

Sufi Symbolism

In Naguib Mahfouz's *Children of the Alley*

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Abstract

Although about six decades have passed since it was first serialized in *Al Ahram* newspaper in 1959, Naguib Mahfouz's *Children of the Alley* remains as controversial as it has always been. It has always been the target of criticism for its godless universe, yet it is very rich in its Sufi symbolism. Despite accusations of blasphemy against the novel, it is fraught with Sufi symbols. Sufi concepts such as divine adoration, hope, repentance, humility, knowledge, purification, nearness and distance, spiritual journey, recollection of God and hermitage are all evident in *Children of the Alley*. These concepts are analyzed in the light of the stories of Gabalawi, Adham, Gabal, Rifaa, Qassem and Arafa that are inherent in Sufism. Places in *Children of the Alley* are also imbued with Sufi significance such as Hind's Rock and the mansion at the top of the alley. As Mahfouz says that the allegories in his writings can be read in various ways depending on the reader, the current study claims to interpret the Sufi symbols in *Children of the Alley*.

Keywords: Sufism, Symbolism, Naguib Mahfouz, Children of the Alley

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Introduction

Although about six decades have passed since it was first serialized in *Al Ahram* newspaper in 1959, Naguib Mahfouz's *Children of the Alley* remains as controversial as it has always been. It has always been the target of criticism for its godless universe, yet it is very rich in its Sufi symbolism. Despite accusations of blasphemy against the novel, it is fraught with Sufi symbols. Sufi concepts such as divine adoration, hope, repentance, humility, knowledge, purification, nearness and distance, spiritual journey, recollection of God and hermitage are all evident in *Children of the Alley*. These concepts are analyzed in the light of the stories of Gabalawi, Adham, Gabal, Rifaa, Qassem and Arafa that are inherent in Sufism. Places in *Children of the Alley* are also imbued with Sufi significance such as Hind's Rock and the mansion at the top of the alley. As Mahfouz says that the allegories in his writings can be read in various ways depending on the reader, the current study claims to interpret the Sufi symbols in *Children of the Alley*.

Mahfouz (1911-2006) is an Egyptian writer who won the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature. Mahfouz, who was born in Al-Jamaleyyah in Cairo, Egypt, studied Sufism academically after graduation when he registered for an MA about Sufism with Shaikh Mustafa Abdel Razik. In *Children of the Alley*, Mahfouz succeeds in conveying his esoteric Sufi symbols, expressing the ineffable ontological themes, in unequivocal terms. Robert Irwin

describes *Children of the Alley* as a “religio-socio-logical allegory” (162). As *Children of the Alley* is religiously inclined, it includes many Sufi insights. In spite of being embedded in Egyptian history, the novel has its universal connotations (Najjar 156).

This pursuit of God is the ultimate target of all Sufi orders, following the various Sufi stations towards God: repentance (*tawba*), patience (*ṣabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), hope (*rajāʿ*), fear (*khawf*), renunciation (*zuhd*), trust (*tawakkul*), contentment (*riḍāʿ*) and love (*maḥabba*) (Yazaki 42). Mahfouz gleans the notion of spiritual pursuit from the Bible and the Quran, but he expresses it literarily in a narrative style (Heikal 143-44). These stations of spiritual pursuit are quite evident in *Children of the Alley* at various allegorical levels.

Children of the Alley as an Allegorical Novel

Children of the Alley hinges, in its substantial impact, on the use of tropes such as metaphors, connotations and allegories (Ayinde 86). The "alley" in the title of the novel is an allegory of the Egyptian society or the world (Ayinde 87). The alley is used as "a microcosm" of the religious history of the world (Najjar 146). Gabalawi is an allegory of the Ultimate Authority. The characters Adham, Gabal, Rifaa and Qassem are allegories of the Biblical and Quranic prophets Adam, Moses, Jesus and Mohamed respectively. The mansion is an allegory of the Biblical and Quranic garden of paradise. Mahfouz titles the first part of the

novel "preface" (*Iftitahia*) which means opening that is equivalent to the title of the first *Sura* in the Quran: "Opening" (*Al Fatiha*). Then, he presents the novel in 114 chapters which are parallel to the 114 sections or *Suras* of the Quran (Jacquemond 129). The death of Gabalawi is an allegory of the death of God at the hands of Arafa who is a symbol of the victory of science over religion in the modern age. The result of this metaphor is the *fatwa* against Mahfouz that led to the assassination attempt against him by a fundamentalist (Ayinde 87). "Mahfouzian philosophy that verbal conflicts soon degenerate into violence and tragedy" proves completely true in the case of Mahfouz himself (Ayinde 92). His audacious verbal talent leads to the tragic assassination attempt against him by an Islamic radical on 14 October 1994.

William Stoddart states that the religions of the world are like a mountain or cone, and each religion occupies a sector in this mountain, while the top of the mountain is occupied by God. The sectors stand for exoterism, whereas the top represents the "total truth" (238). If the allegorical religious history in *Children of the Alley* can be envisaged as a mountain, all religions are different sectors in this mountain representing exoterism while the top of the mountain represented by Gabalawi is the esoterism or Sufism. Stoddart also compares esoterism or mysticism to uncolored light from which many colors emanate, that is, different religions (239). In *Children of the Alley*, Gabalawi is the

uncolored light, while his great men / social reformers / prophets / heroes: Gabal, Rifaa and Qassem are the different colors.

Mahfouz's Sufism and Sufi Characters

The word Sufism (*tasawwuf*) is derived from (*suf*) which means wool that Sufis used to wear, and which is also a symbol of serenity. Since the first Hijri century, the term has been used to refer to the intimate relation a Sufi can have with God (Michon xxi). Aspiration to divine love and wisdom is the quest of Adham, Gabal, Rifaa and Qassem in *Children of the Alley* and is the path of Sufis. Sufism is often described as "Muslim mysticism" (Burckhardt 7).

