

## *Children of the Alley: Mahafouz's Allegory of Violence and Oppression*

**Abdulrahman Mokbel Mahyoub Hezam**

Department of Languages and Translation

Faculty of Science and Arts,

Taibah University- Al-Ola, Saudi Arabia

&

Department. of English, Faculty of Arts,

Taiz university, Yemen

### **Abstract**

The study is an attempt to read the novel as a political allegory of exploitation and oppression in post-independence Egypt. An important objective of the study is to show how the use of allegory in the novel is necessitated by a political reality characterized by violence and oppression and how this allegorical aspect gives the novel a sense of timelessness and universality that makes it relevant to today Middle East. It tries to answer questions like; how repressive regimes are created? The study finds out that Mahfouz employed the existing myths to deal with political themes like oppression, tyranny, revolution and abuse of power. He also secularized the religious history of humanity to show us how repressive regimes are created and how can people get rid of them?

**Keywords:** allegory , Mahfouz , oppression , political novel, violence

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The importance of politics in Third World Literature is increasing in our times which can be attributed to the increasingly important role politics plays in our life especially in the globalized world in which we live. In a region like the Middle East with its continual political instability, the relation between politics and literary production assumes great importance. This relation is clearly seen in the works of the Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006) whose works cannot be fully gauged without understanding the spirit of the time in which he lived. His achievement as a novelist should be viewed not only against the background of social and political developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century Egypt but also the current political upheavals in the whole Middle East. Some of his novels can be read as political allegories with timeless themes which make them relevant to today Middle East. One of these novels is *Children of the Alley*, (1957, English Tran. 1996) a political allegory with timeless political themes. How does Mahfouz employ the existing myths to deal with political themes like oppression, tyranny, revolution and abuse of power? How does he secularize the religious history of humanity to show us how repressive regimes are created and how can the people get rid of them? What kind of change does Mahfouz prefer? Is he seeking total or partial change? How is the novel relevant to today Middle East? Light will be shed on the way he criticizes the Egyptian people for their passivity and acceptance of tyranny.

I.A. Cuddon (1999) defines allegory as “a story in verse or prose with double meaning: a primary or surface meaning and a secondary or under-the-surface meaning. It is a story, therefore, that can be read, understood and interpreted at two levels (and in some cases at three or four levels)” (*The Penguin Dictionary*). To read a novel as a political allegory is to try to find the under-the-surface meaning. A work is called allegorical when it says one thing in order to mean something else. The allegorical mode can be conducive to fiction in a police state like Egypt where the government employs a strict mode of censorship. This is because the authority usually does not see the underlying meaning and this enables writers to use allegory with social and political implications. *Children of the Alley*, Mahfouz’s first novel after 1952 revolution is an important text of its kind in the post-revolution era. It was serialized in *Al-Ahram*, the official newspaper in Egypt in 1959 and proved to be the most controversial of all his novels. It has never been published in book form in Egypt because of the ban imposed by the religious authorities at the time and which has not been lifted since 1959. But the novel has been published in book form elsewhere in the Arab world. The controversy stirred by the novel in the Arab world continues even now. Religious authorities still attack it on the allegation that it is injurious to Islam and the prophets. Mahfouz was unjustly accused of blasphemy and apostasy. When Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* appeared in 1988, some people were quick to compare it to *Children of the Alley* which was published twenty nine years before. A leading figure in the Islamic movement in Egypt went to claim that “Khomeini’s fatwa is correct. Salman Rushdie must be killed. Had this sentence been passed on Naguib Mahfouz when he wrote *Awlad Haritna* [*Children of the Alley*], it would have served as a lesson for Salman Rusdie to heed” (qtd. Mehrez, 1993, 68). Those who compare the two novels tend to read Mahfouz’s work in religious terms which was not the intention of the author. El-Enany sees these comparisons as ill-informed (*Pursuit* 239). Fox (1990) argues that unlike Rushdie, Mahfouz is not ‘a lapsed’ Muslim and his work is in a sense “a pious book” that has been misunderstood by the religious authorities. Fox goes to say that, “It is ironic that (*Children of the Alley*) should have been consigned to hell in the same hand-basket as the mischievous *Satanic Verses*, considering its message” (93).

