This department teaches the principles of the English language […] Go on with the class, Professor.' In a compliant tone the man announced, 'This is the recitation class.' Slowly he touched the naked woman's hair with the pointer. With a strange accent the woman spoke the word 'hair.' The pointer touched her forehead and she replied with 'forehead.' He then moved on to her eyebrows, eyes, her mouth, and then east and west and up and down. To each of his silent questions the woman uttered a strange word which Hamida had never heard before.
>
> (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 220–21)[15]

This is the place where Hamida will be 'schooled' in modernity, where she will learn the 'sexual principles of the English language' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 255) and discover the commodity value of her own body. Indeed, in this respect, one could argue that the brothel also constitutes a 'chronotope of the threshold', a liminal space that facilitates the transition from one temporality, one mode of social being, into another. It also becomes clear as the novel progresses that this process involves a disciplinary reconfiguration of the body – so that, in Hamida's case at least, 'all traces of Midaq Alley [can be] removed' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 257). As part of her initiation into modernity, that is to say, she is subjected to a 'policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour'. I am citing Michel Foucault here, of course, and referring to those disciplinary processes that make possible 'the meticulous control of the operations of the

body, [that assure] the constant subjection of its forces and [impose] upon them a relation of docility-utility' (1977: 137–38). In *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992), I would like to suggest, the brothel functions in a similar way, producing not only 'subjected and practised bodies, "docile" bodies' (Foucault 1977: 138), but also 'modern' bodies – bodies from which all traces of premodernity have been removed.

When Hamida first arrives in the brothel, Faraj examines her hands with a critical eye. 'Why don't you take better care of [these]', he says, 'let your nails grow and put polish on them. Your hands are a weak point, you know.' And on another occasion, after a heated argument between the two, he criticizes the tone of her voice:

> You have a serious flaw I've not noticed before – your voice, my darling. […] It's a most ugly sound. It must be worked on. Those traces of Midaq Alley must be removed. Remember, your clients now come to see you in the best section of Cairo.
>
> (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 257)

Before long, however, Hamida is completely transformed. She masters western dancing and 'the principles of makeup and dress' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 255), assuming the appearance of 'a women who from birth had known only the luxuries of life'. She perfumes her body and takes to wearing flesh-coloured silk stockings simply because they are expensive. Her hair is oiled and scented, her lips are painted a 'lush scarlet' and '[t]wo graceful arches' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 254) now stand in for her eyebrows. Having undergone this disciplinary process, having successfully made her way through these intermediate stages (and spaces), Hamida quickly becomes 'a favourite of the soldiers'; and in no time at all, we are told, her fantasies of 'clothes, jewelry, money and men [are] fulfilled' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 255). She has successfully entered 'modernity', leaving Midaq Alley and everything it signifies far behind:

> Her thoughts flew from [Queen Farida Square] up to the Mousky, New Street, Sanadiqiya Street, and Midaq Alley, and shadowy figures of men and women from the past flitted before her eyes. She wondered whether any of them would recognize her if they were to see her now. Would they see Hamida underneath Titi?
>
> (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 260–61)

The answer, we soon discover, is no – or at least not without considerable difficulty. Passing through Opera Square, Hamida is spotted by Abbas, her spurned fiancé, who experiences something of an epistemological crisis as a consequence of the changes she has undergone. At first he simply does not recognize her; but even once he does, he struggles to make sense of what she has become:

> In vain he tried to find a trace of the girl he once loved. […] This was indeed a total stranger. Where was the Hamida he had loved and who had loved him? […] Who was this girl? […] A sigh of impotent despair weighted his words as he spoke: 'The more I listen to you, the less I understand you.'
>
> (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 263–65)

16. The term 'floating signifier' was first used by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1950 to describe signifiers with vague, variable or unspecified symbolic value. Such signifiers, he argued, have a 'fluid, spontaneous character', and because they 'represent an indeterminate value of signification, in itself devoid of meaning', they are 'susceptible [to] receiving any meaning at all' (1987: 55).

