

قراءة ما بعد كولونيالية لرواية نجيب محفوظ زقاق المدق

A Postcolonial Reading of Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*

Associate Prof. Dr. Hussein Noor Kadhim

Middle Eastern Studies Program, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, 03755 USA

أستاذ مشارك. د. حسين نوركاظم

برنامج دراسات الشرق الأوسط ، كلية دارتموث ، الولايات المتحدة

Email: hussein.kadhim@dartmouth.edu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2212-5906>

المستخلص :

يهدف البحث الحالي لتقديم قراءة ما بعد كولونيالية لرواية نجيب محفوظ زقاق المدق (1947) التي تصور الحياة في أحد أزقة القاهرة التقليدية إبان الحرب العالمية الثانية. إن تواريخ الحروب والاستعمار الغربية غالبا ما تتجاهل آثارها على المناطق الخاضعة لها والتي ظلت تتحول لساحات حرب لتلك القوى المتسلطة. تمثل الرواية محاولة لتصوير تلك الأحداث من منظور المستعمر وتنطوي على دينامية معارضة للهيمنة الاستعمارية وذلك عبر سرد التاريخ البغيض للاستعمار وحروبه من جهة وإبراز أصوات وتجارب وجغرافيات بديلة من الجهة الأخرى. إن فهما عميقا لهذه الدينامية من شأنه أن يتيح تقييما أفضل لرواية محفوظ وللتراث القصصي الذي تمثل جزءا مهما منه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نجيب محفوظ، زقاق المدق، القاهرة، الرواية العربية، الكولونيالية.

Abstract:

The present paper draws on theoretical insights from postcolonial criticism to propose a postcolonial reading of Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* (1947), a novel that depicts life in a traditional Cairo alley in the closing years of World War II. Western accounts have tended to ignore the effects of that war, and of colonialism, on colonial subjects whose regions became battlefields for rival Western powers. The novel explores these events from the colonized perspective. By weaving in the traumatic history of colonialism and of war on the one hand, and by foregrounding alternative voices, experiences, and geographies on the other, the novel sets up a counter-hegemonic dynamic that works to unsettle the grand narratives of colonial history and their underlying assumptions. A fuller understanding of this dynamic is essential for a broader appreciation of Mahfouz's work and of the narrative tradition of which this work is an important part.

Keywords: Naguib Mahfouz, *Midaq Alley*, Cairo, the Arabic novel, the postcolonial.

Introduction

It's been over three-quarters of a century since World War II came to an end. Metropolitan accounts, however, have tended to ignore the effects of that war and, of colonialism, on populations that were made to endure these horrors "for no other reason than their colonized status," explains a scholar of British imperial history, who goes on to add:

Terror, mass migration, shortages, inflation, blackouts, air raids, massacres, famine, forced labor, urbanization, environmental damage, occupation,

resistance, collaboration – all of these dramatic and often horrific phenomena shaped the war experience of Britain’s imperial subjects ([Jackson](#), 2015, pp. 559-60).

Over the past three-quarters of a century, various postcolonial writers have sought to portray these events and experiences from the perspective of the colonized. A notable example is the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006), whose works in this vein include *Khān al-Khalīlī* (1946; English translation: *Khan al-Khalili*, 2008), and *Zuqāq al-Midaqq* (1947; English translation: *Midaq Alley*, 1974). The present article deals with the latter, a novel in the social realist mode that portrays life in a traditional Cairo alley in the closing years of World War II. The article draws on theoretical insights from postcolonial criticism to propose a postcolonial reading of the novel. By weaving in the traumatic history of colonialism and of war on the one hand, and by foregrounding alternative voices, experiences, and geographies on the other, the novel sets up a counter-hegemonic dynamic that works to unsettle the grand narratives of colonial history and their epistemological underpinnings. A fuller understanding of this dynamic is essential for a broader appreciation of Mahfouz’s work and of the narrative tradition of which this work is an important part.

The Colonial Context

As [Harlow](#) (1987) notes, an important feature of postcolonial narratives relates to “their historical referencing and the burden of historical knowledge such referencing enjoins” (p. 80). Before proceeding to a discussion of the novel, then, a brief overview of some relevant historical and cultural contexts follows.

