

# **Midaq Alley Study Guide**

## **Midaq Alley by Naguib Mahfouz**

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# Plot Summary

Midaq Alley is a novel about a street full of colorful Egyptians coping with life towards the end of World War II. They include a dissolute café owner, his fiery wife, and their materialistic prodigal son; a young man who, for the love of a beautiful girl, goes off to make his fortune while she falls first for a rich, elderly sexaholic and later for a pimp who turns her into a prostitute; a kindhearted mystic; two ghouls; and assorted lesser characters. Gossip keeps Midaq Alley alive.

Midaq Alley is an isolated, dead end street in Cairo, Egypt. Uncle Kamil usually naps outside his confectionary, next door to his best friend Abbas's barbershop. A bakery, Salim Alwan's warehouse, and Kirsha's Café complete the alley's businesses. The café is where self-trained Dr. Booshy, kindly mystic Radwan Hussainy, and a somnambulant philosopher, Sheikh Darwish, gather nightly to smoke, drink tea, and talk. Two three-story residences close off the alley. Widowed Saniya Afify owns one, occupying the top floor and renting the others to matchmaker Umm Hamida and her beautiful foster daughter and to Booshy. Hussainy lives next door with his wife and rents one flat to Kamil and Abbas and another to the Kirshas.

Kirsha is addicted to hashish and occasionally obsessed by homosexuality. His spoiled son Hussain cares only about dodging gossip and escaping, while fiery Mrs. Kirsha (Umm Hussain) declares his actions sinful and seeks to reform him. The bakers rent a back room to filthy, sadistic Zaita, who cripples people so they will be more sympathetic as street beggars. Booshy solicits business. Rich, middle-aged Alwan is a workaholic and sexaholic, considering polygamy, while his children want him to retire and take care of himself.

Abbas loves Hamida but must go to Tell el-Kebir to earn his fortune with the British Army before the fiery tempered, materialistic girl overcomes a lack of affection and agrees to marry. Abbas leaves, believing the betrothal is binding. In his wake, Hussain Kirsha also departs, after causing a fight between his parents. Abbas is heartbroken to leave Midaq Alley but determined to do his best for Hamida, while Hussain is the angry prodigal son.

Umm Hamida concludes a marriage agreement between Afify and a younger civil servant and is then astonished to hear Alwan wants to marry her foster daughter. Hamida forgets her fiancé instantly as she pictures getting everything she wants in life. Fate steps in, however, as Alwan barely survives a heart attack and changes mentally. Cut loose from an anticipated life with Abbas, Hamida cares as little about Hussainy's advice as does lecherous Kirsha, whose wife drags the holy man into their squabble. Hussainy leaves on Hajj. Booshy and Zaita are arrested for desecrating tombs by stealing gold teeth, which Booshy sells cheaply to patients like Afify.

A political campaign comes to the district and Kirsha offers his vote to the highest bidder. A mystery man at the rally shows interest in Hamida, and during one of her daily walks, they talk and she accepts that she is on this earth to be taken—by Ibrahim Faraj. She leaves Midaq Alley without compunction, just as Hussain Kirsha limps back bitterly,



laid-off, and married. Faraj turns Hamida into a profitable prostitute, renamed Titi. When he returns on holiday, intending to marry, Abbas learns his fiancée has vanished. Seeing Titi riding in a carriage, he chases her down, cannot believe what has happened to his Hamida, and vows to kill her pimp. Later, while walking with big-talking Hussain, Abbas sees Titi entertaining British troops; he snaps, attacks, and is pummeled to death. Hussain brings the sorrowful news to Midaq Alley, which talks about it for a while, and then returns to its everyday routine.



# Chapters 1-5

## Chapters 1-5 Summary

Midaq Alley is a bygone gem, an isolated, dead-end off Sanadiqiya Street in Cairo. Enormous, balding Uncle Kamil is usually found napping outside his confectionary. His neighbor and best friend is the barber Abbas. The owner of an office, Salim Alwan, lives outside the quarter. The three-story residences at the end of the alley are shuttered against the cold. Kirsha's Café fills with patrons after work. It is dilapidated, with walls covered with arabesques, and a floor scattered with couches where patrons smoke, drink tea, and talk.

Patrons include Sheikh Darwish, a man in his fifties whose dress is a mix of native and western, who is lost in a world of his own. A senile poet, who for twenty years has performed in the café, defies Kirsha by coming to recite and is ordered out. A self-trained dentist, Booshy, and a serene philanthropist, Radwan Hussainy, intercede to no avail. Hussainy, who earlier in life is crushed by disappointments, now sees sorrow as blasphemous. He rents flats to Kirsha, Kamil, and Abbas. The latter two arrive after work. Patrons play along with Abbas's claim to have bought for poor, gullible Kamil a fine burial shroud. Kirsha's prosperous son, Hussain, drops in to be admired and envied. As the patrons trickle home, Kirsha goes to a rooftop party at Hussainy's that lasts until dawn. Darwish departs to the "world of God", the dark streets, where he lives homeless. A former English teacher, he rebels after being demoted, is fired, abandons friends and relations, and makes do, learning peace and contentment, and is honored everywhere he goes.

Saniya Afify finds her fifty-year old reflection in a mirror "not bad", as she prepares to visit Umm Hamida on the middle floor of her house, which neighbors Hussainy's. Booshy occupies the first floor. Umm Hamida is fit woman in her mid-sixties with a rough, resonant voice, which she uses to effect in frequent quarrels with neighbors. She works as a bath attendant and a marriage broker, and knows and tells everything that happens in the alley. Afify needs matrimonial help. Content to be widowed ten years after a bitter marriage, Afify has recouped her fortunes and wants to try again. Umm Hamida finds this sensible and pious, and can find 1,001 men, if Afify puts her hope in God—and her. Umm Hamida first proposes a man "well advanced in years" as best, but adjusts to one in his thirties. Afify's wealth assures success. She accepts Umm Hamida's fee, free rent for life, and leaves hopeful she is "as good as married", but financially cheated.

Slim, beautiful Hamida, a girl in her twenties, comes in combing her long black hair, and asks about the visitor. Fiery-tempered Hamida is adopted as an orphaned infant and suckles along with the baby Hussain Kirsha, thus becoming somehow related. Hamida's temper flairs easily and she and her adoptive mother often tangle. Umm Hamida's helping Afify renews their standard argument about Hamida marrying. The girl is in no hurry and is picky. Only Hussain is worth anything and could be hers if they each always



sucked a separate breast. Umm Hamida punches her for such blasphemy and declares her ungrateful. Hamida says without nice clothes life is meaningless; she envies the factory girls and Jewish women. Having plaited her hair, looked at herself in a mirror, and lamented her fate, Hamida studies the street from a shuttered window.

In the morning, cold, dreary Midaq Alley stirs early. Kamil and Abbas breakfast together, Abbas devouring his and Kamil savoring every bite. Kamil is portly but no glutton. He is fond of sweets and has a wide reputation for his artistry in creating them. His means are modest and he might, indeed, not have the funds for a proper burial. He resumes asking for the shroud, to sell it and use the money. As Husniya the baker beats her husband in the street, Hussain Kirsha approaches, showing off his clothes and watch.

Hussain Kirsha sits in Abbas's chair for a trim. They grew up together in Midaq Alley and remain close until work separates them. Abbas is three years older. Their characters are dissimilar: Abbas is gentle, good-natured, tolerant, laid back, conscientiously pious when not lazy, and satisfied with his life. Kirsha is clever, energetic, intelligent, brave, and aggressive. He works in his father's café until they quarrel, then works in a bicycle shop, and becomes a day laborer for the British Army when the war breaks out. His earnings allow him to live life "large". Kirsha prattles about how the British admire him and are letting him earn extra from the black market. The profitable war will last another twenty years. Kirsha is en route to the zoo to let his girlfriend get ideas from watching monkeys make love in public.

When Kirsha asks about Hamida, Abbas's heart jumps but he says nothing. Kirsha tires of his bashful, boring friend and repeats his usual advice: shake off his shop, the filthy alley, and Kamil, and work for the British Army at Tell el-Kebir. The war is a blessing from God, rescuing Egypt from poverty and misery. As Kirsha continues berating his life, Abbas, who dislikes change and travel, thinks about Hamida. Kirsha reveals that Hamida promenades every day on Moursky Street. Abbas finishes the haircut, outraged to hear Kirsha talk about Hamida as "ambitious". Still, Abbas realizes his life is drudgery and unprofitable and wonders why he should not pursue an ambitious girl—and acquire ambitions of his own. Her love alone could stir him to life and he praises God for entrusting the world's development to the "fertility of love". The alley is unfair. He tells Kirsha he must talk with him about something important.

That afternoon, Hamida sets out on her walk, aware that Alwan and Abbas are watching her. Her cloak is arranged to show off her hips, breasts, and ankles. When she reaches Mousky Street, she smiles and surveys the activity on the busy street. Hamida is self-assured and naturally strong, with a desire to fight and conquer. She easily attracts men and dominates her mother. The women of the alley hate and criticize her. She peers into shop windows at expensive clothing she is determined one day to own. Girls poorer than she have married well. Factory girls approach and she joins in their chatter while studying them. Wartime work has improved their health and liberated their minds. Hamida is pleased that she catches the eyes of passersby more than the rest.

Hamida sees Abbas tailing them. He is poor but presentable-looking and would be acceptable as a husband if she were not determined to marry a rich contractor. She



does not love or want Abbas but cannot dismiss him and his passion somehow pleases her. When she parts from the other girls to return home, Abbas quickly catches up with her. She scowls, ignores his greeting, and walks faster. He struggles to catch up and tries again to talk with her. Hamida halts and accuses Abbas of being fresh, insulting her, and exposing her to scandal. He is horrified and stunned, but grows braver as she continues arguing. Saying his intentions are pure, he asks her to turn off into Azhar Street to talk. He has something important to say. Reaching Hussain Square, Hamida knows what he wants and hurries across to Ghouriya. Now that he is submissive, she needs not dominate and loses interest. This confuses and distresses her. Abbas does not follow, but heads home filled with disappointment—but not despair. At least she has spoken to him. Feeling love for Hamida, he is certain it will last, despite today's failure. Abbas runs into Darwish at the mosque, hears he must always wear a hat, lest he meet alma'sah: t-r-a-g-e-d-y.

## Chapters 1-5 Analysis

Chapters 1-5 introduce the major characters, sketch their essential traits, and establish that Abbas feels compelled leave the beloved nest to earn his fortune. Western readers may find it odd that God is present in virtually every line of dialog spoken by every character, from the most pious to the most debauched. This is typical of Arabic, often as much a reflex as saying "Bless you" when someone sneezes. The blend of East and West in Egypt is symbolized by clothing, the most striking being Darwish's golden spectacles and young Kirsha's stylish wardrobe, showing a lifestyle to which he tries to lure lifelong friend Abbas.

In Chapter 1, which sketches the café, center of Midaq Alley's social life, the theme is that times change, symbolized by a secondhand radio that replaces old-fashioned recitations. Chapter 2 examines Muslim views on marriage. Note that "Umm Hamida" is an example of kunya, the practice whereby an Arab man or woman gives up his or her birth name to become the father (abu) or mother (umm) of his or her firstborn; Umm Hussain is Mrs. Kirsha. That restless, self-assured, and dominating Hamida may not mesh with Abbas is strongly hinted. Note the female liberation brought on by World War II and how Jews live peaceably with Shiite Muslims.



# Chapters 6-9

## Chapters 6-9 Summary

As happens regularly, Kirsha prepares to go out and indulge his passions. Dressed in black and leaning on a stick, he moves slowly and heavily. He normally does his narcotics peddling after dark. The government allows wine, which God forbids, but suppresses hashish, which God allows. Kirsha's heart beats fast as he considers new erotic adventures. As he walks along the streets, mistrusting the greetings he receives, he is hopeful. He stops at a shop near al-Azhar and approaches a handsome young salesman, who realizes this is Kirsha's third recent visit. He wraps a dozen pair.

Kirsha lurks in shadows on the other side of the street, burning with excitement and apprehension as he watches the windows. When the shop closes, Kirsha follows the youth, catches him, and makes small talk. Life is a trial with few rewards, Kirsha says; patience is the key to joy and God provides merciful people. Kirsha refrains from claiming he is one. The youth is hurrying to change clothes and go to Ramadan Café, but Kirsha insists he visit his café. He hesitates but then promises. They shake hands and part.

The only light in Midaq Alley comes from Kirsha's Café. Inside it is warm, the radio is ignored, and Sanker is busy. Kirsha assumes his position at the till, avoiding people's looks. Kamil's shroud is the topic of the evening, and Abbas's plans to work for the British Army. Hussainy talks long-winded about boredom being disbelief in God's gift of life, evil souls polluting the beauty of life, pain bringing joy, despair holding pleasure, and death teaching a lesson. God is a refuge from the devil. Love defeats tragedy and happiness instills the wisdom of love. People are always amazed that this paragon of gentleness is a tyrant with his wife. This is typical of his class and era and she is proud of him and content with her life. Kirsha, whose perversion is so well known he no longer hides it, watches impatiently for his new friend. He enjoys creating scandal after scandal. Booshy sees the signs. Darwish recites two lines of ancient poetry about a woman's invaluable love. Kirsha smiles as the innocent-eyed lad appears.

Jaada and Husniya's bakery is next door to Kirsha's Café. Attached behind it is a grimy, stinking outbuilding. Its floor is strewn with garbage and a long shelf holds filthy bottles, instruments, and bandages. The tenant is as filthy as the room. Zaita is unforgettably thin and uniformly black, except for the terrifying white of his eyes. Zaita has nothing to do with the alley, but his trade is known: he cripples people who wish to optimize their success as street beggars. Born in a family of beggars, he learns "makeup" in a traveling circus.

Daytimes Zaita eavesdrops on the bakers, enjoys watching "full-bodied" Husniya beat Jaada, and later coyly seduce him. Zaita detests and envies Jaada, and imagines throwing hatchets at him. Scorned for his filthiness and stench, Zaita imagines torturing all his neighbors: running Alwan over with a steamroller, burning Hussainy in an oven,





and crushing Kirsha beneath a train and feeding him to dogs. When he cripples a customer, Zaita is cunning and vicious. His eyes light up at their screams of pain. Still, he considers beggars the best of people and wishes they would form the majority of humankind. He begins work at midnight, leaving quietly and making his rounds about the Mosque of Hussain, where beggars pay their daily due.

Zaita buys provisions and returns to his room, where the extinguished light has been relit and Booshy sits with two prospective clients. One is a giant, down on his luck, unable to understand or remember anything, and too kind to be a highwayman. He weeps when Zaita says he cannot twist or break his limbs, and even if he could, it would elicit no sympathy. Instead, Zaita will teach him ballads in praise of the Prophet. The second man is "good material": short and frail. Zaita suggests making him appear blind and warns him of the risk of accident. The man calls this a blessing from God. Zaita explains his standard rate plus surgical fee, and smiles, imagining the pain he will inflict.

Alwan's company keeps Midaq Alley bustling all day with customers, tradesmen, employees, and trucks. It deals in perfumes, wholesale and retail, and wartime has made black market commodities trading profitable. Alwan sits behind a big desk positioned where he can observe everything. He is an expert in his trade, grown prosperous thanks to this second world war. He is healthy, but his vitality is compromised by worries about the future. His three sons scorn the business in favor of the law and medical professions. His four daughters are happily married. Overall, Alwan is inwardly content.

The loving sons fear inheriting the business and urge him to sell and enjoy life, but Alwan resents this. They suggest real estate investment, which Alwan sees as wise. He has heard of rich merchants dying penniless. Wartime conditions, however, demand he wait. His judge son, Muhammad, suggests he try to gain the title of "Bey". Unlike most merchants, Alwan is impressed by social status. Some family members suggest he enter politics, of which he is entirely ignorant, but his attorney son, Arif, warns that campaigning is costly and a risk to his business reputation if his party loses. Alwan puts politics aside and also rejects suggestions he contribute money to charitable organizations as a way of getting his title; spending £5,000 on a title goes against his instincts. He is content to let the future bring whatever it will.