17. Mary Ann Doane makes a similar point in *Femme Fatales*. 'In the literature and art of the late nineteenth century', she writes,

the increased fascination with the figure of the prostitute, as the epitome of the female *flâneur*, was emblematic of the new woman's relation to urban space. [...] The free and unanchored circulation of sexuality and money epitomized the modernity associated with the increased traffic of urban space. [...] Most significantly, the prostitute ostentatiously exhibited the commodification of the human body, the point where the body and exchange value coincided, where capitalism's ruse was exposed. It was in this sense that she represented [...] 'the danger or the price of modernity'.

(1991: 263)

For more on the connection between the female body, urban space and modernity, see de Koning (2009), Swanson (1995) and Wilson (1995).

It is important to emphasize here that Hamida undergoes this process willingly, and with a clear sense of what its outcome will be – unlike Abbas, whose resistance to modernity will ultimately prove fatal. At the end of the novel, by chance, he discovers his beloved entertaining Allied soldiers in a bar (the second of our key chronotopic sites), and he flies into a terrible rage:

He saw Hamida sitting amidst a crowd of soldiers. One stood behind her pouring wine into a glass in her hand […] Her legs were stretched on the lap of another soldier sitting opposite her, and there were others in uniform crowded around her, drinking boisterously. […] 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. Blows, kicks, and glasses flew in all directions.

(Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 280–81)

This is the point in *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992) where the contradictory social forces, the disjunctures and discontinuities initiated by colonial modernity, finally erupt into violence. Although the Allied soldiers 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). In other words, at this juncture the dichotomous spatial organization of the city, and of the novel itself, collapses; foreground and background collide, destroying the narrative's carefully delineated binary structure. Seeing Hamida conducting herself in this 'dishonourable' way, Abbas feels compelled to assert an anachronistic moral code, or at least a code belonging (more properly) to another space, a space like Midaq Alley. The soldiers respond by affirming a counter-code grounded in quite different ethical imperatives, imperatives that do in fact belong to this chronotopic site. And Hamida, who of course carries a name with 'no meaning' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 217), becomes the floating signifier they trade in this conflict of antithetical codes.[16]

Here too, it is worth noting, the body plays a central role. 'As a body reduced to meat for sale', Debarati Sanyal observes, 'the prostitute incarnates a pathological animality. Yet she is also a performer transformed by fashion and cosmetics into a desirable commodity. […] Her mobility and semiotic expertise enact the circulation of commodities in economic modernity' (2006: 98–99).[17] By prostituting herself to the Allied forces in this way, Hamida has entered the economy of capitalist modernity, an economy of 'bodies bought and sold' (Sanyal 2006: 101) – and so at some level, one could argue, it is only logical that Abbas should attempt to disrupt this system by destroying the commodity value of her modernized body: '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.' Only thus can he hope to reverse the transformation Hamida has undergone since leaving Midaq Alley and remove her from the libidinal economy she now occupies. Seen from this perspective, it also makes sense that the soldiers' attempt to *protect* her commodity value should take on such an overdetermined, punitive quality, serving to inscribe modernity on Abbas' 'defenseless' (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 281) body in the most violent way possible. One may be reminded here of Foucault's detailed descriptions of public torture in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Until the late eighteenth century, he argues, the procedures of public torture 'made the body of the condemned man the place where the vengeance of the sovereign was applied, the anchoring point for a manifestation of power, an opportunity [to affirm] the dissymmetry of forces' (Foucault 1977: 55). In *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992), similarly, the episode of punitive violence in the bar is carried out 'in such a way as to give a spectacle not of measure, but of imbalance and excess; in this liturgy of punishment [we witness] an emphatic affirmation of power and of its intrinsic superiority'. It is, in short, a 'theatre of terror' – a way of 'deploying before all eyes an invisible force', of demonstrating, 'through the body of the criminal', the incontestable power and 'unrestrained presence' (Foucault 1977: 48–49) of colonial modernity:

> Hussain Kirsha stood at the door watching his friend pelted with blows from fists and feet, just like a ball and quite defenseless. Each time he was struck, he yelled 'Hussain … Hussain.' His friend, however, who had never before in his life drawn back from a fight, remained glued to the ground, not knowing how he could cut his way to Abbas through all the angry soldiers. Rage swept over him, and he began searching left and right to find some sharp object, some stick or knife. He failed and stood there impotently with the passersby now gathered at the door staring at the battle taking place, their fists clenched and their eyes filled with horror.
>
> (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 281)