The British occupation of Egypt began in 1882 in the aftermath of a nationalist insurrection against the Ottoman viceroy in Egypt, the Khedive Tewfik Pasha ([Goldschmidt](#), 2004, p. 46; [Cole](#), 1993, pp. 234-72). The country would henceforth be ruled by a number of colonial administrators including the Earl of Cromer ([Reid](#), 2008, pp. 217-38; [Daly](#), 2008, pp. 239-51). A brutal despot, his rule (1883-1907) witnessed the Dinshaway incident of June 1906 ([Ibrāhīm](#), 2015, pp. 74-8, 94-99; [Kadhīm](#), 2004, pp. 19-34). Cromer's successors included Herbert Kitchener (1911-1914), an ardent imperialist who played a major role in extending British control in the Middle East ([Sayyid-Marsot](#), 1969, pp. 58, 82-3, 95).

World War I led to the consolidation of Britain's power in the Middle East. In response to the Ottoman Empire joining the Central Powers in 1914, Egypt was declared a British Protectorate, thereby severing its remaining ties to Constantinople. The Khedive Abbas II was deposed and replaced by his uncle Hussain Kamil, now called "Sultan." Power, however, remained in the hands of British officials ([al-Rāfi'ī](#), 1987, pp. 30-32). During the war, Egypt became a major base of Allied operations. The resulting price rises as well as shortages of basic commodities caused widespread hardships with the lower-income segments of the population bearing the brunt of these hardships ([al-Rāfi'ī](#), 1987, pp. 50-55).

Encouraged by Allied promises of self-determination to former Ottoman subjects, many Egyptians had hoped that the occupation of their country would come to an end after the war. In 1919, the nationalist leader Saad Zaghloul (1859-1927) tried to present the case for Egyptian independence to the Paris Peace Conference. He was, however, refused permission to leave the country and was subsequently exiled to Malta. This incident sparked the Revolution of 1919

during which widespread anti-British riots broke out in Cairo and across the country, claiming the lives of hundreds of Egyptian as well as scores of British and Indian soldiers ([al-Rāfi ʿī, 1987](#), pp. 189-238; [Gifford, 2020](#), pp. 31–70). The British authorities, facing widespread popular discontent, later agreed to release Zaghoul and allowed him to travel to Paris in what turned out to be a futile effort to persuade the Allies to recognize Egypt's independence. The then High Commissioner Reginald Wingate, moreover, was replaced by Edmund Allenby ([al-Rāfi ʿī, 1987](#), pp. 274-77, 304-06; [Long, 2005](#), pp. 31-102), an accomplished general who had *defeated* the Ottoman Turks during the Sinai and Palestine campaign of World War I and whose wartime exploits are featured in the blockbuster movie *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). Allenby, however, was willing to reach a compromise on demands for Egyptian independence ([James, 2020](#), pp. 292, 362). A treaty was, therefore, drawn up which, in exchange for granting Egypt nominal independence, gave Britain the right to base troops in the country and to appoint “advisors” to Egyptian ministers. Under the treaty, Britain retained control over the Suez Canal and over Egypt’s foreign relations and defense. Despite strong opposition from some Egyptian nationalist leaders, the treaty was adopted, and on February 28, 1922, the “independence” of Egypt was proclaimed ([Goldschmidt, 2004](#), pp. 71-72; [Ramadān, 1983](#), pp. 343-66). Anti-British sentiment continued to grow, however, and another treaty (the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936) likewise fell short of Egyptian demands for full independence ([Goldschmidt, 2004](#), pp. 77-8; [Ramadān, 1983](#), pp. 770-93).

Egypt once again became a major center for Allied operations during the Second World War. By 1945, there were over 200,000 Allied troops in the country ([Louis, 1984](#), p. 9). With this came price hikes, war profiteering,

rationing, and severe food shortages ([al-Dasūqī](#), 1976, p. 210). According to an eyewitness account:

Living conditions for most people worsened, especially with regard to the availability of bread, so that by the last week of January 1942, this staple food became scarce. . . some people in some quarters of Cairo began to loot bakeries and would snatch the loaf from its owner in the middle of streets and alleys ([al-Rāfi'ī](#), 1989a, p. 44, translation my own).