The vein of Sufism in Mahfouz's oeuvre is beyond doubt, as crystallized in all the Sufi characters and sheikhs in his various novels throughout his writing career. Mahfouz's fresh Sufi and allegorical tendency marks his writings after the period of silence during the 1960s. Mahfouz's existential questions lead him to mysticism in which he attempts to find answers for many unresolved inquiries that persist in his social as well as philosophical works. The researcher takes side with David Shane Elder against Rasheed El-Enany in connection to Mahfouz's stance from Sufism. El-Enany argues that Mahfouz rejects Sufism as a path of resistance to achieve social equality (16). This is a view that is rejected by Elder. Selfish individuals have no place in Mahfouz's human haven. Every individual has his own social role and duty towards other people in his society. For example, Gabal,

Rifaa and Qassem exceed their limited individual circle to the wide social circle of reformation. The form of Sufism that Mahfouz rejects is the selfish one that does not take into consideration the public interest and social concerns. Going deeper into Mahfouz's oeuvre, it can be uncovered that Mahfouz's outlook coincides with Sufism.

Mahfouz, throughout his oeuvre, has never rejected Islam or Sufism. What Mahfouz actually condemns is the practices of Sufism in his local and temporal environment of Cairo and the 20th century. However, he does not condemn Sufism completely as stated by the Arab Andalusian Muslim scholar, mystic, poet, and philosopher Mohamed Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) because Ibn Arabi espouses an active, positive and altruist role of the Sufi in his society. Mahfouz upholds Sufism that has a social impact and not escapist one that seeks individual salvation (Yagi 166). The social role of Sufism goes beyond the individual escapism of personal salvation.

The outset of the novel resembles the beginning of Genesis. At the beginning of creation, there was nothing but the wide wilderness and the great mansion of Gabalawi. The wide wilderness can be read as the universe and the great mansion can be interpreted as the Heavens (Smith 172). When God created Adam, He gave him the Trust of Choice, that is, to choose goodness or evil. This is paralleled by the kind of Trust granted

by Gabalawi to Adham. The Trust of managing the alley is given to Adham due to his knowledge of the tenants and of how to write and count. This new order by Gabalawi is confronted by a rebellion from Idris as he considers himself superior to Adham in race and strength. Consequently, Idris is expelled from the mansion to the alley, just to become a prompter of vice (Smith 173).

The issue of inheritance is a key element in *Children of the Alley*. It plays a significant role in the expulsion of Idris who objects to Adham's inheritance of managing the alley. Further, it plays another vital role in the expulsion of Adham from the mansion because Adham and Umaima wanted to get knowledge of the future inheritance of their descendants. Out of mercy, Gabalawi visits Adham before death to give him peace about the future inheritance of his offspring and to give him promise.

Despite being expelled by Gabalawi from the mansion for seeking Gabalawi's secret book, Adham never loses his admiration and love of his father (Smith 174). This love (*mahaba*) according to Sufism, is incited by the greatness of Gabalawi to which every corner in the mansion and the alley attests. It should be noted here that love (*mahaba*) due to greatness is a station on the ladder of approaching God in accordance with Sufism. Adham's fear (*makhafa*) of Gabalawi which is also a station on the ladder of Sufism towards God is magnified by the greatness of the Beloved and faith in Him.

When the gatekeeper of the mansion, Karim visits Adham to invite Humam to meet Gabalawi, Adham's feelings are moved strongly in response to the memory of his father and in yearning for him. Adham feels nostalgic about the mansion and the old days with his father (Mahfouz 66). These overwhelming emotions of yearning, adoration and nostalgia are common to Sufis towards God. The lamp carried by Karim is a glimpse of light or hope to the heartsick Adham amid his misery. This light is the light thrown in the heart of Sufis by God to give them hope and promise of eternal happiness and peace.

Moreover, Adham prefers the life of reclusion to the life of public service (Ayinde 94). Adham's nature is harmonious with the nature of Sufis in their adoration of solitary life. The romantic contemplation of nature around him is a feature of Sufis who tend to meditate the firmament around them. For him, mundane affairs, like directing the estate, contradict his Sufi disposition. Earthly life is conceived of as exile for Adham and Umaima (Abadir 76). Sufis also think of life on earth as a kind of hurdle where people are exiled, waiting to return Home or Heavens, and speaking about the bitterness of earthly life in the Sufi heritage. At the end of Adham's life, repentance and acceptance is the dominant theme as the ghost of Gabalawi or perhaps Gabalawi himself visits Adham before death to give him hope and to promise him to devote the alley for his descendants (Abadir 82).

In Humam's meeting with Gabalawi at the mansion, Mahfouz describes Humam's feelings by saying "just as we feel the sun upon us without looking at it" (70). This is a very Sufi depiction of God as the sun that is so bright that it dazzles eyes. It throws its rays of warmth, promise, and hope, but it cannot be looked at for its overpower that may blind if one gazes at. Exactly as Gabal is unable to look at the face of Gabalawi, Moses is eligible to look at God. It is the Sufi notion that God sees us, while He is unseen to us.

Humam, the son of Adham, does not accept the invitation of Gabalawi to leave the life of the alley with all its misery and come to live in the mansion (Abadir 79). Humam's altruism and self-sacrifice are qualities of Sufis. These qualities are reflected in the lives of all three primary prophetic characters of the novel: Gabal, Rifaa and Qassem.

The description of the scene of Gabalawi, carrying his lamp, visiting Adham on his deathbed exudes with Sufi connotations of Divine light that are akin to Ibn Arabi's Sufi descriptions in his Collection of poems *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq (The Interpreter of Longings)*. The light of the lamp in this scene is a symbol of forgiveness and hope not only for Adham but for all humans (Heikal 147). It is indescribable light that evades lucid expression. Adham's longing for his father Gabalawi is longing that cannot be gratified because the high walls of the mansion

hinder such contact and that leaves Adham in his agony and solitude without support (Heikal 148). This aspiration can be compared to the Sufi yearning for God.

The idea of God's light is reiterated in the novel. For example, Abda says to Shafi'i, "If it weren't for his isolation from us, the alley would be full of light" (Mahfouz 179). Abda explicates that the light of Gabalawi could have prevailed the whole alley, but it is his desire to remain in isolation for a certain purpose. The omnipresence of God's light is a truth, but it is sent only from time to time to one of his sons to reveal to the people in the alley.