Abbas eventually dies from his injuries, paying the ultimate price for his misapprehension of this particular chronotope's 'metaphysical' properties; and as a consequence, he becomes something of a sacrificial figure in the narrative, a *pharmakos* made to bear the burden of the contradictory social and historical forces associated with colonial modernity. The essential difference between Abbas and his beloved is, then, one of hermeneutical competence. Hamida is able to 'read' space effectively, to recognize and respond to its semiotic qualities (entering the department of western dancing, you may recall, she immediately realizes that 'retreat [is] impossible and that the past [has been] completely erased'), while Abbas fatally misconstrues the governing moral code of the chronotopic space in which he finds himself. As is so often the case, the tragedy in the novel emerges out of this hermeneutical failure, this inability to recognize the very reconfiguration of space we have been discussing. Although Abbas may be capable of responding to modernity as a temporal category, he misrecognizes its socio-spatial coordinates, and thus fails to register what Edward Soja has called the 'triple dialectic of space, time and social being' (1989: 12). In *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992), as I have suggested, all three of these mutually constitutive categories are to be found concentrated in several key sites – Queen Farida Square, the brothel and the bar. And any character who aspires to enter modernity without also becoming one of its

casualties must learn to recognize this convergence. They must learn to iden-
tify and successfully negotiate those places where the 'knots of [the] narrative
are tied or untied' (Bakhtin 2002: 250), where profound socio-cultural (and
stylistic) changes occur, and where modernity – otherwise so intangible, so
elusive – solidifies into marble, stucco and stone.

But what does it ultimately mean for the characters to be able to negotiate
these spaces 'successfully'? And what does this tell us about the nature of their
encounter with modernity as a spatio-temporal category? Abbas is obviously
punished for his failure to recognize the reconfiguration of Cairo's urban space,
but is it really possible to argue that Hamida has made a *successful* transition
into 'modernity' by abandoning her own culture and prostituting herself to the
Allied forces? It is tempting, I suppose, to celebrate the kind of mobility that
she demonstrates by leaving Midaq Alley, that 'graveyard of decaying bones',
and entering the modern city, but by doing so does she not simply exchange
one repressive structure (traditional patriarchy) for another (the economy of
capitalist modernity, an economy of 'bodies bought and sold')? These are ques-
tions the novel simply refuses to answer. Instead, as I have argued elsewhere,
it chooses to emphasize the contradictory nature of colonial modernity itself –
reminding us that it can be at once emancipatory *and* repressive, dignifying
and degrading.[18] In the following passage, as Hamida crosses Queen Farida
Square with Faraj, she seems to have some intimation of this contradictory
quality, and it inspires in her a corresponding ambivalence:

> She had lost track of time and suddenly ahead was Queen Farida
> Square. Hiding her regrets, she said, 'Now we will go back.'
>
> 'Go back?' [Faraj] answered in astonishment.
>
> 'This is the end of the road.'
>
> 'But the world doesn't come to an end with Mousky Street,' he protested.
> 'Why can't we stroll around the square?'
>
> 'I don't want to be late, as my mother will be worried.'
>
> 'If you'd like, we can take a taxi and cover a great distance in a few
> seconds,' he pointed out temptingly.
>
> A taxi! The word rang strangely in her ears. In her whole life she had
> only ridden in a horse-drawn carriage and the magic of the word 'taxi'
> took time to die away. But how could she possibly ride in a taxi with a
> strange man? She was overcome by a powerful desire for adventure.
> […] She glanced at him looking cunningly in her direction, a trace of
> that infuriating smile of his on his lips. Her feelings changed abruptly.
> 'I don't want to be late.'
>
> Slightly disappointed, he asked, trying to appear sad, 'Are you afraid?'
>
> 'I'm not afraid of anything,' she replied indignantly, her anger increasing.
>
> His face lit up, as though now he understood many things. Gaily he
> said, 'I'll call a taxi.'
>
> She made no objection and fixed her gaze on the approaching taxi.
> It stopped and he opened the door for her. Her heart pounding, and
> clutching her cloak, she bent down and entered.
>
> (Mahfouz [1947] 1992: 188)