Economic woes, however, were not the only cause of discontent with the occupation; mistreatment of locals by troops stationed in Egypt was a common grievance. Such mistreatment included public humiliation, physical violence, threats of physical violence, robberies, sexual assault, and murders. In his *Memoirs* (1984), Muhammad [Naguib](#), one of the leaders of the 1952 Revolution and Egypt's first president, recalls how, as an army officer, he was assaulted in Cairo by Allied soldiers. Naguib goes on,

During the war, we suffered much ridicule from the English; their excuse for this was that we were 'animals.' They could not understand that our concerns were bound to be different from their concerns. They expected the Egyptians to treat them as their loyal allies even though they treated us as nobodies. Their soldiers used to sing in the streets vulgar songs that were disrespectful of King Farouk. . . . their conduct extended to violating the honors and treating the country as if it were a big cabaret ([p. 59](#), translation my own).

The violation of honors in the quote above is an indirect reference to sexual violence against women and girls; its negative sexual connotations are further

heightened by the subsequent reference to the cabaret which, in the Arab world, is generally associated with immoral conduct.

For Naguib, as for many other Egyptians, a particularly distressing incident involving British troops was the Abdeen Palace incident of February 4, 1942. The details of the incident are as follows: The British authorities had earlier demanded that King Farouk ask Muṣṭafā al-Naḥḥās, a prominent Egyptian politician, to form a cabinet in the belief that British interests would be better served if al-Naḥḥās formed it. To their dismay, however, Farouk refused. In the evening of that day, British troops and tanks surrounded Abdeen Palace, the king's official residence in Cairo. With guns drawn, British officials forced Farouk to give in to their demands ([Wichhart](#), 2022, pp. 76-90). Recalling this incident, Naguib, then an army major assigned to the Abdeen Palace royal guards unit, describes the anger and shame that he and many Egyptians felt at the humiliation of their country by an occupying power ([p. 61](#)).

British control over Egypt continued in one form or another until July 23, 1952 when the pro-Western monarchy was overthrown by a military coup that proclaimed Egypt a republic ([al-Rāfi'ī](#), 1989b, pp. 209-28; [Roussillon](#), 2008, pp. 334-93).

Midaq Alley: The Postcolonial Connection

References and allusions to the war and to British forces in Egypt abound in the novel. An early such reference comes in the form of a disembodied voice lamenting, “If we’ve been suffering terrors of blackouts and air raids for five years, it’s only due to our own wickedness” ([Mahfouz](#), 1992, T. Le Gassick, trans., [p. 2](#)). Unless otherwise noted, all further references are to this translation

and will be given parenthetically in the text). The polarized categories of the traditional and the modern implicit in this self-chastisement intersect with other related dichotomies to form the thematic thrust of the novel. The traditional is invoked, enacted, appealed to, embodied, or violated; in the quote above, a religiously-based outlook that views wars, plagues, and other calamities as signs of divine wrath is invoked. The war, which has raged on for so long and has created such harsh conditions, qualifies, therefore, as a divine punishment for misdeeds. It may seem surprising that the residents of the alley are blamed for their own plight—which clearly results from the continued occupation of their country by a colonial power. The reaction, however, implies a recognition of the validity and continued relevance of Islamic traditions. Viewing war as a celestial punishment for evildoers further clarifies the “tradition” pole of the opposition above, making the colonial intrusion all the more glaring. The counter-side of the binarism is the (technological) modernity, often associated with the West, which comes in the form of, *inter alia*, air raids, blackouts, and bomb shelters, with the accompanying terror that residents of the alley endure for five years. An age-old traditionalism is thus pitted against a mostly hegemonic and destructive modernity.

A major theme in twentieth-century Arabic fiction is change whose main catalyst is the often violent encounter with the West ([al-Musawi](#), 2003, p. 117). To highlight this theme, the novel begins by recalling the former glory of the alley, its café and the now crumbling arabesques of its walls. (1)

In contrast to this wistful portrait of the alley, change is depicted as a disruptive force thrust upon it from without. It is suggested, for example, by the installment of a radio-set in Kirsha’s café, the hub of the alley's social life. As a result, the elderly storyteller whose stories have long entertained the café’s

patrons is made redundant. The storyteller is so old that he can barely walk and is helped by a boy who leads him by the hand. (3) Technological change is, therefore, portrayed as victimizing the most vulnerable in society: the very young and the very old.