Moses's desire to see God is mainly prompted and blinded by his Sufi adoration (*ishq* or *mahabba*) of the Supreme Power. Because of this overwhelming and unstoppable love, God does not punish Moses for his desire (Chodkiewicz 36). The manifestation of Gabalawi to Gabal to command him to save Hamdan's people from the oppression of the *Effendi* and gangsters hinges upon the Sufi conception of epiphany in which God appears to Moses in Sinai to give him the mission of emancipating the Israelites from the enslavement of the Pharaoh in Egypt. Gabal settles the rule of an eye for an eye, that is, the reign of justice and power in the alley (Smith 175). However, again the endemic disease of humanity, i.e. forgetfulness (the Sufi concept of *ghafla*) dominates the alley after Gabal's death

(Mahfouz 171). What remains is the storytelling that reminds people of Gabalawi and Gabal, just to give people ephemeral relief without any permanent efficacy in their life. The previous oppression and corruption return to the alley with only hope for another great man like Gabal to restore equilibrium to the society (Smith 175). Although Gabalawi appears to Gabal in the desert, Gabal cannot see Gabalawi's face because of darkness, referring to the human incapacity to see God and to the Sufi belief that God cannot be realized by senses; He can be realized by mind / heart / insight but not seen by physical sight (Najjar 148).

Jesus is a Sufi symbol of (*Zuhd*) or sacred solitude, abstention, and renunciation as Mary is the epitome of spiritual retreat, sincerity, and wisdom (Schuon 273-74). In *Children of the Alley*, Rifaa is completely absorbed by spirituality and tendency to help people get rid of their demons as Abda stands for mercy and discreetness. Jesus's miracles in healing the sick can be juxtaposed with Rifaa's miracles of saving people from their demons. In addition, Rifaa is merciful to Yasmina - Rifaa's treacherous wife - as Jesus is merciful to wrongdoers.

Rifaa's mysticism and asceticism are reflected in his emphasis on spirituality. He is not a political leader, but a spiritual one. All his goals center around emancipating people of their inner demons rather than managing the alley. Through this spirituality, abstention, and renouncement, people can live freely (Smith 176). Rifaa's Sufi approach to spirituality is through mercy

and abstention from sexual relations. Moreover, his main target turns to the poor who follow him in large numbers. Some of his adherents follow his celibacy and poverty. His Sufism does not appeal to the overseer and the gangsters who consequently murder him and bury him in the desert (Smith 176). His body is taken later by Gabalawi to bury him in his garden.

Rifaa seeks eternal salvation and real happiness in mercy, peace, and poverty by renouncing the estate. According to Rifaa, this is the real power of spirituality and not the physical power adopted by Gabal (Heikal 152). Seeking redemption in this way is the true path of Sufis in their different orders; they pursue happiness in poverty to God abandoning material properties for the sake of spiritual relief and perennial peace.

The picture of Gabalawi that Rifaa sees at Gawad's house can be deemed a kind of icon that depicts Deity. It is true that no one can see Gabalawi, but his countenance is extracted from descriptions given in anecdotes about him. Rifaa expresses his enchantment with his Gabalawi, saying, "How can anyone not trouble himself with such a fabulous ancestor?" (Mahfouz 189). This statement suggests Rifaa's reverence for Gabalawi. It is a kind of reverence peculiar to prophets, saints, and Sufis.

Speaking to Yasmina, Rifaa confirms that the Al Gabal (the Israelites) are not the best in the alley; the best people are the meekest (Mahfouz 217). Rifaa himself is pictured as a "meek

child,” in other words, a Lamb (Mahfouz 228). Also, Qamar remarks that Qassem is “a meek little lamb” (Mahfouz 278). Power is not the criterion of goodness, but gentleness is the true touchstone. Sufis are not well-known for their strength, but for their kindheartedness. The Israelites covet power after Moses; Jesus preaches “happiness without any estate, power or rank” (Mahfouz 219). He preaches happiness of the weak and the sick, not the strong.

Although Sufism can be traced back to Prophet Mohamed and the Quranic symbolism, it can go further back to "pre-Islamic inheritances" or Abrahamic religions from Christianity and Judaism, and even back to Greek and Roman origins in addition to Persian and Hindu heritage (Burckhardt 3-4). The Prophet Mohamed is the model for all Sufis and the unadulterated epitome of proximity to God. The Prophet Mohamed is the ultimate master or guide for his companions and for later Sufis in any Sufi order. The necessity of a master for the Sufis in the order is essential (Chittick, "Sufism and Islam" 28). This chain (*silsila*) is tenable in *Children of the Alley*. Qassem is an influential spiritual guide who helps his followers to ascend the ladder of spiritual path like Sufis in their order. Sufis always emphasize the fact that the spiritual path is full of obstacles but also full of landmarks set by the Prophet to guide people to God and remind them of Him after forgetfulness (Chittick, "Sufism and Islam" 29).

Although Sufism as an esoteric system existed in the early years of Islam, it was "a reality without a name" (Geoffroy 49). It is true that Sufism is not mentioned in the Holy Quran, but as a theory and practice, it is inherent in the early Islamic culture as manifested in the behavior of the Prophet Mohamed and his companions without any need for theorization at that time (Geoffroy 49). Likewise, the various Islamic sciences, such as Islamic law, interpretation of the Quran, *hadith* and fundamentals of religion were not known during the early years of Islam to be established only later in the ninth century (Geoffroy 49-50).

The Prophet's seclusion in the cave of Mount Hira to contemplate God's creation is analogous to the Sufi's retreat known as (*khalwa*). Through this experience, the Prophet is given a spiritual birth (Gril 76). In *Children of the Alley*, Qassem's seclusion to Hind's Rock to meditate is a similar experience. The traditional Sufi practice of roaming the desert in meditation of the universe is pursued by Qassem in his approach to spirituality. In reaction to Qassem's occasional absence, Qamar wonders whether this absence is because of "his excursions into the desert in the afternoons and evenings?" (Mahfouz 283). It is the common route of Sufis in their roving in solitude, searching for the Ultimate Truth day and night.