In this passage Hamida is sensing what lies *behind* the surfaces and spaces of the city: the 'invisible, metaphysical structure' (Mitchell 1991: xii) that attaches to a place like Queen Farida Square. She is recognizing, however intuitively, the broader significance of this transitional space, and anticipating the consequences – both positive and negative – of her decision to move from one side of the square to the other.[19] Hence the ambivalence, the contrary impulses that saturate this short passage. Feigned reluctance becomes genuine fear. Desire and irresponsibility collide with their opposites ('I don't want to be late'), before emerging once more in the form of defiance and anger. '[P]hobic strivings "away from"' almost immediately give rise to 'philic strivings "toward"' (Ngai 2005: 11). And all of these minor slippages ultimately testify to the presence of much deeper instabilities and equivocalities circulating just beneath the surface of the city (and of the narrative we are reading).

In *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992), as we have seen, modernity takes on a concrete significatory presence within colonial Cairo. It makes itself felt in the public squares, shopping arcades and cafes of the modern city – and in the contrast between these places and the narrow alleyways and dilapidated structures of the old city. Yet Mahfouz is also careful to acknowledge those sites where modernity loses some of its legibility and coherence, where the underlying instabilities and equivocalities mentioned above reassert themselves, and where marble, stucco and stone threaten to dissolve into something far more elusive, far more mystifying and far more volatile. To be modern, as Marshall Berman observes, is to 'find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are' (1983: 15). It is to be 'both revolutionary and conservative: alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, [but also] frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead' (Berman 1983: 13). And this is precisely how the characters in *Midaq Alley* ([1947] 1992) feel when they encounter modernity as a reified presence within the urban landscape of Cairo. Although places like Queen Farida Square generate a large degree of supplementary meaning, the message they convey is never entirely clear, never entirely lucid. At times, as I have argued, the underlying significance of these chronotopic sites rises swiftly to the surface, where it can be identified and decoded with relative ease. 'This signifies modernity', the narrative (and the city) declares in such places. 'This signifies antiquity and decay.' But even then a certain ambiguity intrudes, complicating any straightforward interpretation of these utterances. In this respect, Queen Farida Square itself becomes an objective correlative for the hermeneutical difficulties surrounding colonial modernity. Lining the square, during the early twentieth century, could be found four of the city's largest clothing and drapery stores, a theatre, the Tiring Department Store, a mosque, a post office, the Bazar Mourour, the Central Fire Station, a fully automated telephone exchange, Stein's Oriental Stores, the offices of the Syndicat des Ouvriers and the Household Cooperative Society for Government Employees, an Egyptian coiffeur, an Armenian stationery and a large number of cafes (including the Citadelle, the Galossos and the Grand Café). A covered market was situated just a few metres away, and itinerant street vendors peddled their wares wherever they could – selling cigarettes, newspapers, confectionary and the like.[20] But how was one to interpret such a confused intermingling of the traditional and the modern, the native and the foreign, the *baladi* and the *ifrangi*? Although such squares were originally a

19. This is one of those 'primal modern scenes' that Marshall Berman describes so eloquently in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* – 'experiences that arise from the concrete everyday life of [the city] but carry a mythic resonance that propel them beyond their place and time and transform them into archetypes of modern life' (1983: 148). In a fascinating comparative analysis of Dostoyevsky and Baudelaire, Berman argues that

> [b]oth writers are original in creating […] primal modern scenes: everyday encounters in the city street that are raised to first intensity (as Eliot put it in his essay on Baudelaire), to the point where they express [the] fundamental possibilities and pitfalls, allures and impasses of modern life.
>
> (1983: 229)

20. For a more detailed description of Queen Farida (El-Ataba el-Khadra) Square during the colonial period, see Reynolds (2012: 29–37).

European 'architectural feature imported to regularize and Parisianize Egypt's cities' (Reynolds 2012: 46), they very quickly became something else altogether: initiating (and staging) a collision of different cultures, classes and temporalities. And so it is not particularly surprising that the message these sites convey should turn out, in places, to be far more complicated and difficult to read than first appeared to be the case. If this was modernity, then it was a modernity located not in the absence of everything it sought to supersede, but in the encounter *between* these 'opposing' categories – and in the intertwined sense of promise and danger that such an encounter inevitably produces.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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