None of this upsets a life that revolves around work all day and sex all night. Engrossed at work, Alwan is a "crouching tiger", mastering every adversary, whom he views as "useful devils". He distracts them during negotiations and leaves them happy with whatever they can get. Every midday, Alwan has the same lunch and then takes a siesta. He eats vegetables, potatoes, and a bowl of husked green wheat mixed with pigeon meat and nutmeg. Every two hours after lunch, Alwan drinks tea, and at night is able to enjoy two hours of sexual pleasure. For a long time, only Alwan, the employee who prepares it, and Husniya, who bakes, it know the recipe. One day, Husniya tries it out on husband Jaada, substituting plain green wheat for the bit she removes from Alwan's bowl. Alwan notices a drop in his nightly performance and ferrets out the reason. Once Umm Hamida hears the secret, it spreads everywhere and the whole



alley experiments. It would have become the staple diet were it not so expensive to prepare.

Alwan cares nothing about the denizens of the alley except Hamida, whom he works into his schedule every afternoon following ritual washing and prayers. He sits facing the road, filled with pleasure to watch her walk by. Occasionally he walks outside to glance surreptitiously at her window, but has a reputation to maintain. Still, Alwan's desire for this poor but shapely girl is overwhelming—greater than all the merchandise in India. He has known her since her childhood, when she buys items her mother needs. He has watched her breasts and bottom ripen and admits to himself he wants her. The only problem is that she is a virgin.

Alwan's highborn wife, née Alifat, cannot be criticized in any way, but she is past her prime. He is fond of her, but she cannot keep up with him or bear his attentions. He wants "new blood" and cannot see why he should deprive himself of something God makes lawful. He is horrified by the gossip that would come from marrying Hamida, worries how she and her mother would integrate into the family, and calculates new expenses. This passion enters the bewildering whirl of worries Alwan bears and is the most compelling and inspiring one. He watches Hamida daily.

Mrs. Kirsha—Umm Hussain—is worried that her husband has changed where he enjoys his nightly pleasures, reasoning this means the return of the same "filthy disease". She knows his lies and will not be mollified. Everyone knows what he is doing. She resolves to take decisive action and accept the consequences. Approaching fifty, Umm Hussain is strong, courageous, and sharp tempered. She has born six daughters and one son. The girls are unhappily married but resist divorce. The youngest has disgraced the family by disappearing with a man from Boulaq and going to prison with him. Umm Hussain learns that her husband is serving this new boy personally and observes it.

Furious, she confronts son Hussain in the morning and tells him his father is preparing a new scandal. Hussain fills with anger and scorn. This is one of the reasons for him serving the British Army. He dislikes his family, house, and the alley. Earlier attempts to reform his father have nearly resulted in violence. Hussain does not care about the "sin", just the scandal, gossip, and jokes—and the fiery scenes at home. Hussain and his father are similarly ill natured and bad-tempered, so fighting is inevitable. Currently they are enjoying a truce. Umm Hussain does not want to stir up new enmity, but is determined to reform her husband.

When the café closes at midnight, she asks Kirsha to come up for a discussion. He comes only as close as the threshold. She tries to stifle her anger. She realizes that God has made him her "husband and master", and does not hate him for all his mistreatments. In fact, she is proud of his masculinity and position in the community. She would have no complaints, if he lost this one "sin". Impatient and annoyed, Kirsha holds his position at the threshold and demands what she wants. He is suspicious and demands she stop wasting his time. Dislike for this sarcastic woman always emerges when the "sin" overtakes Kirsha; he wishes she would leave him alone. She has no right



to stand in his way and must obey him, so long as she is adequately provided for. He could get rid of her, but she looks after him and he wants her as his wife.

Both fly into rages about how "sensible" people behave. She demands he repent before God before it is too late. Kirsha pretends not to understand, which infuriates his wife all the more. He claims hashish is his life and only passion, and he smokes it wherever he wishes. He refuses to be put on trial in his own home. Umm Hussain demands to know who the "shameless youth" is who is causing him to leave his home. Again, Kirsha plays dumb. She specifies "the immoral one", the only customer he serves personally. Invoking the Prophet's grandson Hussain, Kirsha calls his wife stupid and raving. She threatens to go public with the scandal tomorrow. He declares he will smash her silly head in, but she says scornfully that hashish has robbed him of the ability. As he slams his way out of the flat, Umm Hussain warns he will see the results of his filthy behavior and calls him a pig. Her heart is overflowing with desire for revenge.

## Chapters 6-9 Analysis

A major conflict is introduced and Kirsha's two obsessions begin to illustrate how hashish and homosexuality are viewed in mid-20th-century Egypt. Much more will be said from several angles. At this point, his spoiled, westernized son says simply that men will be men. Umm Hussain declares it sinful and wants revenge. How Muslims view women is characterized and the possibility of divorce initiated by either party is shown. A strange new character is introduced: filthy, sadistic Zaita, who appears to be in league with Booshy. Their connection proves critical later in the story. Rich, middle-aged Alwan is fleshed out: he is a workaholic and sexaholic. Through Alwan, the legality and practicality of polygamy is considered, as is his desire to be called "Bey". Bey is an Ottoman Turkish title that survives in Egypt as an honorific, a step down from "pasha".



# Chapters 10-14

## Chapters 10-14 Summary

In a suit and with his hair neatly curled, Abbas admires himself in a mirror, and then emerges from his shop at his favorite time of day, early evening, to stroll the rain-washed alley. Next door, Kamil dozes, and Abbas sings to himself about happiness being the key to happiness. Kamil awakens, congratulates his friend on being in love, and warns Abbas not to sell his shroud to pay for a dowry. For four days, Abbas feels self-confident about Hamida, certain that her resistance is but the natural behavior of desirous women, but then he begins to consider she might truly be resistant, cruel, or rude. Morning and afternoon he looks at her window, hoping to see her moving behind the shutters. When he cannot stand this lonely vigil, he approaches her again in Darasa, only to be snubbed. Today, he sets out again with hope and confidence.

When Hamida and her girlfriends pass, Abbas falls in behind them, and when the last departs, he approaches Hamida and tries to speak. Hamida neither likes nor dislikes Abbas. Despite her greedy ambitions, she realizes he is the only suitable young man in the alley. She decides to find out what he is like and what he wants. Feigning annoyance, she bluntly asks and he, seeing a faint smile, suggests they turn off onto the quieter Azhar Street. He is giddy when, without a word, she does so. Rebellious Hamida has no moral qualms, but naturally needs to quarrel and fight. She flares at his suggestions that she be patient and kind and says she must get home if all he can say is he wants "everything that is good".

Abbas replies he wants to plan a life together. Hamida likes his simple, sincere manner, but her frigid heart does not warm, and she does not respond. Abbas asks if she can see sincerity in his eyes, for everyone in Midaq Alley knows his intentions. Hamida frowns and says, "You have disgraced me". Abbas is horrified and declares by Hussain that he truly loves her, even more than her mother does. Pride and vanity diminish Hamida's inclination to violence, experiencing how words of love please the ears, even when they do not appeal to the heart. Immediately, however, she considers the future under the protection of a poor man. She will gain few material benefits while reaping much housework and childcare. She shudders and wishes she had not consented to walk with him. Filled with hope, Abbas begs Hamida to break her silence. Her love has made him into a new man, determined to work for the British and succeed like her "brother" Hussain. He wishes Hamida's reactions were romantic rather than financial, but takes what he can get. He is leaving for Tell el-Kabir for the duration of the war, and then will return to open a new barbershop in a better location and build them a luxurious home. He asks for Hamida's prayers. She sees for the first time that Abbas might provide some of the things she craves, and piously asks God to grant him success. Abbas says, "Amen".

Hamida's indecision diminishes, but a delighted Abbas misspeaks, saying they will be the happiest couple in Midaq Alley. Hamida scowls, realizing how much Abbas loves this



hateful place. He presses on: she may choose the house she likes while he is earning the money to pay for it. Hamida accepts that they have agreed, sees no harm in this for her, and wonders if she too has been made new and lost power over herself. Feeling Abbas's hand grip hers, she does not react. As they walk on, hand in hand, Abbas announces he must reach agreement with Umm Hamida before he leaves. Hamida withdraws her hand, announcing she must go home. Happiness ebbs from Abbas heart. They part at Ghouriya Street.

Umm Hussain asks God's forgiveness and mercy before entering Hussainy's building, determined to enlist the righteous, venerable old man's help in reforming her husband. She has never consulted him before. Hussainy's thin, worn wife admits her to the melancholy flat. Her faith is firmly rooted but she is growing steadily weaker, even though she is only in her mid-forties. Umm Hamida is ushered into Hussainy's private room, where normally he discusses religion with learned male friends.

Hussainy sits on a rug saying his beads. He is not a scholar and knows his limitations, but is pious and God-fearing, and his compassionate heart captivates everyone. All agree he truly is a saint. They greet one another with proper modesty and sit facing one another. As they chitchat politely, Hussainy refrains from mentioning her husband. He knows why she has come, rues being involved in this recurring domestic dispute, but graciously encourages Umm Hussain to speak. Fearlessly and shamelessly, she asks his help with her "lecherous" husband, who has no modesty and will not reform. A brazen boy is coming to the café nightly, bringing new disgrace.

Hussainy prays inwardly that his own soul will stay free of the devil. Umm Hussain would leave the house if it were not for her age and the children. She believes that Hussainy's reputation may influence Kirsha; otherwise, she will loose her anger and send "fire raging through the whole alley." Hussainy urges her to cheer up, control herself, and not feed gossip. He will intervene with the help of God. Umm Hussain agrees, but every time he tries to comfort her, she explodes with curses against Kirsha's conduct. His patience spent, Hussainy signals the meeting has ended.

Hussainy wishes he could avoid involvement, but cannot break his promise. He sends a servant to fetch Kirsha. This is the first time a "known profligate" will enter his home. He reminds himself of the teaching that one who reforms a profligate does better than one who sits with a believer and that God—not men—leads people where he wishes. Hussainy is contemplating the devil's power over mankind when Kirsha arrives, bows, and takes a seat. With the ignorance of the promiscuous, Kirsha has no idea why he is here. Hussainy apologizes for taking Kirsha away from his work, but has an important matter they must discuss brother to brother.

As Hussainy begins talking in a regretful tone about the duty of brothers to catch, help, and advise those who fall, Kirsha sees he has fallen into a trap. Panic, confusion, and embarrassment come over him, but Hussainy continues sternly and candidly: Kirsha's unworthy habits distress him. Kirsha frowns indignantly but feigns astonishment. Hussainy continues: Satan uses youth to spread havoc, but the doors can be closed against him; Kirsha, however, an older, respectable man, is opening the door and



inviting the devil in. Kirsha curses this man's not minding his own business and talking in riddles, but pretends still not to understand.

When Hussainy refers explicitly to "that dissolute youth", Kirsha grows angry and defensive. Hussainy assures him he does not wish to offend or shame him, but everyone is talking about this. Truly angry, Kirsha lets fly his resentment about people who cannot mind their own business. People have gossiped since the creation, not because they disapprove but because they like to belittle others. In the lack of substance, they invent things. People are envious. Hussainy is horrified and amazed at this "dreadful opinion".

Kirsha laughs spitefully, but realizes he has admitted the accusation, so he claims to be alleviating a poor boy's poverty. Hussainy demands Kirsha come clean; all are sinners in need of God's care. Kirsha maintains his innocence. Hussainy declares the boy is immoral and has a bad reputation; it is a bad idea to deceive him rather than take his advice. Kirsha grows silent, bottling up his anger, and looking for an opportunity to leave. Hussainy continues: he does not despair of reforming Kirsha, but he must repent and abandon this "filth created by Satan". Kirsha is now a sinner and risks losing every penny if he persists.

Kirsha knows better than to challenge Hussainy further and declares piously, "It is God's will". Hussainy knows Kirsha is obedient to Satan's will and begs him to leave the boy or let him handle him peacefully. Kirsha angrily refuses. Hussainy gives Kirsha one last chance to repent, but Kirsha maintains all men do dirty things and this is his. He will find his own path. Hussainy declares, "A man can do anything if he wants to" and says goodbye. Kirsha leaves, cursing humanity, Midaq Alley, and Hussainy.

Umm Hussain waits patiently for two days, watching for the boy's arrival to take Kirsha away toward Ghouriya. She visits Hussainy again, but he advises her to leave Kirsha as he is until God acts. Umm Hussain plots revenge. When the boy arrives that night, she descends on him like a madwoman, bypasses her husband at the till, slaps the teacup from the boy's hand, and calls him a "son of a whore". As people stare, she pushes Kirsha back into his chair and dares him to move. She demands why this "woman in the clothes of a man" is coming here, and warns Kirsha not to defend him—or she will smash his bones. Kirsha is too angry to speak. His wife pursues the boy, who hides behind Darwish, demanding why he would ruin her home. When he dares call Umm Hussain a "fellow wife", she punches and slaps the boy, drawing blood and nearly strangling him with his necktie.

Patrons thoroughly enjoy the spectacle. Husniya, Jaada, and Zaita come in and windows are thrown open to hear. The boy struggles, but Umm Hussain is too strong. Kirsha grabs her, demanding she let loose, charging she has caused scandal enough. She releases the boy but grabs her husband's collar, shrilly calling all to witness his lecherous behavior. The boy flees as the spouses struggle. Hussainy steps between them. They exchange insults and Umm Hussain declares she will never return to that filthy man's house again. Hussainy and Kamil prevent her from leaving the alley and she



goes home, grumbling. Onlookers are filled with malicious delight. Only God can patch this up.

Kirsha is annoyed that the boy has fled and wants to go looking for him, but Hussainy restrains him. Kirsha regrets not beating his wife properly and mourns the old days when he was a known criminal—why has he reformed to get this? Hussainy reminds Kirsha to put his faith in God. Abbas is sure that if Kirsha's boy does not return, another will. The café returns to its usual atmosphere until Kirsha shouts that no woman will enslave him. She may have the house and he will wander the streets, a criminal, and a cannibal. Darwish raises his head and declares Umm Hussain more masculine than many men and asks why Kirsha loves her. This is the evil of "h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l-i-t-y". Only descendants of Muhammad may enjoy true love.

Hamida no longer resists the idea of spending her life with Abbas, who feels intoxicated by love. She doubts any of her factory girlfriends will marry better and watching their reactions as she walks with Abbas. One day she tells them they are engaged. Hamida reasons that owning a barbershop and wearing a suit are definitely signs of being middle-class. She dares not dream, however, and rarely feels like she is in love. When Abbas tries to kiss her, Hamida neither yields nor refuses. She wants to experience what she has heard about and the reality makes her gasp and shut her eyes.

Abbas chooses Booshy as his ambassador to visit Umm Hamida, who readily accepts the proposal and is amazed when her rebellious daughter seems pleased. She suspects something has gone on behind her back. Abbas and Kamil next pay a visit and Umm Hamida welcomes the sweet boy into the family. Reading the customary verses of the Qur'an seals the engagement and they enjoy refreshments.

The lovers meet one last time on Azhar Street two days later and walk in silence. Abbas has tears in his eyes. He admits to leaving his heart behind and holds her hand to gather sweet memories while he is away. Hamida is lulled by his words and promises to visit Lord Hussain's tomb and pray for Abbas during his travels. Abbas is delirious, hearing his beloved say she will be sad apart from him. After speaking enthusiastic words about the power of love, Abbas declares he will make so much money the girls will envy Hamida. Sadness envelops them as the end nears. They kiss passionately in Afify's pitch-black stairwell. For one brief moment, Hamida brims with emotion and affection.

That night, Abbas bids farewell to Umm Hamida and then visits the café. Hussainy blesses him, says a long prayer, and advises he be frugal, avoid wine and pork, and never forget Midaq Alley. Booshy promises that when Abbas is rich, he will extract his rotten teeth and provide a nice set of gold teeth. Kamil is silent, dreading living alone after so many years. Darwish recites the "Throne Verse" from the Qur'an, and says that if Abbas is sufficiently heroic, he will become the King of England's "v-i-c-e-r-o-y". Next morning, carrying his clothes in a bundle, Abbas leaves the alley before dawn. A "For Rent" sign hangs in his shop window. Tears flood his eyes.