Qassem's yearning for the mansion is similar to the Sufi's longing for Heavens. The story of the child Qassem sneaking into

the garden of the mansion and bathing in the holy water of its fountain, like Zamzam water, can be read as a kind of baptism and attraction to the holy space of the mansion (Jacquemond 123). This incident may be reminiscent of the "Opening Forth" / *Ash-Sharh* in the biography of the Prophet. The attraction to the Heavens can be compared to the Sufi yearning for God, and bathing in holy water is like purgation of the Sufi through shedding tears of yearning and repentance.

Sadeq, Qassem's companion, says, "Gabalawi chose him above everyone else. . . . I don't think he'll abandon him if things get hard" (Mahfouz 290). Speaking about Qassem, Sadeq seems to refer to the concept of selection of God's Islamic saint or *Wali* in Sufism. Saints or *Auliya* Allah in Islam are mentioned in *The Noble Qur'an* in frequent verses e.g. "No doubt! Verily, the Auliya' of Allah . . . , no fear shall come upon them nor shall they grieve" (10.62). This selection of saints is based on righteousness, and saints are promised support from God in this life and the Hereafter. Sadeq tells Qassem, "God gave you victory; our ancestor does not err when he chooses. Our alley will never mourn again after today" (Mahfouz 357). However, it really mourns again in the age of Arafa.

Arafa is a repentant Nietzschean figure. It seems that Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy puts an end to the Abrahamic happy dream of human inheritance of God's legacy, by bringing

the Ultimate Deity to its finality through declaring the death of God (Smith 174). Nietzsche tries to disenchant people from the illusion of belief in God through philosophical quest exactly as Arafa tries to replace Gabalawi by science/magic. Nietzsche's role in the modern declaration of the death of God is analogous to Arafa's role in the death of Gabalawi (Ismat 26). Like Nietzsche, Arafa is stimulated by his personal tragedy or psychological troubles rather than public interest. Arafa's overambition and isolation lead to his fiasco.

However, Arafa's encounter with Gabalawi's housemaid is a Sufi experience. It is like a revealing dream that inspires mystics to change their lives. On the contrary, Nietzsche does not have such a Sufi encounter or spiritual metamorphosis. The unbridgeable gap between faith and Scientism, as epitomized by Nietzsche's philosophy, leads to the calamities of WWII. Nietzsche's philosophy is embodied in Nazism. By the same token, Arafa's science/magic leads to the overseer's complete domination of the alley. The power of science surpasses that of religion according to Arafa (Ayinde 94).

Arafa's catastrophic end is similar to the execution of al-Halaj in Salah Abdel Sabur's *The Tragedy of Al Halaj* translated as *Murder in Baghdad*. The tragic end of Arafa reflects the loss of faith in scientism and adherence to Sufism. Science is not enough to reform the community (Ayinde 86). The society will become

one-eyed and will be lost and misled in a wilderness. In order to rectify its trajectory, it needs Gabal's force, Rifaa's mercy, and Qassem's wisdom to pave the way for a fair and stable society.

After his meeting with Gabalawi's housemaid, Arafa tries to rectify his trajectory by rebelling against the overseer. According to Aishah Al-Bauniyyah repentance is "return" to the righteous path (7). The message of Gabalawi revealed by the housemaid represents the main impetus for Arafa to revolt against the oppressive power of the overseer. This mystic experience of Gabalawi's words is the watershed in the life of Arafa, even leading him to his death - a fate not different from the destiny of Rifaa in *Children of the Alley*. Although Mahfouz tells the story of God's death at the hands of scientific knowledge represented by Arafa, Arafa, in repentance, states that he will reuse his magic to revive Gabalawi after death. Arafa's work on magic/science may lead in the future to the creation of the superman - Nietzsche's dream on the debris of God's death that he declared. This superman may be attained in the future at the hands of Hanash, many years after Arafa's murder. Arafa's wish to use his magic to restore Gabalawi from death is a wish to revive belief in God or renew faith in Him. This is like the Sufi Abu Hamid Al Ghazali's attempt to renew faith in God after uncertainty. Arafa expresses the human constant need of God.

Jesus Christ refers to the "pseudo-masters" or "false prophets" who will appear at the end of the world (Nasr 187). Arafa can be read as one of these false prophets who preach rationalism or scientism as the new religion of the world and that proves to be wholly destructive to mankind. After centuries of inordinate materialism, rationalism, and scientism, the world turns to deny these tendencies in pursuit of spirituality (Nasr 188). Arafa's immoderate scientism turns against itself to end with his poignant wish to restore Gabalawi to life, in an indication of the modern man's wish to return to God's embrace.

Arafa's disastrous end proves that Mahfouz does not think that Scientism is the final and crucial solution for the social, economic, and political problems of the alley's people. It is usual for Mahfouz throughout his oeuvre to portray evil to showcase how it ends up to a catastrophic end. Perhaps it is Mahfouz's hidden Sufi tendency that motivates him to assume that Arafa wishes he could use his magic/science to restore Gabalawi to life, that is, to restore spirituality to the alley. After the death of Gabalawi, Arafa indulges in a trance of remorse and asks for forgiveness to the extent that he accepts his penalty of death in recognition of his sin against Gabalawi (Heikal 153-54).

Arafa's mother is a magician who has nothing to do with religion and his father is not known, in an indication of the anonymity of the origin of science. Arafa's most audacious claim is that science is the current God that is capable of doing miracles.

Shaykh Abd al-Hamid Kishk claims that the death of God declared by Arafa is final with no hope of return (Najjar 151). On the contrary, Mahfouz himself confirms the opposite by stating that there can be a return as Arafa wishes he could harness science in the future to restore Gabalawi to life. This hidden wish is a Sufi hope for future return to God's embrace.