*Children of the Alley* is labeled political allegory because its secondary meaning or under-the-surface meaning is political. It is political allegory in the same sense that *Animal Farm* is. The use of allegory in the case of Mahfouz is often necessitated by a political reality in which the freedom of expression is curtailed. Thus he is motivated more by a need to have a space to express his views that he cannot express otherwise than a desire to explore new techniques or make contemporary reality more real. His use of allegory and fantasy together is not an escape from reality but a means of examining and exploring it. The allegorical aspect gives the text a sense of timelessness and universality, enabling Mahfouz to tackle the themes of tyranny, oppression and abuse of power in a wider human framework. The novel explores various forms of exploitation and oppression not only in Egypt, but anywhere, at anytime. Mahfouz uses the allegorical mode in *Children of the Alley* as a means of political comment. This refers to mankind's inability to achieve a lasting just and humane social order coming out of his perception of a betrayal of hopes in the wake of the 1952 revolution and the post-independence regimes in Egypt.

This novel can be fully understood only if it is read against the writer's response to consequences following the 1952 revolution in Egypt. It is a known fact that Mahfouz and other intellectuals who welcomed the revolution enthusiastically were later "disenchanted, frustrated, and alienated by the turn the revolution took – first in imposing military rule, and banning political parties, then in establishing the one party state, suppressing individual freedoms, and ruthlessly crushing all opposition" (Badawi, 1985,144). As an intellectual, Mahfouz was disillusioned with the conditions of his country. He had to strive through his writing for a commitment that would fulfill the ideals of the revolution and save his country. But the freedom of writers was curtailed under the new regime. Censorship controls of all stifling kinds are usually imposed by totalitarian and repressive regimes in all parts of the world. But writers like Mahfouz, who are committed to voice their people's concerns and aspirations, can not be completely silenced by these repressive measures. Mahfouz was aware of both the positive and negative results of the revolution. It succeeded in creating a new social system in which the peasants and workers were given rights to education and work. It also helped to achieve a measure of political and economic independence for the people in Egypt. In an interview with Nabeel Faraj, Mahfouz gives credit to the leadership for making several reforms in the industrial and agricultural sectors, but laments the fact that these achievements were at the expense of the individual freedom, the natural civilizational growth of the Egyptian individual. The new political reality in his view created a passive personality unable to think or participate positively in nation building. It helped in creating an atmosphere of insecurity, loss and hypocrisy (66-7).

One of the most important qualities of a great writer is the speed and flexibility with which he adapts to the changing social and political scene. In the Arab world in particular, the writer must have this adaptability in abundance, to be able to carry on his mission and survive. Mahfouz is acutely aware of the relationship between literature and politics in this part of the world. He tells us that:

Sometimes the artist finds it difficult to express himself, especially when we consider the state's position towards him. This is generally true in the Arab world where we can not dissociate art and politics. The artist's dilemma depends to a great extent on the state's position

vis-à-vis freedom of expression. Should the state ignore the writer's voice, it is alone the loser, for his is the voice of truth... a voice that knows and offers what no intelligence apparatus is capable of providing. (qtd. in Mehrez( 1993, 61)

Mahfouz's awareness of his role as a writer in expressing the aspirations and fundamental problems of his countrymen and of the delicate relation between this role and the state's position towards literary production is behind the turning point that occurred in his literary career at this stage. After writing social realistic novels in the 1940s, he relied heavily, in the 1950s and 60s, on such technical devices as allegory and symbolism to get his message through. The first point that must be made about this novel is that although it can not be understood properly unless it is studied in the context of post-independence Egypt, it should be regarded not merely in terms of Egypt in the post-revolution era, but also in terms of issues which are common to all countries. The story is not only of Egypt or the Egyptian people, but of humanity's general plight and problem. It is not only an allegory of the Egyptian people's quest for a just and humane society, but also of all mankind's endless quest for social justice right from Adam till now.

As stated earlier, Mahfouz's employment of allegory is not an escape from reality but an investigation of that reality, an attempt to understand the social and political reality of modern Egypt. There is an assumption that the use of fantasy in a fictional work makes it remote from the living social and political reality. But the use of allegory, myth and fantasy does not always lead to escapism and at the hands of creative writers, like Mahfouz, they can be used as an effective means of examining and exploring reality, "The Writer", Mahfouz tells us, "may employ fantasy, but he always has an eye to reality. I belong to this type of writer. I may invest my work with abstract dimensions, but this is only to get to the heart of reality" (Faraj, 1986, 20). Mahfouz, thus, deals with reality indirectly using allegory to create his vision of Egyptian reality. He is trying to create a dream world in which he can take problems which he could not treat directly. He uses the existing myths and creates his own myth to critique reality and make a scathing criticism of the failure of the leaders of Egypt to create social and political justice.