Jealous of Abbas, Hussain Kirsha one day rolls up his clothing and tells his mother he can stand his life no more. She is used to his rudeness and at first takes his ravings no more seriously than she does his father's. Finally her patience wears out. Hussain declares calmly that his sanity has returned and he is leaving this filthy house, stinking alley, and bovine people who sneer and joke at him about his father. Realizing she may lose her only comfort in life, whom she has hoped to keep at home even after he marries, Umm Hussain goes out to find Kirsha to demand he stop his son. Kirsha declares them a "miserable pair" and regularly insults his wife while condemning his son's stupidity. Determined to leave, Hussain risks antagonizing his father. He denies ever knowing want, but believes he has an "undeniable right" to change his way of life without parental anger or sarcasm. Kirsha is stunned. He loves his son, despite their quarrels and his inability to express his feelings, but now, in danger of losing his only son, he intensifies the battle. Hussain describes how his friends live as "gentlemen", and wants to do the same. Kirsha says he will marry the "daughter of a dog" as he did, provoking Umm Hussain to defend her pious father, who had known the Qur'an by heart. Unable to waste more time on lunatics, Kirsha slaps Hussain, who declares Kirsha will never hit—or see—him again. Umm Hussain steps in to absorb further blows. Around her, Kirsha declares his son dead and gone to hell. Hussain collects his bundle and curses the alley as he leaves.

## Chapters 10-14 Analysis

These chapters show Abbas and Hamida agreeing to marry, as economic considerations overcome a lack of affection. Such a basis is easily forgotten in the chapters ahead, particularly when better economic prospects develop. Abbas is said to be happy as a "tippler safe in a familiar bar", but the analogy is at this point anachronistic; chapters later, Abbas enters a bar and it is clear he is trying alcohol for the first time. At his going-away, pious Hussainy advises him to avoid pork and wine, both forbidden to Muslims. Hamida's name in Arabic means "giving thanks", which certainly fits Abbas's attitude towards the betrothal, which he believes are concluded and binding. The gold teeth that Booshy promises Abbas when he is rich and the gold teeth that Kirsha bares in anger offer a first hint at something dark the dentist is involved in. Two departures are shown; one ritualistic, as is the betrothal and leaving, and the other violent, revealing the Kirshas' deep-seated animosity and inability to stay on topic. As a result, the prodigal son departs.





# Chapters 15-18

## Chapters 15-18 Summary

Afify admits Umm Hamida to her flat as her dearest friend. Over coffee and cigarettes, Umm Hamida announces her daughter's engagement to Abbas, rather than reporting success in Afify's quest. Afify has been generous while waiting impatiently, and has concluded the delay is intentional. Still, Afify hopes for good news and keeps the conversation going with gossip about the Kirshas' troubles. Finally, Umm Hamida gets around to announcing Afify is to be a bride. Her heart suddenly racing, Afify blushes and feigns bashfulness. Umm Hamida is triumphant and declares God and the Prophet condone marriage.

The groom, Ahmad Effendi Talbat, is a civilian employee in the police department. He wears a suit—and even shoes—to work, sits at a big desk piled high with paperwork, deals with visitors and police officers all day, earns at least £10, plus allowances, and is thirty years old. Afify is shocked at being ten years older; Umm Hamida plays along. The family traces back to Lord Hussain. Talbat associates only with the best people and would have married long ago had someone as bashful, noble, and wealthy as Afify come along. He would like to see her photograph. Afify finds a framed one at least six years old, and then grows apprehensive, wondering what Talbat expects. Umm Hamida changes the subject to Afify's trousseau, indicating the groom is offering no dowry. When the matchmaker departs, Afify goes over every detail in her memory and is resigned to spending precious money. Surely it and God will veil her blemishes. The fifties are not yet "years of despair". She cringes at the gossip she knows is about to begin. It seems the perfect time to go have her horoscope read and obtain a lucky charm.

Zaita must disappoint a venerable retired army officer who is already a beggar but wants to be more successful. Zaita cannot deform such old bones. Instead, he will turn dignity into a precious type of deformity. It takes Zaita a while to recover from being called "reverend", and explains how much harder it is to make a person appear crippled than to actually cripple him. Zaita intends to teach him to impersonate a nobleman down on his luck, so people in cafés will not see him as a beggar. Zaita frowns at his first attempts at playing the role and orders him to operate in a different quarter of the city. After the customer leaves, Zaita notices Husniya alone and tries to converse with her. She laughs at the officer's story and says Jaada is taking his biannual bath in Gamaliya, which means he will not return before midnight.

Zaita gets lost in fantasies about formidable Husniya after mentally eliminating her gangly, cowardly husband. Telling him he stinks and looks revolting, Husniya demands Zaita leave and threatens to split him in half. Zaita disparages Jaada, but Husniya is loyal and confident. Zaita's lust builds. He believes she is flirting when telling him he ought to bathe, but she finds his occupation disgusting. He declares he improves people's ability to earn and again demeans Jaada. Husniya declares he is a devil, but



Zaita insists he has once been king of mankind, as are all newborns. If fetuses knew what is in store for them, they would never leave the womb. He assures Husniya he has been loved by his beggar parents, who no longer need a borrowed baby to gain sympathy. He remembers a happy childhood in gutters, covered with flies. Humans can adapt to anything—even to being married to Jaada. Gesturing towards his room and giving a sly wink, Zaita suggests one more joy he would like to taste. In a fit of passion, he strips off his cloak and stands naked before Husniya. She fells him with a heavy mug thrown at his belly.

When Umm Hamida comes to buy some things, Alwan goes out of his way to welcome her, for he has made an "unalterable decision" to solve one of the problems that are plaguing his life. God has provided for men whose wives have ceased to be women and who do not wish to commit adultery. He does not know how to broach the subject to Umm Hamida until an employee brings in his famous lunch and they exchange wry smiles. Alwan asks if the bowl offends a professional matchmaker like she; it certainly offends his puritanical wife. Umm Hamida commiserates. Even in her youth, Alwan's wife had not tolerated his passion and virility, advised him to give up this habit, and warned of consequences to his health. Now she is even less tolerant and talks of leaving home. He considers this rebelliousness as a valid reason to start a new married life. He has warned her of his intention. Umm Hamida's professional instincts are aroused; eligible men as important as Alwan are a rarity. She offers her services and a range of women of all statuses and ages. Alwan shocks her by declaring he wants only Hamida. Umm Hamida is near hysteria, considering the difference in class—even before remembering her daughter's engagement. They have even recited the Qur'an to confirm it, she wails.

Hearing this, Alwan's face drops and turns red with rage at the thought of Hamida marrying a "simpleton barber" who thinks he can get rich on a war that will soon end. Umm Hamida says apologetically that it never dawned on her that such a man would desire her daughter. She says Hamida has nothing to do with the arrangement; it is between herself and Kamil. Alwan suggests they forget the matter, Umm Hamida departs, and he sits, gloomy, perplexed, and angry. He spits on the floor to expel Abbas and imagines the gossip that will eventually reach his children, friends, and enemies. Having survived the fable of his green wheat, he is ready. He will have Hamida, no matter what anyone thinks. Wealth means not having to deny oneself.

Umm Hamida hurries home, filled with conflicting dreams. She finds Hamida combing her hair and wonders how this creature has managed to captivate Alwan. She is nearly envious but realizes she will share in the wealth, but worries how Alwan will react to Hamida's fierce temper. She clucks at her daughter that she is obviously born under a lucky star, and watches closely as she announces an important man—no dreamer—wants her hand. Hamida cannot guess who and nearly snaps her comb in two upon hearing she is wanted by a man whose wealth cannot be counted. Umm Hamida repeats their conversation word for word and readies herself for an argument. Hamida speaks scornfully of "that barber" when her mother reminds her of the engagement. She forgets Abbas with shocking speed. Hamida does not want her mother seeking



Hussainy's advice, but Umm Hamida is out the door too quickly. Hamida resumes combing her hair as she gazes at the business premises across the street.

Hamida has not abandoned her fiancé as blithely as it seems. She had thought herself happily bound to Abbas for life. She has kept her promise to visit the mosque and pray for Abbas (although she normally goes there only to curse her enemies). Abbas has raised her status in the alley. She realizes, however, that she has been "napping in the mouth of a volcano". Restlessness about the future has never left her, and Abbas has not firmed up her unformed ideas about what she wants in a husband. She fears she has been overly optimistic about how he will improve her life. She sees that her indifference will prevent them living together happily. She wishes she had learned a profession like her friends so she could marry when—and only if—she wants. Thus she can discard her fiancé for Alwan because she has banished him from her heart long before.

Umm Hamida returns shortly and announces Hussainy is opposed to changing the engagement. Abbas is young, of the same class, and eager for marriage, while Alwan is none of these things. Abbas will be the better husband, unless he comes home penniless, in which case Hamida may marry whomever she wants. Hamida cares nothing about what the old saint says about her marriage; if he were so good, God would not have taken all his sons. Umm Hamida is stunned and pained by such disrespect. The girl declares herself free until a marriage agreement is signed. She does not give a damn about violating the Qur'an. Hamida sees the hidden approval in her mother's eyes and jokes about age. Umm Hamida muses about how when a man like Alwan marries a girl, her family is inundate as Egypt is when the Nile floods. She does not intend to be left behind. The next morning, Umm Hamida goes to Alwan's office to read the Qur'an, but is told he is not in. He is hovering between life and death following a heart attack.

## Chapters 15-18 Analysis

This section centers on Umm Hamida. She has concluded a marriage agreement between Mrs. Afify and a younger civil servant. Afify's concerns about her age and physical condition point subtly to a major plot twist that lies ahead. Umm Hamida next finds herself in Alwan's office, hearing the astonishing news that he wants to marry her daughter. Hamida in an instant forgets her fiancé and sees herself getting everything she wants in life, but fate steps in. Coming chapters show Alwan surviving but being much changed mentally. Cut loose from an anticipated life with Abbas, Hamida is prone to change. She has shown contempt for traditional morality and the strictures of the Qur'an. She cares as little about a holy man's advice as does lecherous Kirsha.



# Chapters 19-22

## Chapters 19-22 Summary

One morning, Midaq Alley awakens to find a pavilion being set up on adjacent Sanadiqiya Street. Kamil suspects it is for a funeral, but it is instead for a political rally. Kamil knows nothing about politics beyond a few names. Loudspeakers are hung on street corners and the stage is decorated with pictures of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Nahas and the local Wafd candidate: Ibrahim Farhat, a merchant on Nahasin Street. Calm returns as construction ends and lasts until late afternoon when short, husky, round-faced Farhat arrives with a retinue. His walk betrays self-confidence and his eyes "honest simplicity". Everyone expects to benefit from his bounty. He makes his way from door to door, greeting people. People stream into Kirsha's Café and the candidate orders a round of tea for all.

Farhat notices that Kirsha is aloof, having earlier declined an offer of £15 for his support, since another café owner has received £20. Farhat cannot afford to number among the "politicos" that Kirsha despises. Kirsha comes alive during campaigns, having in his youth taken part in the Rebellion of 1919 and vandalism and warring against Armenians and Jews. In 1924-25, he accepts bribes from the government candidate while supporting the Wafd Party, and in 1936 is prevented from supporting it. Thereafter, Kirsha supports whoever pays best, arguing that poor voters deserve to share all the money being spread around. The revolutionary spirit is gone, as is the respectable life, as Kirsha cares only about pleasures of the flesh. He hates no one, including the British. In the present war, he once sides with the Germans and admires Hitler's cruelty and barbarity. The Führer is a hero like the mythical Antar and Abu Zaid.

As the leader of the local café owners, Kirsha has political influence and Farhat cultivates his friendship. Kirsha piously hopes not to be disappointed and promises to deliver the votes. Farhat proclaims himself an independent, adhering to the principles of Saad Zaghlul, but finds party spirit disruptive, and he intends in Parliament to promote the people's practical needs. If he wins, people will see "miracle after miracle". When Farhat asks to see people's voting cards, Kamil refuses, saying he has never voted and does not know his birthplace. Farhat joins in the general laughter. When a boy enters carrying a pile of posters, all assume they are for the election, but they advertise a government-approved aphrodisiac. Farhat moves on to the next establishment. When Farhat asks Darwish for his blessing, the sheik intones, "May the devil take you!"

The pavilion fills before sunset, for it is rumored that not only will politicians speak incomprehensibly, but Qur'an reciters and comedians will also appear. A monologue reciter in village costume and a half-naked woman dancer follow. Hamida returns from her customary walk and is overcome by it all. Suddenly, she feels a compulsion to look over her shoulder, and her eyes meet an intense, insolent stare, which breaks her attention. The odd smile infuriates her and she wants to dig her fingernails into the owner's neck. The man, tall, lean, broad-shouldered, and bareheaded, with almond-



shaped eyes that are cunning and bold, seems pleased with himself. He studies Hamida from slippers to hair and, as their eyes meet, her blood boils and she flees into the alley and her flat. Peering out through closed shutters, she sees him looking window to window, beseechingly. Hamida is glad he is confused and that she has attracted such an educated, middle-class man. When he notices a gap in her window, he lights up, but his smile is more arrogant than ever, and Hamida realizes her blunder. She fears he will enter her building, but he goes instead to Kirsha's Café and occupies Abbas's old spot. Hamida feels his gaze.

The stranger comes every evening to Midaq Alley to smoke a water pipe and sip tea. The regulars in Kirsha's Café get used to him. Kirsha is annoyed that he pays with large notes, but the large tips please Sanker. Hamida watches from her window with excitement and anticipation, but refrains from taking her usual walks because her clothing is so shabby. From time to time, the stranger glances up at Hamida's window and blows kisses as he releases smoke. She feels pleasure, outrage, and flattery. She knows he will follow her on her walk and decides to hurl insults at him that will shatter his smugness. If she had a nice cloak, she would insult him in the café. Hamida despairs of marriage, with Alwan being half-dead and Abbas scorned. She is sure God is punishing Umm Hamida's covetousness. This arrogant new man both infuriates and fascinates her and she cannot sort out her feelings.

One afternoon she dresses carefully and sets off, out of the alley, and onto Sanadiqiya Street. She worries that because she has been skipping her walks, he may think she is trying to meet him, while in fact she is planning a skirmish. She dares not look back, for that would admit defeat. She wonders why he takes so long to overtake her. Alert and on edge, she listens and watches. She tells her girlfriends she has been ill. Leaving them, Hamida is crestfallen, and heading up the alley, she sees him smoking in his usual spot, which sends her into a rage. She sees no explanation for his behavior. She only knows she had wanted him to follow her, and now feels like throwing a water pitcher at his head. She does not know how to deal with his smile.

That night, Hamida plots revenge and awakens depressed and apprehensive about the afternoon. She doubts—and fears—he will come. She feels relief but is even more ready for a confrontation. Restlessly, she leaves the flat without checking her appearance and walks, muttering angrily at herself for letting him get to her. Meeting her friends, she learns one is about to marry. Another observes that Hamida will marry first, since she was betrothed first, but Hamida replies her fiancé is away, earning money. Recalling how God has struck down Alwan, she sees life as an enemy. Parting from her friends, Hamida runs into the stranger, who has obviously been planning things his own way, seeking to confuse her. She tries to work up a rage. The street is nearly deserted and he looks humble. They walk together silently and swiftly.

In a deep voice, he says he could not run after her yesterday because of what people would think, but he has been looking for any chance to meet her. Hamida is again a woman unsure of what to do, while he is clever, instinctive, and determined. He uses tenderness and humility as weapons. She listens carefully and modulates her harsh voice when asking why he follows her. He claims he is neglecting his business to stare



at her window. It is a principle of life that men follow beautiful women. Hamida wants to be seen being courted by a handsome man in a European suit, but tells him to go away before they are seen. He smiles, telling her this is not her quarter, she is different, and she does not belong here. He cannot understand her wishing he were dead. She is on this earth to be taken and he is the one to take her. When she warns him not to take another step, he agrees but promises to wait for her every day, not at the café, lest people wonder, but on the street. Hamida walks on in a trance, thinking about his words. She senses he is a tiger about to pounce, but withholds judgment. If he is bad, she will make him sorry.

Although this would violate military regulations controlling rents, Booshy worried about an increase when Afify invites him to her flat. Like all the tenants, he dislikes the miser, who uses Hussainy to lean on delinquents. He is relieved when she explains she is getting married and cannot face a husband with missing and rotten teeth. He says extraction will take several days and her gums will have to dry and heal for six months before putting in a plate. Afify insists this is impossible. He agrees to make a gold plate and put it in immediately. Afify panics at the anticipated cost, but hopes it is true his rates are ridiculously low. No one asks where he gets plates; they care only that they are cheap. Booshy suggests £10, and when Afify balks, informs her angrily that others would charge £50. They haggle and agree on £8 and he leaves, cursing Afify for pretending to be young.