At the end of the novel, the humanity is desperately looking for redemption (the book of magic) in rubbish where it is thrown by Arafa (Najjar 153). It is a waste land in which man is lost searching for mirage. The ominous death of Arafa proves that Mahfouz realizes that science alone is not sufficient to satisfy the needs of people and guarantee peace and justice without the help of spirituality. Therefore, it is not strange that Arafa is killed and his corpse is thrown in a trash bin like his book of magic/science.

As Arafa works on his material science, he keeps searching for the origins of science and the Big Book that includes the Ten Conditions that Arafa believes contain the secrets of Gabalawi's magic. There is an irony here: Arafa who believes only in what he sees and what he touches still believes in the existence of such a book of magical secrets. This is what motivates Arafa to sneak into the mansion to find the secret of Gabalawi's will. This refers to the fact that science and faith are inseparable; modern science targets faith at the end. Finally, Arafa reaches nothing and returns empty-handed in an indication that modern science is destined to fail in reaching the secrets of the universe. All this reflects

Mahfouz's Sufi disposition and his hidden faith in spirituality (Jacquemond 128).

Arafa works at night in his rear room in the basement; he digs a tunnel under the earth to the mansion that he sneaks into at night also. It seems that Mahfouz links science to darkness, dust, and earth and not to heaven that is associated with spirituality. Thus, Arafa's end is a hole dug in the earth, too. Mahfouz seems to suggest that material science starts and ends in darkness and earth, while spirituality starts and ends in light and heaven (Jacquemond 128). This concords with Sufi paths that start and end in divine light and heavenly spirituality.

Therefore, science is not a new deity and there is no confrontation between science and religion. This is quite obvious in the dramatic ramifications of Gabalawi's death. Arafa indulges in a state of remorse and bewilderment. He recovers from this trance only when Gabalawi's servant meets him and tells him that Gabalawi is satisfied with him. So, like Gabal, Rifaa, and Qassem, Arafa receives a message from Gabalawi, but only at the end of his life (Jacquemond 128). At the end of the novel, hopes remain hinging on Hanash whose name indicates both poison and antidote and who is closer than Arafa to spirituality, which is a kind of final return to and hope in spirituality that is the road to salvation (Jacquemond 129).

Sufi Knowledge and Sufi Concepts

Children of the Alley is a quest for mystical knowledge. Knowledge of Adham, Gabal, Rifaa, and Qassem is esoteric knowledge. The gnosis that these main characters of *Children of the Alley* have gained in their pathway to God has been revealed to their followers exactly as Sufis leave their mystical experiences to the seekers of godhead.

The name Gabalawi whom all main characters seek in their ascent to spirituality symbolizes the vertical movement up the *Gabal* (mountain) to godhead or the Real according to Ibn Arabi (Elder 247-48). Also, the Arabic word “*Gabal*” as a verb means to create or mold which signifies that seekers of God in their vertical movement up the mountain witness a process of recreation or remolding towards the realization of spirituality (Elder 248). The pathway to *Gabal* / God is a rigorous one through Sufi knowledge (Elder 253).

Adham's knowledge is what gives him privilege over Idris and is the main reason for his selection over all the other brethren in spite of his racial inferiority. The knowledge of Adham is juxtaposed with the ignorance of Idris exactly as goodness is contrasted with evil (Ayinde 91). This conforms to the Sufi principles of privilege in terms of knowledge and equality of all humans regardless of race. Idris, in his act of disobedience, abandons perennial peace for the short-lived position of

controlling the mansion. He is not only racist in looking at his brother Adham, but also he sees Adham as physically deficient for the position he is granted by Gabalawi. Idris does not take the core and qualifications into consideration; he considers only superficial features as the criteria of deserving the position. This complies with the Sufi emphasis on the essence rather than a facade (Ayinde 92).

Adam's perpetual desire for searching is his doom (Chittick, *Sufism* 161). Adham's searching for knowledge about the future of his descendants instigated by Idris writes the end of Adham's life in the garden. As the tree of knowledge is the primal temptation for Adam and Eve, it is the final temptation for Arafa who seeks salvation only in scientific knowledge. So, seduction of knowledge is the first and final human sin. The pivotal word in the novel is knowledge. It is the supreme privilege and supreme sin. It is what gives Adham merit over the other sons of Gabalawi and it is the key reason for expelling Adam from paradise when he eats of the tree of knowledge and the very source of damnation upon the head of Arafa when he renounces religion for the sake of scientific knowledge.

Man's ephemeral residence or "sojourn" on earth is reminiscent of the short journey he has to go through in this earthly life (Abadir 83). This concept of the short earthly journey is a key one in the Sufi heritage. The journey of each of the main

characters: Gabal, Rifaa, and Qassem can be read as a spiritual journey and a symbol of social revolution in each case. The society always tries to fetter its members with certain norms, while Gabal, Rifaa, and Qassem break these chains and rebel against them in a journey that searches for salvation within the soul in order to finally attain *Gabal* - the Utopia aspired to. The journeys of these main characters symbolize spiritual development.

The journey in this life is a journey in an unreal world: ‘Essentially this ‘annihilation’ [*fana*] teaches that the sensory world is not the ‘Real’” (Elder 273). This quotation echoes *Children of the Alley*: “This life seemed unreal” (Mahfouz 44). Eternity of the mansion is contrasted with the ephemerality of the alley. Altruism or selflessness is a feature of Gabal, Rifaa and Qassem. All they care about is their community. This can be described as annihilation of individual subjectivity for the sake of the whole community in the journey to God. Journey is a Sufi symbol in the life of the main characters: Gabal, Rifaa, and Qassem. Journeying through inner space is spiritual journeying.

Divine adoration (*ishq or mahabba*) is a Sufi concept. Man's obedience to God should be motivated by love of Him (Chittick, *Sufism* 144). Adham's pure love for Gabalawi is the primary motive to avoid disobedience and not the fear of punishment or interest to stay in the garden / paradise, as it is

clear from Adham's words about his unconditional adoration of Gabalawi. Adham's love of Gabalawi is an allegory of Adam's love (*ishq* or *mahabba*) for God.