The impact on the storyteller's repertoire of narratives, moreover, is far-reaching. This repertoire is culled from traditional sources: anecdotes on poets and poetry, romances such as that of the eleventh-century hero of folk tales Abū Zayd al-Hilālī, accounts of heroism in the face of superior foes—all narrated to the tunes of a *rebab*, a traditional Middle Eastern string instrument. These stories will henceforth go untold; the radio-set with its "modern" programming is to supplant this daily and almost ritual act of recalling the past. A product of a colonially-mediated modernity, the radio, however, is spurned by the café's patrons as it "belched forth its clamor." (51)

Another character whose life is upended by modernization is Sheikh Darwish, a former English language teacher who is demoted as a result of a reorganization of the school system. His protests and pleas to his bosses go unheeded. He succumbs to despair, quits his job and turns into a recluse who finds solace in quasi-religious practices, such as praises of the Prophet Muhammad and members of his family. (13) Sheikh Darwish seldom speaks nowadays; but when he does, his speech is often peppered with snide remarks about other characters and situations. Darwish is one of the more colorful characters with language to match. In an apparent bid to endow his words with authority, he often provides their English language equivalents along with their spellings. As the language of the colonizing power and of empire, English possessed a certain cachet; its use was associated with status and authority. The world of the empire, [Fanon](#) (1963) points out, is "a hostile world, which spurns

the native, but at the same time it is a world of which he is envious” (p. 52). Darwish’s devotion to the family of the Prophet, however, does not stop him from holding on to some aspects of Western culture. His paradoxical ways extend to his wardrobe which includes some articles of Western dress. (3) Sheikh Darwish’s troubled state of mind seems to hint at the daunting challenge of reconciling tradition with Western modernity. On account of his turning into a “dervish”—already anticipated in his compound name—Sheikh Darwish is revered as a holy man whose blessing is sought by all in the alley. (15)

The moral toll of war and occupation is explored in an incident involving a character who is caught rubbing against a little girl at an air raid shelter. (16) That the incident occurs at an air raid shelter implies a certain connection between war and moral decay. The connection, moreover, is pursued through variants on the bomb shelter motif (depots, military bases, army camps, and so forth) all of which are directly linked to the colonial presence in the country.

The prospects for better opportunities outside the alley are eagerly embraced by some while reluctantly by others (Deeb, 1983, pp. 121-130). Hussain Kirsha, the café owner's son is young, energetic and impulsive. Dissatisfied with his lot in the alley, he decides to work at a British army base where he earns significantly more than he does in the alley. He squanders his earnings, however, on alcohol, hashish, prostitutes, and other follies. He is given to bragging about his British contacts at the base: “Corporal Julian,” he relates with an air of pride, “once told me that the only difference between me and the British is that of color.” (34) The pride he takes in his supposed resemblance to the British as well as his attempts to emulate them in his appearance and conduct reflect a willingness to embrace notions of Western cultural and racial superiority and a corresponding tendency to dismiss his own culture as inferior. This, in turn,

shows the extent to which racial oppression is internalized by the colonized subject, resulting in a host of negative experiences ([Fanon, 2008](#), pp. xiv-xv; 2-3).

The ambivalence that several characters feel about the army of occupation reflects the varied relationships with the colonizer that often characterize the colonial encounter ([Robinson, 1972](#), pp. 117–142). Such ambivalence is most clearly reflected in the exchanges between Hussain Kirsha and his Midaq friend Abbas the barber. The latter is content with his lot in the alley. (32) His feeling of content, however, is scorned by his friend as laziness, stupor, even death. Abbas replies that it is God who chooses for him where he is, doing what he does. (35) His friend, however, is undeterred: “Leave this filthy alley behind. Rest your eyes from looking at Uncle Kamil’s carcass. Work for the British Army.” (36) The bleak picture that Hussain Kirsha draws of the alley is in sharp contrast to that of the British army camp which he describes as “a gold mine.” (36) It is the allure of wealth, power, and culture of the colonial world that draws Hussain Kirsha to the British camps.

Abbas is in love with Hamida, Hussain Kirsha’s foster-sister, and dreams of marrying her. He is reminded by Hussain, however, that to win the affection of the young and attractive girl, he would have to have a sizable income which could be earned in a British base. Abbas is so smitten with Hamida that he begins to question his loyalty to the alley that “had barely kept him alive, while it rained wealth on Salim Alwan.” (38) Abbas’s feeling of bitterness at having been treated unfairly by the alley—which could stand for Egypt itself—finds expression in the melancholy tone that pervades the passage. Salim Alwan belongs to the once dominant Turco-Circassian class of landowners and merchants in Egypt. Social and political inequities, while predating the British presence in Egypt, became more acute during the colonial period, especially during the two world wars.