Afify has been seeing the world in a new light, filled with happiness that is inevitably expensive as she shops for furniture and clothing under Umm Hamida's constant supervision. The house and the bride both need much "care, preparation, and repair". Dye will cover any gray hairs caused by anxiety. Umm Hamida tells her not to worry about her tiny breasts and behind; slender is in fashion and there are recipes to fatten her up quickly. She has magic keys for everything. Days pass with the stingy widow tossing her savings at her wedding day. She makes donations at the mosque, gives alms, and lights candles to St. Shaarany. Umm Hamida is amazed at the sudden generosity and wonders if men are worth all this trouble.

Alwan's carriage rolls into the alley and people gather to welcome him. He is a changed man: shrunken, sunken, pallid, bent, and scowling. The driver clears the way for him. Alwan is inwardly seething at the neighbors and holds the employees who kiss his hand responsible for his calamity. They are envious dogs. When manager Kamil Effendi Ibrahim appears, Alwan demands the books, bans smoking on the premises, and orders his water glass half cold and half hot. Ibrahim worries about the changes but also considers that God is just. In three hours, Alwan finds nothing wrong but vows to continue auditing until he finds proof of wrongdoing. He curses business friends and associates who arrive, knowing how they have envied him. Even his wife has resented his former good health.

Alwan cannot forget the terror of awakening to chest constriction and being unable to breathe out. Put on medicine, he hovers for days between life and death, having rare lucid moments, shuddering at the prospect of dying. He tries to pray and make a declaration of faith, but is too weak. His spirit clings to the "fringes of life". As the crisis



passes, he is saddened to hear from his doctor that he has only a little while left. He becomes a different person: delicate, testy, and hate-filled. He asks what sin God could be punishing him for, since he has always looked for the best in people, provided for his family, and kept God's laws—but has still been brought down by others' envy. Life becomes sour and Alwan's brow takes on a permanent scowl.

Alwan is surprised to see Umm Hamida approach and receives her with partial attention. During his convalescence, Hamida rarely crosses his mind. Her well-meaning mother inspires hatred as he declares God has wanted something other than they have. She insists she cares only about his health. When Umm Hamida leaves, Alwan is more upset than ever. He remembers his sons' suggestion that he sell the business and rest and sees only greedy conspirators. Hussainy arrives smiling and they embrace. The holy man has visited the villa several times but Alwan is never available. Hussainy pronounces it a miracle he has survived—and observes piously that all of life owes itself to a succession of divine miracles. When Alwan declares illness an "evil, dreadful thing", Hussainy counters that viewed as a divine test, it is something good. Alwan dislikes this philosophy and feels hostility returning. He demands to know why he deserves to lose his health forever. Hussainy talks of man's intellect being too shallow to comprehend God's ways, cites Job's example, and exhorts Alwan not to despair, but Alwan grows angrier and demands why Kirsha is still strong as a mule. He lashes out at pious sermonizing when Hussainy claims he is better off sick than Kirsha is healthy. Hussainy smiles sweetly, waiting for the truly afflicted man to calm down, asks God to grant him peace, strength, and contentment, says goodbye, and leaves. Alwan's bad mood returns and he walks outside to look up at Hamida's open, empty window. He feels uncomfortable there and returns, scowling, to his chair.

## Chapters 19-22 Analysis

This section examines Egyptian politics and Muslim theodicy (why bad things happen to good people), sets up greedy Hamida's dramatic downfall, and offers more enticing tidbits about Booshy and gold teeth. Kirsha recalls his days as a revolutionary, filling in earlier comments about an evil past. Now he is past politics and cares only about his own pleasures. Politicians are said to orate in "almost incomprehensible classical Arabic", which is radically different from everyday usage. Mention of the historical figure, Mustafa al Nahas, Prime Minister of Egypt, on a number of occasions helps set the novel in late 1944. Hamida's new love interest allows her angry side to flare. Note how she accepts the premise that she is on this earth to be taken and he is the one to take her. It fits with earlier descriptions of marriage in Arab culture. Note that Job is considered a prophet in Islam.



# Chapters 23-25

## Chapters 23-25 Summary

Hamida wants the stranger to return to the café, despite his worry about suspicions, and crouches by her window to watch for him. She feels victorious as he walks up the alley, eyes fixed on her shutters, smiling with resignation. Their eyes meet. Hamida assumes he wants the same thing as Abbas and Alwan. She sees nothing in the way of attaining her high goals. They stare at one another boldly and all of Hamida's instincts sharpen. A battle approaches. The aimlessness with which she has wandered through life is gone. He is no penniless beggar. When he leaves for the night, her eyes follow him and her lips murmur, "Tomorrow."

Next afternoon, Hamida sets out anticipating battle and delighting in life. She sees him at a corner, approaches boldly, and is about to walk past when he grabs her hand and calls her "Darling". He refuses to release her and she is afraid of attracting attention, but cannot allow herself to be psychologically defeated. He urges her to be patient and not worry about people on the street. They care only about money. He has been waiting anxiously to walk with her. She will not promise to stay at his side if he releases her hand and warns him of her temper. He declares her stubborn and self-willed, accepts her return insult silently, and notes she does not move away. He apologizes for being rude, but says her stubbornness requires it. Lacking a response, she is happy to see her curious, giggling friends approaching. After they pass by, he remarks that she is not like them, and cannot see why her fate is to be less free and well dressed.

After comparing her beauty to the stars (and explains he means the cinema), the man asks her name, which she give without hesitation, and says he is Ibrahim Faraj. Hamida loses track of time until they reach Queen Farida Square. Regretfully starting to turn back, she is shocked when he suggests a taxi so they can spend more time together while getting her home before her mother worries. She has ridden in horse-drawn carriages before but never in an automobile, and certainly not with a strange man. Her desire for adventure is about to win out when she sees his infuriating smile. Only the hint that she might be afraid gets her into the vehicle, which heads for Sharif Pasha Street. Faraj thinks to himself he has saved two to three days of "groundwork" by this ride.

A dazzling new world appears to Hamida and she imagines flying in an airplane. Faraj points to fine ladies in superb clothes, and the realization of what she is wearing stings Hamida like a scorpion. She notices Faraj is snuggling closer and pushes him away harder than she intends. He holds her hand and draws close for a kiss. She feels an insane desire to bite his lips, but he withdraws. She wants to claw his neck, but he speaks calmly, pointing out the building where he lives. The entrance to the skyscraper is wider than Midaq Alley. Hamida is suspicious that the kiss may have led him on. She gathers strength for the coming battle, cannot decline his invitation, has no moral qualms, and is not shy. Faraj recognizes she is explosive and must be handled carefully.





They exit the taxi, enter the building, climb to the second floor, and walk down a long corridor. As Faraj unlocks the door, he thinks about saving another day or two.

Faraj opens the door, which leads into another hallway with rooms leading off both sides, and finally into a medium-sized room, carefully appointed. He suggests she remove her cloak, but she declines. Faraj pours lemonade and remarks the taxi is waiting. Hamida observes Faraj, and tingles with anticipation. She has never felt this way before. When asked about the sounds of talking, shrieking, and singing, Faraj replies it is family, whom she will meet in time. She ignores his second request she remove her cloak. She allows Faraj to take her hand and lead her to the sofa, to move closer, to put his arms around her waist and kiss her passionately. Hamida is intoxicated but alert. Her heart beats wildly as he removes her cloak. Facing her wrath, he apologizes sheepishly. Hamida hides a triumphant smile, which vanishes when she compares his delicate hands with her coarse ones. She asks why she is here and declares the whole business absurd. Faraj insists this is a most wonderful thing and his house is her house too.

Faraj admires her hair and kisses it, ignoring the smell of kerosene. Hamida is delighted at the compliment but wants to know how long they will remain. Until they get to know one another, he replies and discounts the thought she could be afraid. Seeing that she wants to kiss him again, Faraj says he understands: she is a tigress and they are inseparably in love. They share a violent kiss. He points at his heart, says that is where she belongs, and disbelieves she could return to the alley and her family. They are made of different stuff from her. She is meant to stroll the streets like the beautiful women in fine clothes and jewelry. God has sent her to Faraj so he can restore her stolen rights. His words play Hamida's heart like a violin. She wants this but wonders how it can be. He must be concealing something.

Faraj realizes they have reached a critical point in his plot, turns on the charm and seduction, and talks about Hamida enjoying the finer things in life. He asks why she should return to the alley with its wretched men who will enjoy her beauty and age her before her time. She is too daring and beautiful for that. Hamida recognizes he is flirting and gets angry. Faraj insists he respects, admires, and loves her and he needs a big-hearted "partner" in life. Hamida almost demands he marry her if he wants to talk this way, but restrains herself. He knows what she is thinking, but continues theatrically about saving her from a life of drudgery so they can live like film stars. Hamida's face goes white with rage as she calls him a "wicked seducer", to which he replies, sarcastically, "I am a man". She insists he is a pimp, to which he says pimps are "stockbrokers of happiness". Faraj claims to respects Hamida far too much to seduce her.

Hamida is outraged but cannot stop loving Faraj. The emotional stress grows unbearable as she declares she is not the kind of girl he thinks. Faraj pretends to be upset and disappointed that she would accept to be an "alley bride". She shrieks at him "Enough!" and heads for the door, which he opens for her. Hamida leaves, miserable and confused. They enter the taxi by separate doors and ride in silence. Halfway down Mousky, Faraj orders the driver to stop, kisses Hamida's shoulder, opens the door, and



says he will be waiting for her tomorrow to start their wonderful new life. He loves her. As Hamida walks away, Faraj smiles sardonically. She is a "whore by instinct" and a priceless pearl.

Umm Hamida asks why her daughter comes home late, accepts the casual lie, and announces they will soon attend Afify's wedding. Hamida tries to appear delighted that Afify is buying her a dress for the reception and in hearing other tidbits in an hour of her mother's prattling. After supper, Hamida lies on the sofa, stares at the ceiling, and recalls everything that has happened that bewildering day. She is, all at once confused, happy, unafraid, and above all adventurous. She recalls wishing she had never seen this man when she first entered the alley, but realizes she has learned from him in one day more about herself than she has known in a lifetime. He has deliberately unburied her secrets. Her refusal when they part is meaningless: neither Abbas nor anyone else is going to doom her to a life of pregnancies, children, sidewalks, and flies. The neighborhood gossips are right when they call her hard and abnormal. The veil has been lifted and she sees her goal clearly.

Hamida marvels at how easily she chooses a path from dull past to exciting future. Holding Faraj in his flat, Hamida had been outwardly angry but inwardly joyful. Only his self-confidence about her coming back to him inspires hate. She will return, but will force him to pay for his conceit. She will neither worship nor submit to him, but fight a heated battle. She wants light, dignity, and power, not submission and slavery. Hamida is somewhat concerned about being called a whore. She tosses and turns, but her decision does not alter. Hearing her mother snore, Hamida thinks about how these are their final hours together; she realizes belatedly how she loves her despite their quarrels and how Umm Hamida has loved her more than a real mother. How will she feel tomorrow, left behind? Hamida steels herself: she has no father or mother—only Faraj. Voices from the café keep her awake and she curses them: Kirsha, Kamil, Booshy. She remembers her lover, seated between Booshy and Darwish, blowing kisses, and her heart throbs violently. She pictures his luxurious room and yearns for sleep. Hussainy wishes peace to all. What will the man who tells Umm Hamida to refuse Alwan's hand say tomorrow about Hamida leaving? She curses all the alley people and cares not what anyone will say.

Hamida wrestles with insomnia until just before dawn. When she awakens, her resolve remains. She is a passing visitor in the alley, as Faraj says. She does chores, prepares lentils, and muses this is the last time she will cook here—or perhaps anywhere. She has no idea what rich people eat. She bathes, combs her long hair, twists it into a pigtail, and puts on her best clothes, but is embarrassed by her shoddy underwear. She resolves not to give herself to Faraj until she is properly dressed. The idea fills her with joy and passion. Hamida goes to the window and looks at each doorway in turn, remembering events, but feeling affection for anyone. People have stung her enough with their tongues, particularly Mrs. Hussainy. Hamida's eyes rest long on Alwan's office and she recalls dreaming of riches for a day and a half and then burning with regret at letting him slip away. Faraj moves her more completely than Alwan. She looks at the barbershop, remembers Abbas, and wonders what he will do when he returns and finds no trace of her. She cannot imagine having let him kiss her. Hamida turns, more



resolute than ever. She and Umm Hamida eat lunch. While her foster mother naps, Hamida watches her and wishes they could say a proper good-bye. She weakens a bit, realizing she will never again see this woman who has sheltered and loved her, and who lies blissfully unaware of what is coming. When Hamida leaves, her mother tells her not to be late.

Hamida's face shows the strain as she leaves the flat and the alley for the last time. She heads to where Faraj will be waiting, needing revenge to restore her peace of mind. She sees not an insolent smile, but a look of hope and concern. He lets her pass and walks behind her. At the end of New Street, she stops and turns, seemingly remembering something. He suggests they go to Azhar Street where no one will see them. Hamida realizes she has surrendered. Faraj hails a taxi and as she steps in, Hamida realizes she has moved from one life to the next. Faraj talks about his sleepless night, current joy, and desire to give Hamida "rivers of happiness", diamonds, gold, lipstick, and even silk brassieres. Blushing and delighted, Hamida is anger-free. Inside the apartment, Faraj suggests they burn her cloak together and is pleased she has brought nothing from her past. He shows her their bedroom, where he assures her she will sleep alone, while he occupies a couch. Hamida is determined not to be a sheep. Faraj senses this and pretends to give in. He is not a pimp but the headmaster of a school that will teach her all she needs to know.

Hussain Kirsha trudges unhappily back to Midaq Alley, ignoring the noise or light of the café. Praising God that her son has come back to his senses, his mother smothers him with hugs and kisses, and laughs hysterically. Hussain scowls and asks Sayyida and Abdu—his wife and brother-in-law—to enter the flat. Umm Hussain is stunned and annoyed, welcomes the bride, and complains of not being invited to the wedding. The newcomers express regrets. Hussain has been laid off. Kirsha arrives, not believing the rumor his son would dare return. He demands why Hussain would come back after God has spared him seeing his face. Umm Hussain announces the lay-off and Kirsha grows angrier. He is not running an almshouse; Hussain should return to his "clean life". The police are arresting hashish peddlers, so their economic future looks bleak. Umm Hussain urges prayer, but Kirsha will not forget being abandoned.

When Kirsha asks why Hussain has been fired, his wife knows reconciliation has begun. The war is ending and many are being let go. Hussain has no in-laws other than a brother, also laid off. Hussain has saved no money and is indignant at Hitler's failing. Kirsha sarcastically orders the house prepared and upgraded for water and electricity, but when Hussain wisely stifles his anger, the storm passes. In fact, Kirsha is happy to see Hussain and delighted he is married. Hussain hopes to find work and has his wife's jewelry. They will only stay a few days. Prodded by his mother's winks, Hussain makes awkward but courteous introductions. As Kirsha eyes attractive, young Abdu, his mood lightens, and he shows genuine enthusiasm. Umm Hussain reports that Hamida has disappeared without a trace. She has certainly been seduced and run away. Hamida is pretty but has never been any good.



## Chapters 23-25 Analysis

This section watches Hamida leave Midaq Alley with no compunction, and Hussain Kirsha limps back bitterly. Considerable space is given to Ibrahim Faraj, who acquires a name and whose crass motives the narrator is at pains to point out. Every step of his seduction of Hamida is thoroughly planned; she slips into his fingers faster than he expects, even with her temper. The motif of having babies and living in filthy gutters covered with flies, earlier described by Zaita as the fate of street beggars, recurs here: Faraj is removing Hamida from that. Kirsha, his wife, and son fight again, but psychologically need and allow reconciliation. Kirsha's impure thoughts about the new brother-in-law soften his temper but suggest new crises of the old sort may lay ahead. The war is ending and economic recession threatens an artificially prosperous Egypt. The novel's avaricious characters will be facing new trials.



# Chapters 26-28

## Chapters 26-28 Summary

Hamida awakens beneath a white ceiling and crystal light and remembers her new life. The door is closed and the key is where she has left it. She smiles and slides out of the luxurious bed. When Faraj knocks, Hamida takes a few moments to tidy herself. He gives her a strange nickname, Titi. Her old name, like her old clothes, must be forgotten. She wishes her rough hands and shrill voice could be so easily changed. Faraj says English and Americans will like this ancient, easily pronounced name. He assures her she will know everything shortly. She will be transformed into a lady of "dazzling beauty and fame" in this house. He must give her a tour immediately. He gives her robe and slippers, perfumes her, and advises not to act shy or nervous. She stares at him and then shrugs indifferently.