It is not mentioned in the novel that Adham witnessed Gabalawi's wrath before the situation of expelling Idris out of the mansion. Before this situation, Adham experienced the mercy and love of Gabalawi. Adham went through a similar experience when he disobeyed Gabalawi, only to be expelled out of the Garden. Only then the two aspects of God's attributes are manifested: mercy and severity. This story is an allegory of Adam's happiness in the Garden under God's mercy to be expelled later under God's severity. The Severe and Wrathful God is the same Gentle and Merciful one. The privileged and loved Adham because of his knowledge for the first time confronts the Gabalawi's severity to be expelled to the alley to prove his endurance in front of adversity, to create the hero he is destined to be out of the "furnace" of hardships (Chittick, *Sufism* 147). Adam is chosen for his knowledge to be a jewel in the crown of humanity and to be one of the social reformers or heroes in the human religious history. This happens only through the facade of God's severity. Adam who relishes God's mercy, love and beauty in paradise endures woes in his life on earth (Chittick, *Sufism* 147). Likewise, Adham who tastes Gabalawi's love and grace in the mansion

sheds tears and undergoes throes in his life in the alley. He starts to tread on thistles in every step.

As Adam is promised to dwell in paradise with his righteous offspring, Gabalawi promises Adham before his death that his descendants will inherit the estate. God states, "He loves them, and they love Him" (*The Noble Qur'an* 5.54). Al-Bauniyyah asserts that love comes before forgiveness (97). Mutual love is what connects God to Adam and Gabalawi to Adham. Before his death Gabalawi manifests himself to Adham to reassure him by the promise of the estate being inherited by his offspring. This visitation of Gabalawi to Adham is an indication of love in spite of Adham's sin. Love is the secret word that links the Sufis to their Creator.

Nearness and distance are key concepts in Sufism (Chittick, *Sufism* 152). Adham always wants to be near to Gabalawi in the mansion, and distance escalates his pain. He feels so happy only when Gabalawi or the ghost of Gabalawi visits him before his death. Without distance and yearning, there will not be love since love grows out of the soil of longing for the beloved (Chittick, *Sufism* 152). Adham remains yearning to return to Gabalawi for the rest of his life. Nearness to God is more important for Adam than paradise itself (Chittick, *Sufism* 154-55). For Sufis, this is an obvious precept. This is also applicable to Adham in his relation to Gabalawi. What he cares mostly about is

nearness to his father. Throughout his life he keeps aspiring to return to the nearness of Gabalawi.

Sufis love God with all his attributes: gentleness and severity (Chittick, *Sufism* 155). In spite of Gabalawi's severity in expelling him, Adham has never lost his love and longing for his father. Adam's feelings of separation enhance his love for God (Chittick, *Sufism* 157). By the same token, Adham's separation from Gabalawi intensifies his aspiration to Gabalawi.

One of the greatest motivators for love is need. Adam's constant need for God is a spark that always needs the oxygen of God to remain alive. Adam's imperfect nature always needs the Absolute Perfect to gratify these needs. Adam's belief that he is "nothing" is what ignites his love of the Wealthy. This absolute belief is called "poverty" by Sufis (Chittick, *Sufism* 158-59). In *Children of the Alley*, Adham, after his expulsion, is in dire poverty with an eternal hope to return to the love of Gabalawi and his support.

Repentance is another concept inherent in Sufism. Iblis never confesses his mistake, but he continues in his arrogance, saying "I am better than him" (*The Noble Qur'an* 7.12). On the contrary, Adam always acknowledges his slip, saying "Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves" (*The Noble Qur'an* 7.23). In *Children of the Alley*, Idris never attempts to correct his mistake

or repent of it, while Adham immediately repents and admits his mistake after committing it. God's infinite resources are juxtaposed with Adam's infinite needs. This is why Adam will never stop asking help from God and will never stop shedding tears in front of Him (Chittick, *Sufism* 159). Adham always cries in continuous supplication for Gabalawi's forgiveness. In the aftermath of Adam's slip, God makes amends to the fallen man by imparting forgiveness upon him (Michon xxiv). Similarly, Gabalawi visits Adham on his deathbed to give him forgiveness and promise.

The innate qualities of Adam are his weakness and "imperfection" (Chittick, *Sufism* 164). Nevertheless, these qualities make him a unique creature among all creations. His sinning is not a defect but a distinctive characteristic (Chittick, *Sufism* 163). In *Children of the Alley*, Idris describes Adham as racially inferior and physically weaker. These are not defects; on the contrary, they are his unique features that make him different from his other brothers. Without Adam's sinning, there cannot be a forgiving God (Chittick, *Sufism* 165). Without Adham's slip, there cannot be Gabalawi's forgiveness at Adham's deathbed. Adam's weakness and imperfection necessitate God's forgiveness and mercy (Chittick, *Sufism* 168). Adham's sinfulness and repentance necessitate Gabalawi's forgiveness and promise to Adham and his descendants.

Purification by afflictions is a further Sufi concept. The indigence of Adam is what gives him distinction. It is like a crucible in which impurities are disposed of and only pure gold remains (Chittick, *Sufism* 160). It is also like the fire that induces fragrance out of "incense" (Chittick, *Sufism* 161). In *Children of the Alley*, Adham is purified by the poverty and hardships in the alley to deserve Gabalawi's visitation at the end of his life to give him the promise of forgiveness and inherited estate to his descendants. The main characters in the novel - Adham, Gabal, Rifaa and Qassem - are destined to experience the riddles of fate and the afflictions of earthly life or life in the alley. Depending on the severity of the pain, they are chosen to be the heroes of humanity. These characters or spiritual heroes in the novel go through enough sacrifices that make them appropriate to receive God's message to humanity.

Additional Sufi features are humility and hope. While Iblis looks upon himself with too much pride, Adam looks upon himself with humbleness and disdain (Chittick, *Sufism* 161). Therefore, Adam deserves prostration from the angels. While Idris is so arrogant that he deserves no place in the garden, Adham is so humble that he deserves to be the director of the estate and deserves forgiveness at the end of his life. Since Adam is created of humility, he looks down on earth; since Iblis is made of arrogance and claims of loftiness, like fire, he always tries to go up (Chittick, *Sufism* 168-69). In *Children of the Alley*, Adham

is the epitome of humbleness and misery that deserve mercy; however, Idris is the pure representation of rebellion and destructive pride.