Hamida is at one with her foster-brother Hussain Kirsha in her disdain for Midaq which she calls “nothing alley.” (27) She dreams of marrying a wealthy man who will take her from the poverty-stricken alley to the more fashionable districts of Cairo. Unsurprisingly, she is not keen on Abbas whose hand “clutched at what was scarcely the price of bread.” (38) When he decides to work at a British army base, however, she accepts his marriage proposal and the two become engaged before he leaves for the base. For some, then, the colonial situation offered opportunities for success and prosperity that were otherwise unavailable to them.

As Abbas bids the alley a reluctant farewell, Sheikh Darwish quips: “You have now become a volunteer in the British army, and if you prove yourself a hero, then it’s not unlikely that the king of England will carve you out a little kingdom and appoint you ruler in his place.” (111) Sheikh Darwish’s parting comment is a wry allusion to the creation by colonial powers of so-called independent states on former Ottoman territory after the First World War. By far, the most damaging aspect of the colonial legacy has been the partitioning of the region (under the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916), and the creation of artificial borders that cut across ethnic, religious, and linguistic lines (Felton, 2008, pp. 13-16).

Salim Alwan is the well-to-do owner of an exports and imports agency; as noted above, he belongs to the Turco-Circassian merchant class whose origins date to the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517 and whose position was further consolidated with the rise to power of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769-1849). Members of this class were often viewed with suspicion because of their perceived lack of empathy for native Egyptians and because of alleged war profiteering and other questionable practices. Although Salim Alwan spends most

of his time in Midaq alley where his business is located, he nevertheless does not feel any sense of belonging to it: “He had never really belonged there. The truth was, he cared for none of them.” (68) Nor is he particularly averse to war; the two world wars proved highly lucrative for his business. (62-63)

Salim Alwan, however, is not content with the mere pursuit of wealth. Alwan, who has a wife and several grown children, takes a liking to Hamida and decides to marry her. The young girl accepts his marriage proposal, even though she is engaged to Abbas the barber. The old man’s dreams of matrimonial bliss, however, prove short-lived; he is taken ill shortly thereafter and is forced to abandon his marriage plans.

The theme of colonialism leading to moral decay is picked up again in chapter 19 in which Hamida runs into Faraj Ibrahim, a somewhat mysterious stranger who later turns out to be a procurer. In this episode, Mahfouz provides a satirical commentary on the political order in the country. Uncle Kamil, a pastry seller, sees a pavilion being set up for an election rally and at first mistakes it for a funeral. He also scolds a youth for trying to hang a campaign poster on the wall of his shop because he thinks it brings bad luck.

The candidate arrives in the alley with a cohort of supporters; he makes a stop at the café and offers Kirsha a bribe in exchange for his support. The latter, however, complains that he is offered a paltry sum compared to other café-owners—suggesting the prevalence of corruption in the political sphere. To underline the irony of the situation, moreover, the candidate assures the crowd that “the days of empty talk and bribery are over” and promises to end shortages of “clothing rations, sugar, kerosene, cooking oil, no more impure bread, and lower meat prices.” (153) These necessities will not be provided; what will be

provided, however, as incentives for residents to vote for the candidate, are some payoffs to be expended before votes are cast and after they have been tallied. The arrangement, quips Sheikh Darwish, resembles a bride dowry that is paid both before and after the marriage is consummated. (153) The allusion to a sexual act in the context of corrupt political power no doubt raises some troubling questions about the nature of power and of domination.

To underscore the connection between the British-installed regime (with its sham elections) and moral corruption, Hamida is accosted by Faraj Ibrahim at this very election rally. Faraj is seen orchestrating the chants in praise of the candidate; he is in the alley, however, to scout for young girls to turn to prostitutes for British and American troops. The two thematic strands of colonial domination and moral decay thus come together in the character of Faraj. More tellingly, perhaps, the language Faraj uses to persuade Hamida to run off with him bears some similarity to that used by Hussain Kirsha to persuade Abbas the barber to leave the alley and work at a British army base. In both cases, the alley is described through images that evoke death and decay. Faraj tells Hamida that it is “sinful for a lively, healthy, blooming body to live in a graveyard of decaying bones” (194-95) while Hussain Kirsha urges, “Rest your eyes from looking at Uncle Kamil’s carcass. Work for the British Army.” (36) A certain equivalence is, therefore, implied between working at a British army base and working as a prostitute for British and American troops.