In the Department of Oriental Dancing, Hamida meets two girls and the effeminate dance instructor, Susu. In the Department of Western Dancing, she marvels at the noise and movement of beautifully dressed and made-up girls. Behind a third door, however, she is mortified to watch a woman standing naked and reciting the English names of various parts of her body. Recitation class is where girls clarify what they pick up in taverns and hotels. Faraj says no one can force Hamida to do anything; she cannot be mastered or deceived. She will master the subjects quickly if she wishes. She may dance or not, be brave or not, stay or return. Hamida's tensions subside. As Faraj kisses her fingertips, Hamida sighs and presses against him. Her lips are parted when he lifts her chin. Faraj carries her to bed, and looks at her seductively, controls himself because, he says, Americans will pay £50 for a virgin. Hamida springs to the floor and attacks like a tiger. Faraj absorbs a slap, smiles sardonically, and strikes her just as hard. Hamida blanches and attacks with her nails. Rather than defend himself, Faraj pulls her close. Hamida clings to him, trembling with passion.

Even Kirsha's Café is closed when Zaita slips out to begin his rounds. He runs into Booshy, who announces Abdul Hamid Taliby has died and has been buried between Nasr Gate and the mountain road. He has been buried with a full set of gold teeth. They enter the gloomy cemetery grounds, pick up Booshy's concealed tools including a spade and candle, and hurry to Taliby's tomb. The direct route is unsafe, so they split up, sneak around back, and scale the wall into the courtyard. Booshy is nervous but Zaita remains calm. Inside they identify the sepulcher. As he has many times before, Zaita pries up the heavy flagstones and, with Booshy's help, lays them aside. Zaita insists Booshy accompany him down the stairs and light the candle. The "sequence of history" is revealed in the shrouds laid side by side. Zaita uncovers Taliby's head, pries out his false teeth, and restores the shroud. Booshy exits first and screams as he is seized. Zaita retreats but there is nowhere to go, and he has the golden evidence in his pocket. News circulates fast about the grave robbers. Afify is overcome with hysteria and hurls her gold plate away. Her new husband jumps from the bathtub and runs to her rescue.



Snoozing Kamil is angry with someone tickling his bald head, until he sees it is Abbas. The young man is sharply dressed, looks fit, and has learned English. Abbas looks around his beloved alley, at his old shop, and at Hamida's window, imagining them seeing one another. Kamil fills him in on news: Hussain Kirsha's firing and tense homecoming, Booshy and Zaita's imprisonment (to think Booshy wants to fit Abbas for gold teeth!), and Afify's marriage. Kamil cannot bring himself to talk about Hamida. Only Kirsha and Darwish are in the café, so they return to Kamil's shop, where Abbas describes life in Tell el-Kebir. He has been careful with his money, smokes hashish only occasionally, and has bought a golden necklace with a dangling heart for Hamida. Abbas wants to get married while on leave.

When Kamil looks away and says nothing, Abbas grows alarmed. When Kamil cannot say what is wrong, Abbas senses disaster with Hamida. Kamil admits she has disappeared and no one knows what has happened. Abbas is stunned, and then his mind whirls feverishly. Hamida fails to return from her usual walk, everyone searches, and even checks with the police station and hospital. Abbas stares vacantly and then lashes out at alley residents who give up too easily. If Hamida is finished, so is he. Hurt by the outburst, Kamil says in nearly two months they have spared no effort in trying to find her. There are many theories. Most believe she has suffered an accident. No one talks about it any more. Abbas realizes he has been happily dreaming for two months while disaster has struck. Abbas stomps off to see Umm Hamida, but quickly returns and the two men fall into one another's arms, sobbing like children.

Naturally giving people the benefit of the doubt, Abbas wants to believe that Hamida is perfect and beyond the suspicions that trouble lovers in such situations. Umm Hamida has nothing new, but lies about Hamida thinking about him and waiting for his return. This makes Abbas sadder. At the time of her evening stroll, Abbas wonders what God could have done with her, how it could have happened, and why. He walks to Mousky, her favorite street, and considers knocking on every door. He considers returning to Tell el-Kebir and trying to forget, but has no reason to earn money now or to live. He asks the factory girls walking his direction about Hamida. They recall seeing her several times with a well-dressed man in a suit. An icy shudder goes through Abbas. He realizes Kamil and Umm Hamida have been concealing this and recalls faint fears this could happen. Doubt gives way to a mix of anger, hatred, and disappointment. One must have conceit and pride to feel jealousy, and Abbas has neither, but his hopes and dreams are shattered. He wants revenge. He believes Hamida's walks have been to parade for the "street wolves". Abbas wants to strangle Hamida with the necklace in his pocket, and as he recalls his joy while buying it, he becomes enraged.

## Chapters 26-28 Analysis

This section shows what Hamida's new life will be, if she chooses to accept it. The appearance of free will wins her over, but Faraj knows her economic condition and high tastes guarantee she will become a prostitute—and a very lucrative one. Abbas returns on furlough to get married and hears the scant details of his fiancées' disappearance. Sorrow and doubt turn to a desire for revenge, setting up the novel's dramatic climax.



# Chapters 29-32

## Chapters 29-32 Summary

Alwan sells his entire tea stock at a profit when he can no longer bear the strain of the black market. There seems to be a curse on everything in his life. His nerves are devouring him and he thinks only about death. He has forgotten the comforts of faith, and wishes God would let him die swiftly like many heart attack victims. Instead, like his father and grandfather, he will linger in agony. He is so terrified that he analyzes all of death's aspects. People say the dead still see family peering down at them, and Alwan can feel the eerie darkness, loneliness, and suffocation of the tomb. He knows God passes judgment and takes retribution before admitting anyone to paradise. Alwan clings to the fringe of life, even though it gives him no pleasure. He has consulted a variety of specialists and puts his whole faith in medicine.

Alwan constantly fights with himself and others. Senior employees are quitting and the remaining workforce is disgruntled. In the alley, green wheat is held responsible. Alwan and Kamil are estranged. Alwan targets his wife for special outbursts, hatred, and blame, calling her a vengeful viper and wondering if she suspects his plans to marry Hamida. She may have put a curse on his health. When Alwan is rude and insulting, she remains politely and patiently submissive, until finally he announces he will try his luck at marriage again. This shatters her self-control and sends her fleeing to her children, who want him to liquidate his business and devote full energies to restoring his health. He announces that their mother is trying to kill him and a new woman will show him mercy. His fortune suffices should another heir arrive. All will be satisfied after his death, but while he lives, they are on their own. Alwan eliminates the household's luxurious fare, making everyone share his dietary restrictions. The sons accept God's inevitable will, but prepare steps to ensure a covetous new wife cannot neglect him.

Hamida's disappearance shatters Alwan, even though he had rarely thought of her during his illness. He follows efforts to find her and the gossip about her running off with an unknown man. He resents the fickle girl and pictures her publicly hanged. Hearing of Abbas's return from Tell el-Kebir, he invites the young man for a chat and tells him about Darwish, his former friend, shouting the news to him that Hamida had eloped. Alwan had cursed him as an idiot, making Darwish weep. Kamil and the old barber help him to the café and try to comfort him. Darwish continues weeping, howling, gasping, and trembling, causing people to look out their windows. Alwan abandons his pride and goes to the café to beg forgiveness.

On his second day back, Abbas is in Kamil's flat when Hussain Kirsha seeks him out. Abbas has spent a sleepless night and a thoughtful morning. Despair has succeeded vengeance. They walk, with Abbas scarcely hearing details of Hussain's life, opinions on the war, or the view that pitiful Egypt can find happiness only during a war. It grows dark. Hussain and cowardly Abbas both wish they had been heroic combat soldiers.



Abbas can almost see Hamida walking here, but knows he must forget her betrayal lest his soft heart burn out. All he has gotten out of love is suffering and humiliation.

Reaching the Jewish Quarter, Hussain wants to stop for a drink in Vita's Bar. He is surprised that Abbas has not developed a taste for it among the British. The clientele are poor cabdrivers and laborers with some market loafers thrown in. They find an empty table in back. Abbas is uneasy with the noise and points out a short, fat fourteen-year-old drunk among adults; Hussein says it is Awkal, a newspaper boy. Wine brings pleasure to the unemployed like himself, even if they can no longer afford whiskey. The bartender brings two wines and some nuts. They clink glasses and Hussein downs his, and when Abbas is disgusted by the taste, forces him to down it. Revulsion turns to satisfaction as the alcohol reaches Abbas's head. Hussein orders another. He is staying in his father's house with his wife and brother-in-law and does not intend to run the café from dawn through half the night for £3 a month as his father wants. Hussain is beginning to hate the world because he cannot find a life that suits him. Abbas is surprised and delighted by how cozy he is feeling. Hussein continues, talking about the good life in Wayliya, being penniless and on the verge of hawking his wife's jewelry. It appears she may be pregnant.

Abbas can no longer follow the conversation and melancholy replaces peacefulness. He demands a second drink, which loosens his tongue about Hamida. Hussein says Abbas should have forgotten her within a day. Awkal makes a drunken announcement that leaves patrons laughing, but enrages Hussain. Life, he says, is not a child's game. It must be lived. Abbas mourns his loss and vows to spit in Hamida's face and to break the man's neck. Hussein vows to set fire to the hated alley to free himself forever. When Abbas talks wistfully about the wonderful place, Hussain declares he is a "brainless sheep", one who is thrifty, saving money, and has no reason to complain. Abbas objects that Hussein complains more than he, and has never said a "Praise be to God" in his life. He then admits each has his own religion. Hussein laughs loudly about how bartenders get greater profits and free liquor, and figures he should adopt British nationality—Abbas is too weak-kneed to be anything but Italian. At any rate, they will ship out together. The question, leaving the tavern, is where to go now.

Hamida misses her late-afternoon walks and spends that hour in front of her mirror. She now looks like a woman born to luxury, with clothing, hair, make up, and jewelry all bringing out her natural beauty. From the beginning, Hamida has exercised free will. Knowing what is expected of her, she instinctively rebels, enjoys the battle, and finally gives into Faraj's eloquence. She enters her new life without regret, quickly becomes the soldiers' favorite, and her savings prove her popularity. Hamida retains no happy memories; so unlike most of the girls forced into this life, she feels no remorse. Hamida's dreams are being fulfilled and she enjoys the power and authority she is receiving. She recalls the misery of hearing the first time that Faraj does not want to marry her, but realizes she has not been created for the duties marriage entails. Still, she is restless, dissatisfied, disillusioned, and resentful. Sex is not enough. She needs emotional power.





Faraj approaches, looking like a profitable sex merchant, not a hopeful seducer. She enjoys his attentions for two weeks before he reveals his true nature. Hamida finds it odd that someone who has never known love would build a life around love. He plays the role of ardent lover with every girl that falls into his net, and then cools once she is grown dependent on him financially and emotionally—and he holds over her the threat of arrest. Hamida assumes his indifference stems from having so many girls vying for his attention. She is suspicious as he approaches, apparently in a hurry, and ignores him. She feels independent only when soliciting; the rest of the time, she is a humiliated prisoner. Faraj is aware of her animosity and hopes she will get used to his coldness so he can push off completely. He delays the final blow. When he reminds her, "Time is money", Hamida resents the vulgarity. As he speaks sarcastically of love and demands she put work first—a speech she has heard many times before—Hamida he recalls how cleverly he begins criticizing her: first of her hands, then her voice. His words hurt and humiliate her, but he then soothes her and flatters her work. Lately, he has dropped all pretense of affection and told her "love" is just a silly word. Hamida is indignant. He knows she works hard and earns him more than all the other girls combined. When she demands to know if he loves her, Faraj temporizes, but Hamida will not be put off. She will die of grief if he says no. Faraj does not want to lose a day's profits, so he says he loves her.

The sound of these words is filthy and mortifying, but Hamida rises to the battle and demands they get married, if that is the case. Faraj is astonished, then loses patience, and finally decides to be candid. He laughs loud, sarcastically disparaging marriage as *déclassé*. Hamida can restrain herself no longer and leaps at his throat, but Faraj anticipates her move and restrains her, smiling mockingly. Hamida slaps him hard. Faraj knows physical combat will only strengthen the bonds he wants to break, so he withdraws, reminding her it is time for work. Hamida knows what this means and wants to kill Faraj. Instead, she runs away. Nostalgia for her opulent room nearly overcome Hamida. On the street, hot air takes her breath away. Knowing she is scarred but too strong to be destroyed, she hails a carriage to get some air and rest. She is oblivious to passersby staring at the flesh revealed as she crosses her legs in a short silk dress. Hamida daydreams about finding a new love. As the carriage circles the Opera House, Hamida thinks of her old neighborhood and wonders if anyone would recognize her now. She does not care. She is an orphan. As the carriage turns toward the tavern where Hamida works, she hears "Hamida!" called loudly, and sees Abbas an arm's length away.

Abbas is panting, having chased the carriage since Opera Square. Hussain first points to a beautiful woman passing by, but fails to recognize Hamida. Abbas looks, finds her vaguely familiar, and suddenly shouts, "Stop!" Leaving Hussain behind, Abbas sprints after the carriage towards Ezbekiya Gardens, and catches up as she is about to enter a tavern. Both are overcome by what they see. Hamida signals Abbas to follow into into a flower shop where Hamida is obviously a frequent customer. The discrete shopkeeper leaves them along. Face to face with his "mortal enemy", Abbas trembles with excitement and bewilderment. He has no idea why he has not simply let her pass, rather than pursuing her. He had run out of blind instinct, like a sleepwalker. Returning to his senses, Abbas finds no trace of the girl he once loved. Clearly, the rumors are



true, and the reality is shattering. Life seems futile. Abbas does not intend to harm or even humiliate her. Hamida looks at Abbas in confusion, contempt, and animosity—and curses the bad luck of having their paths cross.

Abbas breaks the unnerving silence, asking how Hamida could end up this way. Embarrassed but not ashamed, she says only it is God's unchangeable will. This arouses Abbas's anger and hatred and he bellows at her about being seduced by a degenerate. Hamida flares back, fearlessly, and demands he leave her sight. Abbas's anger vanishes and, trembling, he asks how his fiancée can talk this way. She shrugs off the past. He agrees, but wants to understand what has gone wrong: why has Hamida broken her promise and forsaken happiness with him? Impatiently, Hamida wishes he would drop the subject and leave, but aloud says the fates have wanted something other than she. He demands what pig has abducted her and turned her to prostitution. She declares this is her life, she cannot go back, and Abbas cannot change her. She is fleeing a horrible destiny. He should forget her, hate her if he wishes, but leave her in peace.

Abbas faces a total stranger. Gone is the Hamida he has loved, kissed, and discussed their future. Abbas tells her of returning yesterday from Tell el-Kebir, intending to marry, but puts away his necklace when he sees Hamida's jewelry. She mocks the suggestion she has regrets, but speaks melodramatically of paying for her mistakes "with my flesh and blood". Abbas takes this as a confession but is still bewildered. Meanwhile, Hamida contemplates how to get Abbas to kill Faraj. She tells Abbas that she is neither making excuses nor seeking forgiveness, but is controlled by a horrible man whom she loathes and despises, but cannot escape. Abbas takes the bait, and offers to smash his head in. Hamida hides her delight and is relieved when he maintains he cannot take her back.

Hamida tells Abbas he cannot find the monster today, but next Sunday afternoon she will point him out: the only Egyptian in a bar on this lane. Her tone suggests she fears the consequences for Abbas, but he is resolute. She doubts he is capable of murder, and suggests he hit Faraj, drag him to the police, and let the law handle him. Abbas, however, needs him to die—since his and Hamida's life together has been ruined. In answer to the question she has dreaded, Hamida says she will sell her jewelry and find a respectable job, far away. She is uneasy until Abbas repeats he cannot forgive her. Hamida wants both Abbas and Faraj to perish, and will not leave until she sees herself avenged. Abbas's heart is "geared for revenge", but also throbs with affection for Hamida, who only wants to be free of "parasites".

## Chapters 29-32 Analysis

This section examines Alwan's failure to recover psychologically from his brush with death, allowing the author to muse about inheritance matters and eschatology. The old man is re-infatuated with Hamida, who has vanished. It focuses next on Hamida. Her life as the talented and profitable prostitute Titi is sketched. Discussion of reporting girls to the police and hauling Faraj into court are puzzling, as under the British, Egyptian brothels are both legal and regulated. Perhaps Faraj is working underground, but his



operation sounds too elaborate for that. Faraj is following standard operating procedure with Titi: having hooked her, he moves on. Hamida cannot accept this and storms out. Note that she heads not for Alexandria, as she has apparently contemplated, but returns to the tavern where she normally solicits. She sets up Abbas as her avenger with surprising ease, and the process parallels Faraj's earlier seduction of her. The novel's climax has been well set up, but the outcome is not yet clearly inevitable.