One must emphasize here that what is important is the message that Mahfouz intends to convey through his novel and not how he presents the stories of the three monotheistic religions. To say that the work shows Mahfouz's disrespect for Islam is to misinterpret the message of the work. Even if it deals with religious themes, it must be said that it does not deal with this religion or that but with the role of religion in modern man's life without focusing on one particular religion. The fact remains that Mahfouz is not interested in presenting a religious history of mankind, nor in addressing himself critically to any religion. In fact he secularizes the history of the three monotheistic religions turning them into sociopolitical movements or political revolts against tyranny and oppression. The prophets are presented as revolutionary leaders with an entirely socio-political agenda that aims at establishing a just and humane society in the alley and that has nothing to do with religion. He presents the events in the life of the prophets in a realistic way without the metaphysical trappings that are usually associated with these events. According to El-Enany(1993), "God, Satan, Adam, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are all there but without the halo of religious myth: The novel is an attempt at demythologizing humanity's religious quest" (142).

The narrator throughout the novel says our alley and never says my alley. This emphasizes the importance of the collective identity of the inhabitants of the alley. The alley is

our alley, our Egypt, our world. This also emphasizes the concept of equality among the inhabitants of the alley, which is the central message of all the reformists who appear in the alley. The significance of the 'hara' or alley as a source of inspiration for Mahfouz's work must be emphasized here. In his realistic novels including *The Trilogy*, the alley is real and symbolic, real because it is in a sense an honest and precise record of the old quarters of Cairo, and symbolic because it is meant to be a microcosm of Egypt. Al-Gitani tells us that the alley "remains the pivot around which his [Mahfouz's] work rotates during his long literary career. It assumes further dimensions and becomes the epitome of the whole world" ("The Alley" 42). If the alley in the realistic novels is the microcosm of Egypt, it is in *Children of the Alley* that we see the alley, "taking more extensive dimensions and becoming a symbol of the world at large" (Al-Gitani, 1993 42). Although the alley, as it appears in the novel, has the general features of a modern Cairene alley of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, it is the symbolic level that is of paramount importance. The alley is a mini Egypt and a micro-universe. One can call it a global alley because the author intends it to be the symbol of the entire globe. This is why he deliberately isolates it from any specific framework of reference both in terms of time and place. Talking about the alley in *Children*, Al-Gitani tells us that it is, "a new alley, one that bears no name and represents no place, an alley that derives its significance from actual reality but has been refashioned by the writer's vision" ("The Alley" 43). The alley undergoes no major physical change in spite of the long span of time that the novel covers. Generations come and go but the alley remains unchanged. El-Enany(1993) sees this lack of physical progress as "an indictment of the human experience for its ethical failure despite all the material progress it may boast" (150).

*Children of the Alley* is not a continuation of what Mahfouz had been doing through his realistic novels, namely, chronicling the modern history of Egypt. But it is a continuation of his main mission which is finding an answer to the problems of Egypt. In his novels till this stage, history, be it pharoanic or recent history, had been the core of his writing. Now he began to investigate the entire human history to explore his theme of power and its abuse. At the beginning of *The Journey of Ibn Fattuma*(1983), a novel written by Mahfouz in 1983, the narrator who is dissatisfied with the conditions in his country because it is full of corruption and injustice, sets on his travels in an attempt to "learn and bring back to my sick country the healing remedy" (19). It seems that Mahfouz's journey through the human history in *Children of the Alley*, is in search of the healing remedy for his sick country. In one of his monologues Kamal in *The Trilogy* tells us:

For too long the nation had patiently endured the blows it received. Today, it was Tawfiq Nasim, yesterday Ismail Sidqy, and before that Muhammad Mahmud. This ill-omened chain of despots stretched back into pre-history. Every bastard has been deluded by his own power and has claimed to be the chosen guardian for us children. (*Sugar Street*, 1992 32)

It is this long chain of despots stretching back into pre-history that is the main concern of Mahfouz in *Children of the Alley*. The point that the novel makes is that "generation after generation of Egyptians live in a perpetual master-slave relationship under one despot after another" (Fox 91). In the novel the alley suffers from long periods of oppression at the hands of the overseer and his gangsters who subject the people to all kinds of mistreatment and injustice. If the mythical language is translated into political language, the picture that emerges is that of a police state with the overseer as the dictator, the gangsters his apparatus of oppression and the

poets of the coffeehouses as the government controlled media which sing the praise of the dictator and his policies.