God says, "O *Ibadi* (My slaves) who have transgressed against themselves (by committing evil deeds and sins)! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah: verily, Allah forgives all sins" (*The Noble Qur'an* 39.53). Likewise, Gabalawi forgives all Adham's slips on his deathbed. In spite of all the injustices and corruption committed by Adham's offspring, Gabalawi promises him and his descendants the inheritance of the estate. Unlike Iblis whose previous obedience makes him arrogant and proud, Adam's disobedience is not a defect; on the contrary, it is a merit because sinning makes him humble and not proud (Chittick, *Sufism* 172). Humility requires mercy, but pride invites anger from God. Therefore, in *Children of the Alley*, Gabalawi imparts mercy and pardon upon Adham, while outpours fury upon Idris.

So, Adham gains Gabalawi's mercy only through sincere repentance. As humans' potential to sin is unlimited, God's mercy is as well unlimited (Chittick, *Sufism* 174). Adham never loses hope of Gabalawi's mercy and pardon till the very end of his life, and his hope is proved to be exact when Gabalawi visits him on his deathbed to give him forgiveness and promise.

The true Sufi gets rid of all his pride to become "poor" (*faqir*) in God (Michon xxiii). This is obvious in the behavior of Adham who is humble in contrast to Idris who is arrogant. Sufis clearly understand their weakness and incapacity in comparison to God's Power and Ability (Michon xxiii). Adham recognizes that he is fragile and incapable, so he always beseeches Gabalawi's support in his supplications.

One of the main practices of Sufism is "The recollection of God" / (*Dhikr*)/ reciting the Quran (Michon xxiv). It takes the form of storytelling by poets at cafes reminding people of the stories of Gabalawi, Adham, Gabal, Rifaa and Qassem. The main benefit of these stories is to balm the people's wounds and give them relief out of their misery. Storytelling is a common practice in the alley in *Children of the Alley*. It is a symbol of *Dhikr* / recitation of Quran. Recollection or *Dhikr* is a way to avoid "forgetfulness" (Burckhardt 16). As Al-Bauniyyah quotes from the Noble Quran and other sources like Al-Qushayri and Al-Sulami, recollection of God gives people peace (67). Also, storytelling is the means people employ to remind them of Gabalawi and his great men. The stories of the Abrahamic religions as recited in the Bible and the Quran have their temporary prosperous effect on people who always return to the usual practice of oppression and corruption. Nevertheless, these stories still have the power to give relief and consolation to those who listen to them. This is the very effect of the storytelling by

poets at cafes in *Children of the Alley*. This cryptic or Sufi relief extracted from these accounts is emphasized by the effect that the Bible and the Quran have on the minds of people and on the writings of Mahfouz himself. It is true that Mahfouz avers that the Bible and the Quran are reduced to mere storytelling accompanied by music to be sung at cafes, but he contends that they remain a mystic source of relief to the alley's people.

The rebec poets in the novel represent the reciters of the Bible and the Quran to remind people of the stories of Gabalawi, Adham, Gabal, Rifaa and Qassem. This permanent recollection of God and his prophets is a constant practice by Sufis in their spiritual meetings. Richard Jacquemond states that the purpose of this recollection is to protect the collective memory from oblivion because the main plague of the alley is oblivion (129). Sufis say that the remedy of the human plague of forgetfulness is recollection, that is, recitation of the Quran or storytelling by the poets in the alley.

The Mansion as a Sufi Symbol

Gabalawi is hidden in the mansion: the traditional Islamic conception of God as hidden Deity (Jacquemond 127). This is also the traditional Sufi conception of God as hidden Deity. The mansion is a Sufi symbol of Home to which all people refuge for heavenly gifts. The mansion stands for the heaven that “can be seen from anywhere” (Mahfouz 332). The mansion and its Garden

as a place of plenty is an allegory of paradise (Abadir 68). The mansion is an allegory of heaven, while the *hara* or the alley is an allegory of earthly life (Abadir 75). The mansion stands for the universe, too (Najjar 146). Mahfouz uses the word “gates” to refer to the doors of Gabalawi’s mansion (189). This is very close to the Sufis’ delineation of their standing at the threshold of God’s gate waiting for Him to open it for them to usher into his mercy and peace.

Hind’s Rock as a Sufi Symbol

The theme of rumination in the shadows of Hind's Rock is recurrent in *Children of the Alley*. Reflection or contemplation is a main Sufi path. Originally, Hind’s Rock is given this name because it witnesses the love affair of Qadri and Hind, and it is the place where both find solitariness. Moreover, it is where Humam is killed; it is where Gabal meets Gabalawi; it is where Rifaa speaks to Gabalawi (Mahfouz 261). It symbolizes the hermitage of the Sufi seekers to God.

The *takiyya* (a place where Sufis live) can be compared to Hind's Rock as the place of seclusion for Sufis. In another work by Mahfouz, *The Epic of the Harafish*, and speaking about the mystic Ashur al-Nagi, Mahfouz writes, “His mystical consciousness is initiated in front of the *takiyya*, or Sufi monastery” (Elder 328). The Sufi monastery in *Children of the Alley* is Hind’s Rock. The *takiyya* is a Sufi retreat center (Yagi

169). It is represented by Hind's Rock to which Gabal, Rifaa and Qassem in *Children of the Alley* retreat for Sufi meditation. It is a place of origin and originality. The unchangeable status of the *takiyya* throughout ages is quite evident. Hind's Rock remains the same for most of the main characters in *Children of the Alley*.

Gabal seems to take refuge to Hind's Rock for relief and dreaming or meditation (Mahfouz 111). In their journey out of the alley, Shafi'i and Abda take shelter in the shadows of Hind's Rock (Mahfouz 175). It is like a holy site in the Holy Journey of Mary. Again, it is a shrine.