# Chapters 33-35

## Chapters 33-35 Summary

Hussainy's relatives and friends gather to see him off on pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. They tell tales of pilgrimages ancient and modern, discuss sacred traditions, and one chants verse from the Qur'an. Hussainy gives a long, eloquent speech. When a friend wishes him "A happy journey and safe return", Hussainy asks not to be reminded of the latter, for those who visit God's house while longing for home God ignores. He will think of Egypt only after leaving the "scenes of the revelations", and reserve thought of "returning" for another pilgrimage—and perhaps ending his life in the Holy Land. He pictures places in his mind, throbs with love for God, and longs for Mecca, the Well of Zamzam, and the road taken by the Messenger on his Flight—and multitudes over thirteen hundred years. His heart chills, anticipating praying at the Prophet's grave and kneeling in the Holy Garden imagining the Prophet's face, and walking through Mecca reciting verses as they are first revealed. He will seek forgiveness and divine peace. He asks his friends only to pray to God that he will fulfill Hussainy's hopes.

His eyes glistening with joy and passion, Hussainy continues, talking about his love of life, which the All Merciful has filled with both tears and joys. He loves everything in the world and sees all as pure goodness. Evil is but "the inability of the sick to see the good concealed in the crevices". Worship consists equally of loving life and the afterlife. Those who complain about sickness and deny divine wisdom should consider the alternative: having never existed at all. Hussainy confesses to having questioned the timing of his son's death, but surrendered to God's wisdom as being greater than his own sorrow. He has passed a test of faith, and thanks God for it. Ever since, he gives heartfelt thanks for every affliction. Every test confirms that God applies power with wisdom—something human lovers often do, leading to delight. The afflicted are God's favorites. Hussainy is happy to comfort those who once thought him in need of consolation. He likens his contentment to a singer lost in a melody and elated by the power of his art. Most view tragedies afflicting the seemingly blameless as "signs of revengeful justice", but God is too just and merciful for this. He describes himself in the Qur'an as "mighty and revengeful", but only to indicate how men ought to settle their affairs. God's essential attributes are mercy and wisdom. Accepting the loss of his children as punishment would leave him depressed, dissatisfied, and void of forgiveness and mercy. Whatever reveals wisdom, goodness, and joy cannot be tragic.

Hussainy draws his opinions from both literal texts and scholastic interpretations of Islam. Some of his guests believe revenge is mercy, but he has not been inviting debate. Rather, he has expressed the feelings that well up inside him. Smiling, he discloses the hidden reason for undertaking the pilgrimage this year. Every time he has wanted to, God has made him put it off. Now, however, the devil has ensnared three of their neighbors in the alley, breaking his heart, and making him feel guilty about his own blessings. His conscience tells him he must go to the land of repentance and remain for



as long as God wills. He may then return and put all his energies into good works. The holy men say prayers for Hussainy and continue talking.

Hussainy visits Kirsha's Café to say goodbye to friends and remind them pilgrimage is "a duty for all who can make it", performed for themselves and for those who cannot. Kamil asks for prayer beads from Mecca. Hussainy promises not to be like the fellow who gives him a shroud and then laughs. He brings this up hoping to pull Abbas out of his misery. This failing, he offers advice: return to Tell el-Kebir today. Work hard, save money, never look back, get over this as a child does measles; be brave, patient, and faithful, and happy that God has chosen him to help those in need. Abbas says vaguely, "Everything will pass just as though it never happened". Hussainy turns next to the "cleverest fellow in our alley", Hussain Kirsha, with prayers God will put him in his father's place. Darwish asks to be remembered during the pilgrimage and to pass along his complaints about the sufferings he has endured from "the Lady of Ladies". Two relatives are accompanying Hussainy to Suez. On the way out of the alley, Hussainy embraces Alwan and hopes they can make pilgrimage next year together. Alwan answers mechanically. At the entrance, the carriage is loaded with baggage. After final farewells, it rolls away.

Kamil advises Abbas to heed Hussainy, to trust God, and to go. Abbas has told no one, but has gone over the meeting with Hamida many times, knows he still loves her, accepts he has lost her, and looks to avenge her. He tells Kamil he will remain through Sunday and all is in God's hands. Abbas goes Vita's Bar, hoping to find Hussain Kirsha, to tell him the story and seek his advice. He wants to stab his rival, but crime and violence go against his nature. He knows he should go to Tell el-Kebir. Hussain is already drunk at the bar, so Abbas drags him out while he still can talk. He announces finding Hamida in the carriage yesterday, relates their conversation, and concludes that the "filthy gangster" must be punished. Hussain sees Hamida as the real criminal. Agreeing on moral grounds, Abbas suggests their honor has been insulted. Recalling his sister has gone to prison in a similar scandal, Hussain hopes Hamida goes to the devil and says Abbas is jealous, not concerned with the alley's honor; had it been a matter of honor, Abbas would have killed or at least beaten Hamida.

Nevertheless, Hussain agrees to help beat the fellow as often as it takes to get paid off to stop. Revenge and profit go well together. Abbas is surprised and delighted at the clever plan, and Hussein enjoys being praised. He wants to return to Vita's Bar, but Abbas wants to scout out the tavern where they will meet the enemy. The streets are dark and noisy. Abbas feels elated, having his strong, brave friend beside him. He will let matters with Hamida fall where they may. He points out the flower shop and tavern. As they enter, Hussein looks carefully around, while Abbas sees Hamida entertaining a group of soldiers, is blinded with rage, and screams her name. She orders him to leave, but her voice is like gasoline on flames. Abbas hurls an empty beer glass in her face, making blood spurt. Her screams mingle with the shouts of the drunks who fall on Abbas, beating him from all sides. Hussain watches from the door and hears his friend's calls, but he can only watch in horror.



Hussain trudges in red eyed, sits opposite his father, and announces the British have murdered Abbas. He relates the story about Hamida and their plan, how Abbas goes berserk seeing "that bitch" in the tavern as they pass by, and how he is beaten senseless by dozens of soldiers. Hussein swears he had wanted to help, but there were too many. Kirsha declaims, "All power and strength are in God's hands". The police arrive too late to help, but take his body to the hospital and the whore to first-aid; no justice can be expected from the British. Kirsha offers more piety about God's creatures returning to him and sends his son to inform the relatives. Kirsha tells the story repeatedly to all who ask, and it gets augmented and changed in further tellings. Kamil staggers into the café and begins weeping like a child. How could the young man who has teased him about a shroud be gone? Umm Hamida streaks through the alley wailing, more for the killer than the victim, some think. Alwan is most deeply affected, for it means death has entered the alley, increasing his terrors. He goes back to following doctor's orders strictly.

Like all others, this crisis subsides and Midaq Alley is again indifferent and forgetful. It weeps in the morning, laughs in the evening, and in between, doors and windows creak open and shut. Afify clears out Booshy's flat and Kamil holds his belongings. He wants the dentist to live with him when he gets out of prison, because he is lonely. Umm Hamida renews contact with her foster daughter, who is recovering, and hopes to reap profit from all of this. A butcher, his wife, seven sons, and an extremely beautiful daughter rent Booshy's flat. People decorate for Hussainy's homecoming. Darwish sees Kamil gazing at the roof of the café, recites about man being forgotten without changing anyone's heart, and, seeing Kamil's tears, shrugs and continues: "Let him who dies of love die sad; there's no good in any love without death". Shuddering, Darwish continues begging mercy from the Lady of Ladies and telling the People of the House he will be patient as long as he lives, for all things have their nihaya: "e-n-d".

## Chapters 33-35 Analysis

The conclusion begins with Hussainy's pious thoughts on pilgrimage and on theodicy, already discussed in the context of Alwan. Hussainy deals at length with suffering and death of innocents—like his children—and how God orders everyone's birth, life, and death according to his wisdom. The faithful may not challenge this or look for other explanations. It is again made clear that Hussainy's position of honor in the community stems more from his loving disposition than his scholarship or orthodoxy. As he leaves, he advises Abbas to go back to work for the British and behave. Instead, Abbas fights the British and dies suddenly at their hands, thus requiring the burial shroud discussed at the novel's beginning. Hussainy notes the joke before the fact and Kamil afterwards in lament for his dead friend. Abbas's death is senseless; he is at the wrong time and place. Big-talking Hussain Kirsha is clever but worthless. Assuming prostitution is not a victimless crime, Hussain raises the question: who is to blame, while Umm Hamida and her daughter ask: who is to profit?



# Characters

## Abbas Hilu

A medium-height, pallid, slightly heavy barber with yellowish, wavy hair, Abbas has always lived in—and loved—Midaq Alley. He and Uncle Kamil, with whom he shares a flat, breakfast together every day after opening their shops and before working. Abbas is good-natured, gentle, peaceful, tolerant, kind, and conscientious about his religious duties. He has worked as a barber's helper for ten years before opening his own shop five years ago. He is satisfied with his lot and hates change. When Kamil complains he is so poor that when he dies, he will not be able to afford a burial shroud, Abbas claims to have bought one and laid it away. It is a joke that all but naive Kamil share. Abbas falls hopelessly in love with Hamida, whom he considers beyond him, but his old friend, Hussain Kirsha, argues he must pursue her. Hussain also pushes Abbas to abandon boring Midaq Alley and seek his fortune, like him, working for the British Army. Abbas gets the nerve to talk to Hamida, tells her of his plans, overcomes her lack of passion, becomes engaged, and goes off to Tell el-Kebir, where he lives frugally and dreams of Hamida. He returns on holiday months later, determined to marry, only to find Hamida has vanished without a trace. Within a day, Abbas crosses paths with Hamida—now a prostitute renamed Titi—and confronts her. She claims to have been seduced by a terrible man and easily gets peace-loving Abbas to swear vengeance. Hussain Kirsha reinforces Abbas's nerve but does not back him in a clash with British soldiers whom Titi is entertaining, and Abbas is brutally beaten to death.

## Hamida

A beautiful, shapely, dark-eyed girl in her twenties, Hamida longs for fine clothes and a rich husband, and loves to fight with her foster mother and anyone else within reach. Her black hair, which she combs often, applying kerosene to kill lice, reaches her mid thighs. When angry—which is often—Hamida sets her lips and narrows her eyes in an unfeminine look of strength and determination. Hamida takes daily strolls to Mousky Street, where she meets progressive young Egyptian women working in war factories and Jewish girls. She admires their freedom and affluence. She knows that Abbas the barber is in love with her but disdains him until he declares his intention of working for the British Army to earn money to give her a good life. Feeling little for him, Hamida agrees to marry and forces the enthusiasm to kiss him and promise to pray for him. While Abbas is away, rich, middle-aged businessman Salim Alwan announces his intention to marry Hamida, suffers a heart attack, and thus slips through her fingers. Having forgotten her fiancé, Hamida is vulnerable to the next man who shows interest. Educated, middle-class Ibrahim Faraj shows up during a political rally, and becomes a regular at Kirsha's Café, sneaking glances up at Hamida's window. During one of her walks, he approaches, withstands her aggression, and convinces her to visit his home. The next day, she is ready to leave the hateful alley. Soon, Faraj reveals he is a pimp, who teaches Hamida—renamed Titi—the prostitute's trade. She quickly becomes a



favorite of British troops, but cools towards Faraj. She and Abbas cross paths when he comes home on leave and searches for her. With little difficulty, she enlists him to kill Faraj in a week. She is entertaining British troops when Abbas happens into her tavern. Her behavior infuriates him and he throws a glass at her. The soldiers pummel him to death. During her recovery, Hamida makes up with her foster mother.

## Kirsha

A poor café owner, Kirsha squanders his considerable café income and takes risks peddling narcotics after dark. Regularly, Kirsha's sexual passions overwhelm him and he goes out looking for erotic adventures with young men. Kirsha's perversion is so well known he no longer hides it, and he enjoys creating scandal after scandal. He invites to his café a young salesman and serves him personally. When Mrs. Kirsha objects to his "sin", Kirsha demands she obey him. Kirsha is adept at playing dumb. He knows nothing about a "shameless youth", both to his wife and to Radwan Hussainy, the neighborhood holy man whom she drags into the dispute. Kirsha arrives at Hussainy's home with the ignorance of the promiscuous, but soon sees he has fallen into a trap. He feels panic, confusion, embarrassment, and indignation, but pretends not to understand. Kirsha declares that people gossip not because they disapprove but because they like to belittle him, and when substance is lacking, they invent things. He maintains all men do dirty things and this is his. He will find his own path. Kirsha leaves, cursing everyone. The Kirsha family has two major fights, first when son Hussain declares he is leaving their filthy house; unable to express his love, Kirsha declares the boy dead and gone to hell. The second time is when Hussain returns, married and unemployed. Kirsha insists he is not running an almshouse, but eventually gives in. Eyeing Hussein's new brother-in-law improves his mood. A political rally reveals that in his youth Kirsha was a revolutionary and supporter of the Wafd Party. Now, he supports whoever pays best. The revolutionary spirit is gone, as is the respectable life, as Kirsha cares only about pleasures of the flesh.

## Saniya Afify

The miserly owner of house, whose first floor she rents to Dr. Booshy and middle to Umm Hamida, Afify has been a widow for ten years and for most of that time has believed she is better off. Her late husband treated her badly and squandered her savings. She has rethought her position and seeks the services of marriage broker Umm Hamida, whose rent she grudgingly agrees to forget for life in exchange for her services. Afify wants a husband near her age but happily accepts thirty-year-old Ahmad Effendi Talbat, a civilian employee in the police department. He offers no dowry, but Umm Hamida happily helps her shop to make herself and her house presentable. Including in the improvements is the pulling of her rotten teeth and provision of a gold plate. She haggles with Dr. Booshy and insists he fit her as soon as possible. When Booshy and Zaita are arrested for desecrating tombs and a gold plate is found in their possession, Afify goes hysterical, frightening her new husband.





## Salim Alwan

The fifty-year-old owner of a large company whose office lies adjacent to Abbas's barbershop, Alwan is well built and well-off financially, with large Circassian mustaches, and a strutting walk. His wife is from the aristocratic Alifat family. His sons are professionals: judge Muhammad, attorney Arif, and physician Hassan. They want Alwan to sell his stressful business, retire, and take care of himself. Alwan, however, is both a workaholic and a sexaholic. His wife does not share his passion, which is deepened by daily lunches of husked green wheat mixed with pigeon meat and nutmeg, followed at two-hour intervals by tea. This ensures him two hours of sexual pleasure a night. Alwan has his eye on pretty, young Hamida, who disdains him until she hears of his proposal. Her mother is ready to seal the betrothal (ignoring Hamida's prior betrothal to Abbas Hilu) when Alwan suffers a near-fatal heart attack. This changes Alwan's personality. He becomes obsessed about death, and believes everyone is out to ruin his business or steal his money. He alienates the few people in Midaq Alley who try to be his friend.

## Dr. Booshy

A roving, self-trained dentist, Booshy dresses incongruously in a cloak, skullcap, and wooden shoes. He learns his trade by apprenticing to a dentist in the Gamaliya district and becomes sufficiently proficient to set out on his own. He is known for inflicting incredible pain and blood loss during extractions, but offers deeply discounted prices. Booshy rents a flat from the miserly widow, Saniya Afify, who, in anticipation of getting remarried, asks him to extract her teeth and replace them with a gold plate as soon as possible. Somewhat later, Booshy and the filthy cripple-maker Zaita, for whom Booshy solicits clients, are arrested stealing a gold plate from a recently deceased corpse and are jailed for it.

## Sheikh Darwish

A man in his fifties, whose native cloak and wooden sandals contrast with Western-style necktie and expensive-looking gold-rimmed spectacles, the homeless Darwish spends most of his time in Kirsha's Café sitting stiff as a statue and silent as a corpse, lost in a world of his own. He rouses himself, occasionally speaks his philosophical piece, inevitably ending with an Arabic word, which he translates into English and spells—and then sinks back into reverie. In his youth, Darwish is a diligent, energetic English language teacher in a religious foundation school until they merge with the Ministry of Education and he is demoted. His rebellious nature is provoked and the "Effendi" is eventually fired. He deserts family and friends and lives successfully on the streets (the "world of God"). He does not, as is sometimes claimed, work miracles or predict the future. He is beloved, honored, and welcomed everywhere as a good sign of God's favor.