Read within the context of the political reality at the time, one tends to agree with Fox when he says that Mahfouz “saw Nasser as yet another incarnation of pharaoh, indistinguishable in essence from countless previous tyrants in a chain of tyranny stretching back thousands of years into Egypt’s mythic past” (91). But the novel is not only about Nasser and Egypt. The alley as pointed out earlier is a global alley and the timelessness that characterizes the events in the novel makes its message a general one even if Mahfouz’s main concern is his own country. What the novel offers is “a potent and much needed message for the powers that be, not only in Egypt and other Arab countries, but everywhere in the world” (Abu-Haider 1985 119).

Unlike *Gulliver’s Travels*, the allegory in *Children of the Alley* consists entirely of human beings and not Yahoos or Lilliputians. Mahfouz is not presenting unusual or improbable events and appearances, but ordinary and probable events. There are no divine characters or superhuman heroes, and all actions of the protagonists lie within the human capacity. Even Gebelawi who stands for God in the allegorical frame of the novel is presented in human terms. With the exception of his long age which lasts for several generations till he dies in the last part, everything else about him is human. He is described in the last part as “conqueror of the desert, master of all men, the symbol of power and courage, owner of the estate and the alley, and first father of succeeding generations” (*Children* 407). He appears in person in the first part which is a recreation of the story of the Fall, then he retreats to his mansion at the end of the alley never to be seen again. The only role he plays in the rest of the novel is sending messages to the reformists that he has bestowed the estate on all the inhabitants of the alley as they are all his grandchildren and must have equal share in the revenue of the estate.

The four prophets or reformists are Gabel, Rifaa, Qassem and Arafa who stand for Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and the modern man of science respectively. The novel is not constructed as a single sustained myth but various myths. Unlike Thomas Mann in his recreation of religious myths in *Joseph and His Brothers*, Mahfouz did not need encyclopedic knowledge of the myths he is using because he used myths which are known to almost everyone. Hatfield tells us that Mann’s intention in his novel is “less to recreate a period of the past than to show typical and timeless figures against a more or less distinct background” (95). The same can be said about Mahfouz’s intention in his novel which is not to recreate Jewish, Christian and Islamic myths, but to dramatize Man’s quest for freedom and justice.

The use of different myths by Mahfouz makes it difficult to maintain an organic unity in the novel, and the result is “a number of very fast-moving short novellas, held together by means of certain parallelism and continuities, and, of course, one unifying concept” (Badawi, 1985 143). The repetitions that we find in the novel are of thematic significance. There are several words, phrases, and events the recurrence of which not only points to their symbolic potentialities but also establishes the dominant mood in the novel. For example, the clubs used by the gangsters to suppress people are found in every part because they are intended to be the symbol of all the repressive apparatus used by those in power to maintain their position by force. The ‘Futwat’ or the gangsters stand for the police, the army and the security intelligence. They are used for the purpose of maintaining the predominance of the overseer in the same way that

the police and the army are used to maintain the power of the individual military man, the dictator or the party. They serve to carry out the personal wishes of one individual or a group of individuals at the expense of the people. The ruling regime continues throughout the four parts in the sense that the ruler known as the overseer continues in power. His name may change but the policies and the nature of the regime remain unchanged. This unchangeability is part of Mahfouz's message that dictators are the same everywhere in the world and at any time in history. According to Abu-Haider(1985), the novel is:

essentially a parable of authority and power, not only in Egypt (its author's country), but everywhere in the Arab world, or rather in the Middle East. It is a story of an endless struggle for power, a perpetual Armageddon, in which nothing seems to avail except Machiavellian machinations in their most sinister and primeval aspects. (119)

With the exception of the power of Gebelawi which he asserts only in the first part when he expels his sons, the power that is ruling the alley is that of the overseer and the thug gangs leaders. We are kept aware that Gebelawi has the power to change everything in the alley but he never uses his authority to set things right. This aloofness on the part of Gebelawi is employed by Mahfouz to indicate that oppressed people must not wait for divine intervention to liberate them from oppression. It is their duty to do it themselves. But how?