A taxi ride with Ibrahim Faraj takes Hamida to the more fashionable districts of Cairo. The poor orphan girl from Midaq alley, who has never been in a car before, is, unsurprisingly, blown away by the sights and sounds of this new world. (189) Soon thereafter, she runs off with him.

It is now widely accepted that the colonial project was closely bound up with Western cultural norms and assumptions. Like many colonized subjects, Ibrahim Faraj comes to embrace many of these norms and assumptions, including notions of beauty and the body—as opposed to the generally “inferior” non-Western conceptions. Hamida is made to *embody* such notions through a process of “taming” ([Mahfouz](#), 2014, p. 204). She is given a new name -Titi- which, explains Faraj, “will amuse Englishmen and Americans and one which their twisted tongues can easily pronounce.” (217)

In this section, the theme of colonialism and moral decay is pursued further: Hamida enrolls in a “school” that teaches the art of dance as well as the fundamentals of the English language, especially words that denote body parts. The school curriculum, moreover, is designed to prepare students for careers in taverns and hotels where “American officers will gladly pay fifty pounds for virgins.” (223) The references here (and on page 217) are among the earliest such references to Americans in an Arabic novel. They suggest that the United States was already perceived as part of the colonial sphere.

Hamida soon becomes popular with Allied troops. (255) Success, however, does not bring her happiness; when she asks Faraj to marry her, he stubbornly refuses. Faraj has now “dropped his role of lover for that of the flesh merchant.” (256) It is ironic that Faraj, whose name literally means “relief from hardship,” turns out to be no relief. To keep his hold on Hamida, moreover, he tries to make her dependent on him financially and emotionally and even threatens to expose her before the police.

Despondent, Hamida leaves Faraj’s apartment, vowing to take revenge on him. Her fiancé, who is back in the alley on leave, decides to find Faraj and beat

him up. He asks his old friend Hussain Kirsha to accompany him. Having been laid off as the war drew to a close and having squandered his wages, Hussain Kirsha is back in the alley with a pregnant wife, her unemployed brother, and a few English words he learnt from his former employers. The two young men head to a tavern where they think they will find their foe; instead, they find Hamida being fondled by a group of British soldiers. Outraged, Abbas hurls an empty bottle at her, injuring her in the face. A brawl ensues and Abbas is beaten to death by a mob of soldiers:

Abbas is surrounded by drunken soldiers who fell on him from all sides like wild animals. Blows, kicks, and glasses flew in all directions. Hussain Kirsha . . . stood there impotently with the passersby now gathered at the door staring at the battle taking place, their hands tied, and their eyes filled with horror. (281)

The brutal manner in which Abbas is killed no doubt recalls the brutality of the Denshawai incident of 1906 and indeed the brutality with which anti-colonial rebellions were regularly put down ([Kadhim](#), 2004, pp. 19-34). Not unlike the passersby in this episode, Egyptians watched with horror as many of their countrymen were cut down by British troops in Cairo, Alexandria, and elsewhere in the country. Their frustration that the perpetrators could not be held accountable is revealed in Hussain Kirsha's reply, when asked about the fate of the British soldiers: "Who can get any justice from them?" ([Mahfouz](#), 2014, p. 310).

Conclusion

In the foregoing, a postcolonial reading of Mahfouz's novel *Midaq Alley* has been undertaken. Several "characteristically post-colonial" features ([Griffiths](#), 1989, p. 134), including a thematic focus on the postcolonial experience and a subtle exploration of questions of identity, power and oppression, among others, have been examined. As noted above, colonial subjects whose "benighted" regions became battlefields for rival Western powers, were largely left out of the meta-narrative of a dominant West ([Brantlinger](#), 1988, p. 11). The novel seeks to reframe that narrative through "localized" retellings of colonial history on the one hand, and on the other through creating spaces for indigenous voices, experiences, and geographies and in doing so sets up a "dynamic of opposition" to colonial structures of domination ([Ashcroft](#), 1994, p. 162). As such, it partakes in what [Said](#) (1994) calls "the cultural effort to decolonize" that continues "long after the political establishment of independent nation-states" (p. 213).

Discussing the importance of nationalist historical fictions, [Boehmer](#) (2005) writes that "for the colonized to tell a history meant *assuming control*—taking charge of the past, of self-definition, or of political destiny" (p. 187). As a chronicle of life in a city under military occupation and going through social and political change, the novel contributes in some measure to the discourse of national self-definition and to the shaping of that country's political destiny.

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