## Ibrahim Faraj

The pimp who talks of love and of giving Hamida all the finer things in life before turning her into a prostitute, Faraj appears in Midaq Alley during a political rally for candidate Ibrahim Farhat. He stares insolently at beautiful Hamida as she returns from her daily walk, and seats himself in Kirsha's Café, where he appears to blow kisses towards her shuttered window as he smokes a water pipe. Faraj encounters her during another walk and convinces her that she has been put on earth to be taken—by him. He intends to give her all she deserves, for she is not like the denizens of this poor street. Talking her into taking the first taxi ride of her life and visiting his richly appointed apartment moves Faraj's plan along more swiftly than he expects. Soon she is living with him and learning all that is needed to become a top-earning prostitute. As he has with all his other girls, Faraj pulls back from talk of love and becomes businesslike. Hamida, whom Faraj has renamed Titi because British and American soldiers will find it amusing, confronts Faraj about their relationship and leaves the house when he refuses to marry her. She crosses paths with her ex-fiancé, Abbas Hilu, who agrees to make Faraj suffer for his crimes. Abbas does not live long enough to carry out the plan, however.

## Ibrahim Farhat

A short, husky, round-faced merchant on Nahasin Street turned politician, running under the Wafd Party banner, Farhat visits Kirsha's Café to seek the owner's influential support. Boys put up colorful posters on walls, but Kamil refuses one as being bad for business. Farhat travels with a retinue, walks self-confidently door to door, greeting people. People stream into Kirsha's Café and the candidate orders a round of tea for all. Farhat claims to be independent while adhering to the principles of Saad Zaghlul, but finds party spirit disruptive, and he intends in Parliament to promote the people's practical needs. If he wins, people will see "miracle after miracle". Moving on to the next establishment, Farhat asks Sheikh Darwish for his blessing but hears instead, "May the devil take you!"

## Radwan Hussainy

An impressively tall, broad man with a pinkish-red, glowing face and reddish beard, Hussainy wears a flowing black cloak and perpetual look of happiness, tolerance, and deep faith. He walks slowly and his smile announces love for people and life. He never lets a day pass in which he does not do some good deed for the unfortunate. He owns a house on the right side of Midaq Alley and takes less rent than he is entitled to under the laws of military occupation from tenants Kirsha, Uncle Kamil, and Abbas. His failure to graduate from the University of al-Azhar and loss of all his children nearly choke him with despair, but his faith restores him and he becomes a source of consolation to all. Hussainy often invites his friends to the roof of his house for a small party after the café closes for the night. In the course of the novel, Hussainy is involuntarily drawn into the battle between Kirsha and his wife over Kirsha's new gay interest and into passing judgment on the validity of Hamida's betrothal to Abbas Hilu when a better offer comes



along. Towards the end of the novel, Hussainy realizes his life's desire of making pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. He gives a long, thoughtful farewell oration to colleagues and says simple farewells—and offers advice—to friends in Kirsha's Café.

## **Jaada and Husniya**

Husband and wife bakers whose shop is next door to Kirsha's Café, Jaada and Husniya are constantly at war with one another. Husniya rents a filthy outbuilding to Zaita, a filthy loner who earns his living by creating cripples and spends time before midnight spying through a hole in the wall on the couple as they fight and make love. When Jaada is away for the day at the baths, Zaita makes his move on Husniya and is dropped in the dust by this formidable woman.

## **Uncle Kamil**

A hulking, balding, florid-faced maker and seller of sweets, Kamil owns a shop to the right of Midaq Alley's entry. Kamil habitually sleeps on the shop's threshold with a flyswatter on his lap. He is most characterized by his high voice. Kamil complains about being in such deep poverty that he will not be able to afford a funeral shroud. Kamil and his barber friend, Abbas Hilu, with whom he shares a flat in Radwan Hussainy's house, breakfast together every day after opening their shops and before working. Kamil's confectionary artistry is well known outside the alley, but he has never prospered financially. Abbas as a joke claims to have bought for him and laid it away a fine funeral shroud. Everyone in Kirsha's Café goes along with the practical joke on the famously gullible Kamil, who tries unsuccessfully to get his hands on it, to sell it, and use the profits while alive. Kamil is heartbroken when Abbas sells his shop and moves to Tell el-Kebir to earn a wartime fortune and return to provide for his new fiancée, Hamida, the kind of life she wants and deserves. Kamil chants the Qur'an with Umm Hamida to seal the betrothal before Abbas departs. Months later, it falls to Kamil to break the news that Hamida has disappeared without a trace to Abbas, who is home on leave. Abbas searches for her, unexpectedly finds her, and dies when the British troops she is entertaining as a whore beat him to death. Kamil is distraught and mentions the irony of the burial shroud.

## **Mrs. Kirsha (Umm Hussain)**

The proud daughter of a pious Muslim holy man, Mrs. Kirsha—whose kunya is Umm Hussain—is approaching fifty, and is strong, courageous, and sharp tempered. She has born six daughters and one son. Long ago she nursed the orphaned Hamida alongside her Hussain, but now criticizes the young woman. Umm Hussain's greatest worry is that her husband has returned to his "filthy disease" of homosexuality. She resolves to take decisive action, despite the consequences. When the café closes at midnight, she demands he repent and grows furious when he pretends not to understand. She threatens to go public with the scandal. She asks neighborhood holy man Radwan



Hussainy to intervene before she sends "fire raging through the whole alley". She would leave if it were not for her age and the children. Hussainy fails in his mission and Umm Hussain attacks the boy, punching, slapping, and nearly strangling him with his necktie. She returns home under protest. The Kirsha family fights two more pitched battles, the first being when Hussain declares he is leaving home. Umm Hussain begs her only comfort not to leave, but Kirsha declares the boy dead and gone to hell. The second battle is when Hussain returns, married and unemployed. Kirsha insists he is not running an almshouse, but eventually gives in to his wife's pleadings.

## Hussain Kirsha

The son of the Kirsha Café's owner, Hussain is in his twenties, and is slight, delicate, fit, clever, energetic, intelligent, courageous, and aggressive. He dresses well and shows off possessions like a gold wristwatch, frequents cinemas and cabarets, eats meat, drinks wine, loves women, smokes hashish, and entertains friends. His motto is: "live large". After working both for his father and in a bicycle shop, Hussein becomes a day laborer for the British Army, and convinces his friend Abbas Hilu to abandon his meager existence as a barber and do likewise. Hussain is convinced Germany and Japan will hold out for at least ten more years. World War II is a gift from God to the Egyptians. Hussain is also doing well in the black market. Abbas takes the advice and goes to Tell el-Kebir, having become betrothed to Hamida. Hussain fights with his father and moves to Wayliya, where he marries Sayyida. Laid off like brother-in-law Abdu, penniless, and on the verge of hawking Sayyida's jewelry, Hussein trudges home. His mother smothers him with hugs and kisses, but his father insists he is not running an almshouse. He lets them stay temporarily and in time suggests Hussein take over running the café. Hussain prefers Vita's Bar, where he introduces Abbas to red wine. He is with his friend when he is beaten to death by British troops and brings the sorrowful news home to Midaq Alley.

## The Poet

A senile old man, led about by a boy, "The Poet" is a part of a dying breed, the public reciter. He carries a two-stringed fiddle and a book, and makes a regular nuisance of himself reciting ancient stories in a harsh voice to the patrons of Kirsha's Café. Kirsha has for some time been trying to ban him from performances in his café and has now installed a secondhand radio to discourage him further. The poet begs to stay, as the other cafés have already thrown him out and he must support himself and the son he is apprenticing.

## Sanker

The waiter in Kirsha's Café, Sanker is kept busy all the time.



## Susu

The effeminate dance instructor at Ibrahim Faraj's "school", Susu identifies himself as the dancers' sister and declares dance is the art of arts, and a sure path to financial reward.

## Umm Hamida

A well-built, fit, and healthy woman in her mid-sixties, Umm Hamida has protruding eyes, pockmarked cheeks, and a rough, resonant voice, which she frequently uses to quarrel with neighbors. She works as a bath attendant and as a marriage broker, but her avocation is gossip. She is the adoptive mother of a beautiful orphan, Hamida (hence the kunya "Hamida's Mother", her birth name is never given). They rent a dingy middle flat in a house owned by the widow Saniya Afify, who seeks Umm Hamida's professional help. The price Umm Hamida demands is free rent for life. Umm Hamida frequently fights with her foster daughter about her pickiness in men and doubts she will ever marry. She would like to match her to old Sheikh Darwish. Hamida surprisingly agrees to marry Abbas Hilu, the barber, after he decides to make his fortune working for the British Army. Umm Hamida and Uncle Kamil recite from the Qur'an to make it official. Shortly thereafter, however, rich merchant Salim Alwan seeks her hand and Umm Hamida prepares to recite with him, but finds he has been felled by a heart attack. Her visions of a life of ease on her daughter's coattails vanish. Umm Hamid is distraught when her daughter vanishes one afternoon during her daily walk. Eventually Abbas finds her, working as a prostitute. He wounds her, and is beaten to death by her clients. While Hamida recovers, Umm Hamida restores relations and thinks of how to profit from the tragedy.

## Zaita

A filthy recluse, black-on-black, who rents a hole in the wall from the baker Husniya, Zaita earns his living by creating cripples who wish to improve their chances as beggars. Zaita regularly spies on the bakers, enjoys watching "full-bodied" Husniya beat Jaada, and later coyly seduce him. Zaita detests and envies Jaada, and imagines throwing hatchets at him. Scorned for his filthiness and stench, Zaita imagines torturing all his neighbors. When he cripples a customer, Zaita is cunning and vicious. His eyes light up at their screams of pain. Still, he considers beggars the best of people and wishes they would form the majority of humankind. He begins work at midnight, leaving quietly and walking deliberately to the Mosque of Hussain, where beggars recognize his sovereignty. He makes the rounds, rousing them to collect his due. Dr. Booshy solicits customers for Zaita and Zaita helps the squeamish Booshy retrieve gold teeth from recently deceased corpses. The pair is caught red-handed and imprisoned.



# Objects/Places

## Midaq Alley

The primary setting for the novel, Midaq Alley, is a relic of a once glorious gem, located off historic Sanadiqiya Street in Cairo, Egypt. The surrounding quarters are Ghouriya and Sagha. The alley exists in isolation from them. It is a dead-end lined on one side by an importer's business operation, which employs outsider workers, a husband-and-wife run bakery, a confectionary that enjoys a good reputation outside the alley, a barbershop, two adjoining three-story houses, and Kirsha's Café, at night the alley's only source of illumination, where everyone congregates. The streets get washed on the few occasions Cairo gets rain. Most of the time, the inhabitants are indifferent and forgetful. The alley is said to weep in the morning, laugh in the evening, and in between, doors and windows creak open and shut.

## Kirsha's Café

A dingy, dilapidated square room with arabesque-covered walls, a few couches, and a newly installed secondhand radio, Kirsha's Café is the setting for much of Midaq Alley. Kirsha normally tends the till, mellow on hashish, while Sanker the waiter is kept busy. Every evening after work patrons file in, smoke water pipes, drink coffee or tea, joke, philosophize, argue, and debate. The owner and his wife openly fight. When the café closes around midnight, Kirsha goes off to hashish parties on the roofs or sexual encounters elsewhere. His son, Hussain, does not want to take over the operation.

## British Army

Egyptian readers need no explanation of why the British Army is in Egypt during World War II, so none is given. Foreign readers with some historical background may assume that they are leftovers from fighting the Germans at Tobruk and El Alamein, two landmark events not mentioned in the novel. The British are simply in Egypt providing gainful employment for Egyptian civilians and opportunities to participate in a thriving black market. Abbas Hilu works at the British base at Tell el-Kebir. The British also seem to have restricted rent increases for the duration of the war, and their soldiers (along with some Americans) are enthusiastic and well-paying patrons of Cairo's bordellos. The British are, in fact, hated colonial occupiers since 1882 and supposed independence in 1922 makes little difference. Café owner Kirsha is said to have mellowed to the point he hates no one, including the British. When Abbas is pummeled to death by British soldiers upset that he has disturbed their entertainment by Titi (Hamida), his friend says with resignation that there will be no justice for him under British rule.



## Hashish

A narcotic substance popular in the Middle East, hashish is allowed by the Qur'an but forbidden by secular authorities, in contrast with wine, which the Qur'an forbids but secular authorities allow. Hashish is one of café owner Kirsha's passions, as a consumer and as a dealer, which is shown to be a risky proposition, as authorities arrest several fellow dealers. Kirsha claims that it soothes the mind, comforts the body, and is an excellent aphrodisiac.

## Mosque of Hussain

One of the holiest Muslim places in Cairo, the Mosque of Hussain is located near Midaq Alley and al-Azar University, which Radwan Hussainy once attends but fails to graduate. An ancient cemetery surrounds the mosque. The mosque honors the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and enshrines his head. "Lord Hussain" is martyred while leading a rebellion against the Caliphate, the event that begins the rift between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. Shiites consider Hussain the Third Imam and every year mourn his death. Zaita makes nightly rounds of the square around the mosque, collecting his portion of beggars' earnings, and Dr. Booshy hides tools there needed to break into newly-sealed tombs and steal gold teeth to reuse in his dental practice.

## Mecca and Medina

Pious Muslims who are physically and financially able are obliged at least once in their lives to undertake a pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca and Medina. This novel shows Radwan Hussainy finally setting off on this sacred journey, which one thing or another has prevented all his life. Now the loss of three members of the Midaq Alley community inspire him to go, seeking forgiveness for all. He and religiously minded friends gather to recall tales of the hajj, and Hussainy describes many of the activities that occur during the hajj, including visits to the Well of Zamzam, along the road taken by the Messenger on his Flight, praying at the Prophet Muhammad's grave, kneeling in the Holy Garden imagining the Prophet's face, and walking through Mecca reciting verses, as they are first revealed. Hussainy seeks forgiveness and divine peace.

## Sharif Pasha Street

The street of apartment buildings, whose entranceways are wider than that of Midaq Alley, Sharif Pasha Street is home to the pimp Ibrahim Faraj lives. He conveys poor but ambitious Hamida there by taxi—the first time she has ridden in one—and impresses her with electricity, mirrors, running water, and fine furniture. Eventually, his cruelty forces her to run away, but by then she is nostalgic for the finer things in life, even if they must be bought by prostituting herself.



## **Tell el-Kabir**

Historic Tell el-Kabir is no more than a place name in the novel, the site of the British Army based where Abbas Hilu finds employment as a day laborer.

## **Vita's Bar**

A working-class bar located in the Jewish Quarter of Cairo, Vita's Bar becomes a favorite haunt of Hussain Kirsha after he is laid off and forced to return home to Midaq Alley. Hussain takes his old friend Abbas Hilu there and introduces him to wine. Outside Vita's, Abbas accidentally crosses paths with his ex-fiancée, Hamida, and races off to his bloody fate.

## **Wafd Party**

After World War I, a "delegation" (wafd) seeks international approval of independence for Egypt but is rebuffed by the British. Leaders organize a nationalist political party, led by Saad Zaghlul, who is mentioned in the novel. Mustafa al-Nahhas is also mentioned as Prime Minister of Egypt. He serves many times. This reference helps set the novel in late 1944. Fictional character Ibrahim Farhat runs under the Wafd banner, and Kirsha during his earlier political days supports the Wafd.





# Themes

## Religion

Midaq Alley is superficially full of religious language, which Western readers may find coming from every character, from the most pious to the most debauched. This is typical of Arabic, however, and is as much a reflex as when a Westerner automatically says "Bless you" when someone sneezes. Beneath this, Islam is shown embedded in the lives of these people. Young Abbas Hilu is said to be conscientious about his religious duties but is occasionally lazy. These duties (the "Five Pillars" of Islam) are: 1) profession of faith, 2) ritual prayer, 3) giving alms, 4) fasting during Ramadan, and 5) pilgrimage to Mecca. In addition, Shiites, which these Egyptians clearly are, given their devotion to "Lord Hussain", also pay special attention to jihad (holy war), living virtuously and encouraging others to do likewise, and refraining from evil actions and to encouraging others to do likewise. Holy war is not mentioned, but Radwan Hussainy is a paragon of the other two. He, in particular, is shown trying to talk Kirsha out of his "sin", reminding himself beforehand of the teaching that one who reforms a profligate does better than one who sits with a believer, and that God—not men—leads people where he wishes.