Mahfouz sees that there are two types of power, good and bad. The bad power is the one that is found in the overseer and his gangs while good power is that of the reformists Gabal, Rifaa and Qassem. Qassem. The power of the reformists is not an individual power and their revolts against the oppressors are not individual revolts. It is the collective power of the people and not their individual strength that helps them overcome the power of the gangsters. Arafa fails in his revolt because it is an individual revolt which lacks the popular base that his predecessors built. Here lies Mahfouz's idea of the role of the people in resisting tyranny. One feels that Mahfouz is criticizing indirectly the Egyptian people for not asserting their power in the same way they did in the pre-independence era ,before and during the 1919 revolution. In this novel as well as in *The Harafish*, there is a harsh criticism of the way the inhabitants of the alley and the harafish endure silently and patiently the oppression and inhumane treatment meted out to them by their leaders. Gabal expresses this idea when he says,

And yet, strange to say, the people of our alley laugh! How can they laugh? They celebrate winners, any winner and cheer any strong man, no matter who he is and bow down before bullies' clubs-all this to conceal the terrible fear deep inside them. We eat humiliation like food in this alley. (*Children* 111)

One of Qassem's men declares that, "Cowardice is the curse of our alley, that is why they're such hypocrites with the gangsters!" (*Children* 315). According to Barakat the Egyptian is portrayed in Mahfouz's works as "resorting to public compliance as a way out of his powerlessness. Those in power are deceived for they believe they are admired" (132). To cure this illness Qassem says, "Courage is the most important thing for the people of this alley, if they aren't going to be trampled down for the rest of their lives" (*Children* 316). It is this courage that people in the Middle East have shown in their revolutions against their regimes in the first part pf 2011.

What the people need to realize their potential power, in Mahfouz's view, is a true leader who with his intelligence and devotion can employ their power to establish a just order free of tyranny and exploitation. The three good leaders in the novel are presented as having democratic temperaments. They are not tyrants but companions to those who serve them and share in their enterprises. In this context Mahfouz's comment on his main intention in writing the novel sounds true. Mahfouz is quoted by El-Enany saying that *Children of the Alley*:

depicts the conflict between prophets and thugs. ... I wanted to ask the revolutionary leaders which path they wanted to choose: the prophets' or the thugs'. The stories of the prophets provided an artistic framework, but my intention was to criticize the revolution and the existing social system. At that time I had noticed a new class evolving and growing extraordinarily rich. The question which then agonized me was whether we were moving towards socialism or towards feudalism of a new kind. (100)

Mahfouz seems to have written his novel in a mode of gloom and disenchantment over the failure of the new leaders to fulfill the dreams of the people. But this gloomy vision was not unique in the writings at the time. It is to be found in the works of many leading writers in Egypt such as the plays of Yusuf Idris, the famous Egyptian writer of plays, short stories and novels, and the poetry of Salah Abd Al-Sabur the Egyptian free verse writer and a leading figure in modern Arabic poetry, to name but a few. What is remarkable about Mahfouz's novel is that it shows that modern society in general is in no way better than the ancient society, for in the past as well as in the present the plight of the inhabitants of the alley remains unchanged.

The novel presents a view of the human history as a long line of injustice and tyranny that is interrupted by short periods in which justice and equality are established. Jacquemond, (2003) who believes that the novel betrays Mahfouz's distrust of authority and his belief in the inevitability of its corruption, argues that Mahfouz does not offer any solution to the problem of the corruption of authority, other than the moral solution by establishing justice at the hands of a good man and its disappearance after his death (125). Somekh also sees that the work gives no definite answers to the questions it raises. "As the work ends," he tells us, "the struggle is still as fierce as ever, the questions as disturbing" (139). But one cannot but agree with El-Enany (1993) when he concludes that *Children of the Alley's* main message is:

Popular revolution, is the answer to oppression offered by Mahfouz. This is perfectly understandable, seen in the context of his apotheosis of Egypt's only popular revolution in its contemporary history (the 1919 revolution) and, conversely his bitter disillusionment with its later militarily-led ... revolution of 1952. (156)

Mahfouz again and again advocates popular revolution or the active involvement of the people in standing up to oppression. This is why Gabal, Rifaa, and Qassem, succeed in their revolts. Mahfouz has a firm belief in the people's capacity to mould or fashion their political and social system, this is exactly what is happening in the Arab World these days.

#### **About the Author:**

**Dr Abdulrahman Mokbel Mahyoub Hezam** is an Ex- chairman of Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Taiz university, Yemen. He is currently working as: Head, Department of

Languages and Translation, Faculty of Science and Arts, Taibah University- Al-Ola, Saudi Arabia.

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