Rifaa spends long time secluded in the shadows of Hind's Rock (Mahfouz 201-02). Rifaa's disciples Zaki, Hussein, Ali and Karim gather at Hind's Rock in the serene atmosphere of the desert for meditation of their savior (Mahfouz 218-19). It is also mentioned in the novel that Rifaa's blood is seen on the sand west of Hind's Rock (Mahfouz 245). This may refer to the Crucifixion of Jesus outside the city walls of Jerusalem, which may indicate that Hind's Rock can be read as Jerusalem itself. Mahfouz writes, "[S]ands west of Hind's Rock had been found blotched with Rifaa's blood" (245).

Qassem spends his time in the desert playing in the shadows of Hind's Rock, gazing at the mansion where his grandfather dwells (Mahfouz 254). Mahfouz states that the only refuge for Qassem from the heat of the sun in the wilderness is

Hind's Rock. Mahfouz states, "The only place in the desert that offered shelter from the raging sun was Hind's Rock" (259). It is the place of seclusion where Qassem finds spiritual relief and pure contemplation, like all Sufis in their hermitages. Mahfouz explains that Qassem finds his pleasure in the immaculate surroundings of Hind's Rock where he can scrutinize the sky (Mahfouz 260).

Hind's Rock is the site where Humam and Rifaa died and where Gabal met Gabalawi (Mahfouz 270). It can also be considered a holy shrine which always reminds Qassem of such great events in the alley. In her way through the desert, Qamar's slave Sakina takes rest in the shade of Hind's Rock telling Qassem that she seeks temporary relief from the heat of the sun in the shadows of the Rock (Mahfouz 271). Thus, again, it is the ultimate source of relief in the wilderness from weariness.

In his way through the desert to visit Yahya, Qassem stays for a while at Hind's Rock pondering the concept of happiness and power in the alley (Mahfouz 281). He can choose his own safety and happiness and forget about the happiness of his people, but he believes he is like Gabal and Rifaa; he cannot be selfish; they choose to side with their peoples against corruption and abusive power to guarantee happiness for the people in the alley. He cares for the happiness of others like Gabal and Rifaa. This should be his own choice, too. He goes through all this

introspection in the shade of Hind's Rock – the hermitage of Sufis. Before leaving the place, he encounters a scorpion approaching him, and he immediately crushes it (Mahfouz 282). This is a symbolic indication that he chooses to crush the evil power in the alley and confront oppression to attain justice. It is the triumph of prophethood in Qassem to choose the heavy burden of responsibility towards the people of the alley rather than choosing his personal happiness. All this occurs in the shadows of Hind's Rock.

Searching for Qassem after a night of absence outside home, Zachary, Hassan and Sadeq find him at Yahya's house. Yahya tells them that some neighbors find Qassem unconscious at Hind's Rock (Mahfouz 284). Qandil, Gabalawi's servant, talks to Qassem at Hind's Rock. This can be interpreted as the first revelation to Qassem or the First revelation of the Holy Quran to Prophet Mohamed by Gabriel. Qandil is the equivalent to Gabriel. Therefore, Hind's Rock, here, can be seen as representing the Cave of Hira where Mohamed is secluded to contemplate the creation of God and to worship. Again, Hind's Rock is that mysterious place of seclusion for Sufis where they contemplate the universe and worship God.

Hind's Rock can also be conceived of as the first site where Qassem meets his friends or companions to reveal his message to them (Mahfouz 302). So, it can be seen as an early mosque. Like the other main characters / heroes in *Children of the*

Alley, Qassem seeks refuge in Hind's Rock for contemplation. This rock is the retreat or *Khalwa* of Sufis to which they refuge to meditate creation and cosmology.

Conclusion

This paper presents a Sufi rereading of Naguib Mahfouz's *Children of the Alley*. *Children of the Alley* teems with symbols; many of which have their Sufi connotations. Sufi conceptions such as divine love, recollection of God, asceticism, altruism, hope, repentance, humbleness, purification, yearning and trust are embodied throughout the novel. Each of these Sufi allegories has its various reflections and ramifications within the novel. The current study attempts to open the gates for a Sufi interpretation and to decode the Sufi symbols in the text. Given their spirituality as a point of departure, the main characters in *Children of the Alley* have their social and Sufi roles in facing the evil powers of the *Futuwwat* or gangsters. The alley dearly needs the power of Gabal, love of Rifaa and justice of Qassem. Gabalawi does not interfere in the alley except when he reveals his message to Gabal, Rifaa and Qassem.

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الرمزية الصوفية فى رواية نجيب محفوظ أولاد حارتنا

الملخص

على الرغم من مرور ما يربو على الستة عقود على نشر رواية نجيب محفوظ أولاد حارتنا فى عام ١٩٥٩، فما زالت الرواية تثير الكثير من الجدل حتى الوقت الراهن. و على الرغم من الاتهامات الكثيرة ضد الرواية بالتجديف و الهرطقة، إلا أن الرواية تزخر بالعديد من الرموز الصوفية التى لا تخطأها البصيرة الأدبية. من هذه الرموز الصوفية مفاهيم العشق الإلهى، و الأمل، و التوبة، و القنوت، و المعرفة، و التطهير، والقرب من الله، والرحلة الروحية، وذكر الله. كما تفيض الأماكن فى الرواية بالدلالات الرمزية الصوفية مثل البيت الكبير أو السماء، وصخرة هند أو المحراب. وتعتمد الورقة البحثية فى تحليلها لهذه الرموز على تفاصيل مستقاه من قصة جبلاوي، و أدهم و جبل، و رفاعه، و قاسم، و عرفة، و هى الشخصيات الرئيسة فى الرواية التى تتضح قصصهم بالصوفية. وكما يوضح محفوظ أن الحكايات الرمزية فى كتاباته يمكن أن تقرأ قراءات متعددة، فالورقة البحثية تقدم قراءة صوفية لرواية محفوظ أولاد حارتنا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصوفية ، الرمزية ، نجيب محفوظ ، رواية أولاد حارتنا