Alwan remembers wanting to make the profession of faith whenever he regains consciousness following his heart attack. Ritual prayer five times a day toward Mecca is not shown, but Umm Hussain is careful when greeting the pious Hussainy to position her robe over her hand before shaking his, thus preserving his ritual purity. Several times, there are references to the strict dietary laws which outright forbid pork and wine and require the pious to investigate ingredients before consuming. The formal giving of alms is not shown, but Afify is shown distributing voluntary charity to beggars as she prepares to wed. Curiously, she also lights candles in a Christian church. There is a hint of Ramadan fasting discipline, when the revelers end their nighttime celebration once white and black threads can be distinguished at daybreak. Because Hussainy is participating in it, much attention is given to the fifth pillar, the Hajj, a requirement of every able-bodied Muslim who can afford to do so at least once in his or her lifetime. The change into ritual clothing is mentioned and some of the rituals but, curiously, not the circling of the Ka'aba and touching the Black Stone.

## Sex

Midaq Alley looks at sex from a number of angles. The most prominent is Kirsha's homosexuality. The local religious expert, Radwan Hussainy, declares it "unworthy" for an older, respectable man open the door and invite the devil in this way. Hussainy does not wish to offend or shame Kirsha, but insists he must repent, abandon this "filth created by Satan", and never again see this "dissolute youth", who Hussainy wrongly sees as the seducer. By continuing in sin, Kirsha risks losing every penny. Kirsha objects that all men do dirty things and this is his. Mrs. Kirsha is blunt and when the



"woman in the clothes of a man" visits the café, she confronts him. When he dares call her a "fellow wife", she punches and slaps him, drawing blood and nearly strangling him with his necktie. He flees, but all realize if he does not return, another will. The café returns to its usual atmosphere until Kirsha shouts that no woman will enslave him. Darwish speaks of the evil of "h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l-i-t-y", and notes only descendants of Muhammad may enjoy true love.

Several characters help understand the Muslim understanding of marriage. God and his Prophet bless it and the desire for it is nothing to be ashamed of. Afify is fifty years old, ten years a widow, and ready to remarry. Umm Hamida, the matchmaker, arranges a betrothal to a thirty-year-old. Salim Alwan, a rich, middle-aged businessman, is both a workaholic and sexaholic whose daily lunch consists of husked green wheat mixed with pigeon meat and nutmeg, followed at two-hour intervals by tea. This ensures him two hours of sexual pleasure a night. His wife does not share his passion, so he fixes his eye on pretty, young Hamida. He is ready to take her as a lawful second wife—Islam requires only that a man have sufficient wealth to provide for both and treat both equally—but suffers a near-fatal heart attack before a betrothal can be arranged. After his recovery, Alwan resumes thinking about adding a second, more responsive wife. Hamida at this point has freed herself mentally and emotionally from her prior engagement to Abbas Hilu, whose kisses excite her but otherwise leaves her indifferent. She is happy to attract the attention of a handsome stranger and allows him to maneuver her into falling in love with him. He is, in fact, a pimp, and uses talk of love to turn her into the prostitute "Titi". He refrains from taking her virginity because foreign clients will pay handsomely. Most of her colleagues experience self-loathing, but Hamida has no moral qualms about this new life, and positively enjoys the income and the empowering that solicitation brings.

## War

Midaq Alley is set in the closing month of World War II in a backwater area, far from any fighting and suffering. All of the characters who comment on the war find in a financial boon—even a gift of God—for their impoverished country. The British Army pays good wages to Egyptian civilian day laborers and circumstances on base make possible lucrative involvement in the black market. These workers wear nice clothing and accessories, eat meat (normally an unaffordable luxury), learn to enjoy wine (proscribed for Muslims), enjoy seeing films and partaking of other forms of entertainment they have never imagined. Likewise, Egyptian women drawn into the workforce as factory laborers experience a liberation that becomes the envy of other girls. Their prosperity and freedom are inspirational.

Egypt is de facto a British colony, but war sentiment as expressed by Kirsha, the alley's most politically astute member, is pro-German. In part, this is because the war has brought prosperity to Egypt and Germany's defeat would bring economic depression. In part, it is also admiration for the charismatic figure of Adolf Hitler. Kirsha thinks of him as "the world's greatest bully", and admires him precisely because he is cruel and barbaric. He does not, however, consider him and Nazism in terms of the Holocaust, as Western

readers in the 21st century might expect. Rather, Kirsha wishes Hitler success like those mythical figures of pre-Islamic Arabic literature, Antar and Abu Zaid. References to the Jews in the novel are generally positive: Jewish women appear to be the only people in Cairo. The Jewish Quarter offers bars where Muslims can partake of a forbidden pleasure. Kirsha earlier in life takes place in the Rebellion of 1919, which involves vandalism and warring against Armenians and Jews, but it is commonplace in the Middle East for these two groups and the Greeks to incur popular wrath when their entrepreneurial talents elevate them too highly above the Arab masses.

# Style

## Point of View

An impersonal narrator tells the stories of Midaq Alley as a simple narrative of events. This narrator is privy to character's thoughts and reveals them, particularly when they conflict with what that character is saying out loud. A great deal of the novel is given over to dialog. The narrator shows tenderness towards run-down, shabby, backward Midaq Alley and for most of its inhabitants. Two inhabitants leave to seek their fortune. The narrator sides with the one who is sad to leave and makes it difficult for the one who hates it to return as a prodigal son. The narrator shows no compassion for Zaita, the filthy, recluse peeping tom who creates cripples, extorts money, and robs tombs. Mrs. Afify's pretend qualms about remarrying are handled tongue-in-cheek, but despite her miserliness, she is not portrayed unkindly. The minor characters are there to provide color and are handled neutrally.

In general, the narrator stays neutral on issues one might not think would crop up in such a back alley environment: drug dealing and consumption, homosexuality, black marketeering, election fraud, and discrete solicitation to prostitution. He usually states arguments for and against each issue and then leaves it as a matter of personal choice. Several times the neighborhood holy man, Radwan Hussainy, is consulted on moral matters and he delivers black-and-white answers based on his admittedly non-scholarly understanding of Islam. The narrator has great fun showing how those who disagree with him squirm in his presence, but the narrator does not pass judgment if they reject his advice. He even seems to side with Kirsha, who believes in "live and let live" and "men are like that". Hamida is so tightly wound, grasping, and materialistic that she verges on villainy, but shows a tender, vulnerable side that redeems her until she manipulates Abbas in precisely the way she is earlier manipulated into prostitution. Then the narrator turns scornful, and when Abbas and his friend debate whether she or the pimp is guiltier, he shows compassion for neither. This he reserves for Abbas who dies because he is in the wrong place at the wrong time.

## Setting

Midaq Alley is set in Cairo, Egypt, during World War II. Internal indications are that it begins in the autumn of 1944 and ends in the spring of 1945. Italy's withdrawal from fighting on the Axis side suggests late summer/fall of 1944, and it is said that Salim Alwan's heart attacks occurs during the cold months, while his return to work comes in the spring. There are no references to great battles fought between the British and Germans at Tobruk or El Alamein in 1941; the British simply are present, preventing rent increase, doing little about the black market, keeping prostitutes busy, and at first stimulating the economy considerably. By the end, they are laying off Egyptian day workers, which also suggests the conflict is ending. Characters lament that Hitler appears unwilling or unable to fight on for another ten years. A political rally is depicted



which also suggests a setting in 1944, because it names a historical character, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Nahas, who loses office that year.

Midaq Alley is a relic of a once glorious gem, located off historic Sanadiqiya Street in Cairo, surrounded by Ghouriya and Sagha. It is a dead-end, in isolation from the rest of the city, and most of the novel takes place there. The old folks are comfortable there, young Abbas loves living there, and his friend Hussain Kirsha hates it passionately. Both leave, with different emotions. Hamida takes daily walks outside and encounters young women working in factories and thinks of a different future. Eventually, she is transported by taxi to modern Sharif Pasha Street, home of the pimp Ibrahim Faraj, who introduces her to an opulent new world as a high-scale prostitute.

## Language and Meaning

Midaq Alley is narrated in the past tense in flowing idiomatic English. The original is, of course, in modern Egyptian Arabic. The Introduction by translator Trevor Le Gassick discusses the difficulties of rendering Arabic syntax and vocabulary into idiomatic English. He claims to have tried to make it sound as if Mahfouz's native tongue was English and he had written in it. He has condensed, dropped, simplified, and defined in context various phrases, passages, names, doing so as little as possible. Le Gassick mentions but does not elaborate on the problem of presenting so complex a culture to another. Western readers may find it odd that God (only once transliterated as Allah) is present in virtually every line of dialog spoken by every character, from the most pious to the most debauched. This is typical of Arabic, and amounts emotionally to little more than the reflex of saying "Bless you" when someone sneezes. The blend of East and West in Egypt is shown as are the internal cultural changes as Egypt confronts the future. This is symbolized in the two streets: backward, impoverished, unwashed, dead-end Midaq Alley, where most of the novel is set, and modern Sharif Pasha Street, which by a taxi drive transports an ambitious girl like Hamida to a new, more prosperous life, if she is willing to prostitute herself. Between lie streets where the girls who work in the wartime factories walk, suggesting times can change less dramatically.

## Structure

Midaq Alley is told in thirty-five chapters in a smooth linear narrative. Many of the chapters are quite short and in the summary/analysis have been dealt with as larger units. The major actors are introduced and briefly characterized, then left to be fleshed out in the context of adventures and crises. The most serious is Kirsha, the café owner's latest homosexual fling. His wife has had enough and is determined to reform him. She draws in the alley's resident holy man, but to no avail. The spouses have several rows, which delight the alley gossips, and fight over their son Hussain's acts of abandoning the paternal home and limping back when his plans fall short.

Barber Abbas Hilu and confectioner Uncle Kamil and are best friends and share a flat. Abbas falls in love with the beautiful Hamida, who wants the finer things in life. Abbas is



her only marriage option in the alley, and holds little attraction, but decides to seek his fortune working for the British Army to win her hand. She accepts, and they are officially betrothed. Abbas disappears for a time, during which Hamida falls into two love triangles in rapid succession, the second one taking her away from Midaq Alley and into a life of prostitution on modern Sharif Pasha Street. Lesser vignettes that keep the novel interesting involve matchmaking, cripple-making, domestic rows, an ill-timed attempt at seduction, the emotional aftermath of a near-death experience, a crooked election campaign, and the robbing of a tomb.

The climax has Abbas and Hussain Kirsha both return, one dejected, married, and out of work, and the other elated and intending to marry. Abbas learns of Hamida's disappearance and their paths happen to cross. He agrees to avenge her but dies tragically before he can attack the pimp. Midaq Alley returns quickly to its quiet, timeless ways.

## Quotes

"By profession she was a bath attendant and a marriage broker, and was both shrewd and talkative. To be sure, her tongue was hardly ever still and she scarcely missed a single report or scandal concerning anyone or any house in the neighborhood. She was both a herald and a historian of bad news of all kinds and a veritable encyclopedia of woes." Chap. 2, p. 16

"He had scarcely anything to do with the alley in which he dwelt. Zaita visited none of its people, nor did they visit him. He had no need for anyone, nor anyone for him. Except, that is, for Dr. Booshy and the fathers who resorted to scaring their children with his image. His trade was known to all, a trade which gave him the right to the title of 'Doctor,' although he did not use it out of respect for Booshy. It was his profession to create cripples, not the usual, natural cripples, but artificial cripples of a new type. "People came to him who wanted to become beggars." Chap. 7, p. 55

"Radwan Hussainy greeted him and invited him to be seated. Kirsha sat down in the armchair occupied so short a time before by his wife; a cup of tea was poured for him. He felt completely at ease and confident, with not a trace of apprehension or fear, and he had no idea why Hussainy had invited him here. With all those who reach his state of confusion and promiscuity, prudence and intuition are likely to vanish." Chap. 10, p. 93

"She asked herself which one of them would not consider herself lucky to become engaged to a café waiter or blacksmith's apprentice. Indeed, he was the owner of a shop, definitely middle class. Moreover, he wore a suit. She constantly made practical comparisons, but never allowed herself to be drawn into his magical world of dreams. Only occasionally and briefly was she emotionally moved and at these rare times she seemed to be truly in love." Chap. 14, p. 105

"He had no favorites either, and it was surprising, then, that at one time he felt a curious enthusiasm for the present war, in which he sided with the Germans. He often wondered about Hitler's plans and whether it was possible that the Führer might lose the war and whether the Russians would not be wise to accept the unilateral peace offered them. Kirsha thought of Hitler as the world's greatest bully; indeed, his admiration for him stemmed from what he heard of his cruelty and barbarity. He wished him success, viewing him like those mythical bravados of literature Antar and Abu Zaid." Chap. 19, p. 152

"He entered her life at a time when she was overcome with despair. Salim Alwan had collapsed near death after giving her a day and a half of hope for the life she had always wanted, and now this had happened, after she had banished Abbas from her dreams. Because she now knew there was no hope of marrying Alwan, she renewed her engagement to the barber, even though she felt only scorn for him." Chap. 20, p. 161



"So the days of preparation passed, full of endless activities, pleasures, and hopes, dyeing of hair and collecting perfumes, extracting teeth and making a gold plate; and all of this was costing money. The widow, struggling to overcome her stinginess, tossed her savings in the path of that long-awaited day. She even gave money to the mosque of Hussain and dispersed it liberally to the poor surrounding it. In addition, she donated forty candles to St. Shaarany.

"Umm Hamida was overcome with amazement at the widow's sudden generosity. She clasped her hands together and said to herself, 'Are men worth all this trouble? Long may your wisdom reign, O Lord, for it is You who have decreed that women worship men . . .'" Chap. 21, p. 172

"He laughed out loud, asking, 'And are pimps not men too? Oh yes, my lovely young woman, they are real men, but not like others, I agree. Will ordinary men ever give you anything but headaches? Why, pimps are stockbrokers of happiness! But in any case, don't forget that I love you. Please don't let anger finish our love. I'm inviting you to happiness, love, and dignity.'" Chap. 23, p. 197

"Zaita stopped short and then rushed down the steps, icy with fear and not knowing what to do. He retreated backward into the vault until his heel touched the corpse. He moved forward a step and stood glued to the floor, not knowing where to escape to. He thought of lying down between the corpses but before he could make a move he was enveloped in a dazzling light that blinded him. A loud voice shouted out in an Upper Egyptian accent, 'Up you come, or I'll fire on you.'

"In despair, he climbed the steps as ordered. He had completely forgotten the set of gold teeth in his pocket." Chap. 27, p. 228

"After his convalescence he had made a point of having a serious consultation with his doctor. He assured Alwan that he was cured of his heart condition but advised him to take care and to live cautiously. Salim Alwan complained about his insomnia and tensions, and the doctor advised a nerve specialist. Now he consulted a procession of specialists in nerves, heart, chest, and head. Thus his illness opened a door to a world populated by germs, symptoms, and diagnoses. It was amazing, for he had never believed in medicine or doctors. Now in his troubled state his faith in them was entire." Chap. 29, p. 240

"I do not declare myself innocent. Once sorrow overcame me too and it ate away a piece of my heart. In the throes of my pain and sorrow I asked myself: Why did God not leave my child to enjoy his share of life and happiness? Did not He, the Glorious and Almighty, create the child? Why, then, should He not take him back when He wished? If God had wanted him to have life, then the child would have remained on earth until His will was done. But He reclaimed my child in all the wisdom His will decreed. God does nothing that is not wise, and wisdom is good. My Lord wished well of both me and the child. A feeling of joy overcame me when I realized that His wisdom was greater than my sorrow." Chap. 33, p. 271





"This was the normal pattern of life in the alley, disturbed only occasionally when one of its girls disappeared or one of its menfolk was swallowed by the prison. But soon such bubbles subsided into its lakelike surface, calm or stagnant, and by evening whatever might have happened in the morning was almost forgotten." Chap. 35, p. 282



## Topics for Discussion

What function does the unnamed Poet play in the novel?

What is Uncle Kamel's function in the novel?

What is the social function of gossip in the novel?

How is wine depicted in the novel?

Who is guiltier: Hamida, or Faraj for her descent into prostitution?

What is the position of women in the novel and how does its portrayal make you feel?

How does Midaq Alley help you better understand the world of Islam?