

## Reading Mahfouz through a Girardian Lens: Plague and Contagious Violence in *The Harafish*

<https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.22.2.18>

Muhammad Yousri  
Kafrelsheikh University, Egypt

Received on 5.9.2021

Accepted on 3.3.2022

Published on 10.6.2022

**Abstract:** *This study seeks to investigate the influence of plague on Naguib Mahfouz's novel, The Harafish (1977), which traces the changes that take place in an unnamed Egyptian alley after it has been struck by the plague. Crucially, the plague, along with its biomedical effect, plays a central role in the de/formation of the community's sociopolitical structure. To approach Mahfouz's novel as a plague narrative, the study utilizes Rene Girard's theory of plague and literature that combines concepts such as reversal, undifferentiating, violence, and scapegoating. Following a Girardian perspective, the concepts of reversal and undifferentiation are used to explore the collapse of the pre-pandemic sociopolitical order, and the formation of a new structure in which the harafish, led by Ashur al-Naji, take control of the alley's sources of power and wealth. Although undifferentiation becomes the ruling principle, violence, like the plague, infects the alley. Violence, through mimesis, becomes contagious and ends a sacrificial crisis. The study ultimately concludes that there is a close relationship between the plague's biomedical and sociopolitical influence. Approaching The Harafish as a plague narrative adds value to the current scholarly and academic discourse over Mahfouz's work itself and the post-COVID-19 world crisis as well.*

**Keywords:** Girard, Mahfouz, scapegoating, plague, violence

### 1. Introduction

In early 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced a global pandemic as a new coronavirus has been surging worldwide. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic put the whole world in the face of the challenge of survival. The question of surviving the pandemic disaster is entwined with the crisis of 'undifferentiation,' or the collapse of all forms of knowledge in post-pandemic communities. This close connection between social crises and viral contagion has become a characteristic of our contemporary world. With the collapse of all forms of knowledge and norms of differentiation, violence becomes as contagious as the plague itself in its symbolic and actual forms. According to the French thinker Rene Girard (1979: 79), this contagious violence is a characteristic feature of all pandemic literature. It spreads like highly pathogenic viruses within post-pandemic communities and threatens to fuel conflict and antagonism amongst 'monstrous doubles'. Thus, commenting on the current coronavirus pandemic and its social repercussions in his article "What the Great Pandemic Novels Teach Us," the Turkish novelist and Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk (2020) underscores the relationship between plague and violence and

suggests that, for a better world to come, violence and antagonism should be replaced by equality and solidarity provoked by the contemporary crisis which has made all humanity face the same threat of death.

The study examines the interaction between the microbial and socio-political effects of the plague in the novel *Malhamat al-Harafish* (English translation: *The Harafish*, 2015)<sup>1</sup> by the Egyptian novelist and Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz by drawing on Rene Girard's approach of the representation of pandemics in literature. Along with its biomedical effect, the study explores the real and symbolic import of plague in Mahfouz's novel to determine whether there is a relationship between the pandemic catastrophe and the un/differentiation crisis of the power structure in the community depicted by Mahfouz. The underlying argument developed here is that the role of plague in Mahfouz's novel is decisive as it significantly contributes to the transformation process traced by Mahfouz through the ten generations of the Naji family. Bearing in mind the contemporary COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the novel is read alongside Girard's theory on plague to examine how Mahfouz employs plague as a metaphor for discussing further social issues that are still pertinent to our world today.

## 2. Girardian themes of plague narrative

Girard's work on plague and literature is often acclaimed for its ability to stage plague's metaphorical significance, especially how plague literature stages social tensions and crises along with plague's biomedical impact. His thesis on the social influence of plague focuses principally on the violence inherent in human societies, which comes to the fore in such post-pandemic communities as those depicted in Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* (429 BC), Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) and Albert Camus's in *The Plague* (1947). In his inspiring essay on plague narratives, Girard (1974: 845) demonstrates the role of plague and the interaction between its biomedical and social influences in literature:

Earlier, I said that the plague, as a literary theme, is still alive today, in a world less and less threatened by real bacterial epidemics. This fact looks less surprising now, as we come to realize that the properly medical aspects of the disease never were essential; in themselves, they always played a minor role, serving mostly as a disguise for an even more terrible threat that no science has ever been able to conquer [the dissolution of the social bond]. The threat is still very much with us, and it would be a mistake to consider the presence of the plague in our literature as a matter of formal routine ... its relevance to our current psychosociological predicament becomes evident as soon as specific examples are produced.

In literature, argues Girard, the biomedical symptoms of plague have become a symbol for other various ills that threaten the social life of the afflicted community. Literature's representation of the biomedical impact of plague on society, according to Girard, would be unthinkable if it does not consider its social impact. This does not mean that Girard attempts to ignore the biomedical impact of

real plagues on human communities. Rather, he focuses on the interaction of plague's biomedical and social influences on society. Commenting on Girard's approach to plague and literature, Fleming (2004: 105) notes that Girard endeavors to formulate how the outbreak of real plagues throughout history have triggered many instances of social and cultural disintegration.

Along with its biomedical impact, the plague has an 'undifferentiating effect' on the socio-political structure of society. Girard is fully aware of plague's 'undifferentiating effect', and, therefore, his theory underscores the symbolic cleansing, renewal, and reordering of society that recurrently operate within plague narratives. He further claims that the undifferentiating import that accompanies the pandemic crisis is a worse disease than the plague itself (Girard 1978: 138).

In his study of the relationship between plague and literature, Girard further notes the ubiquity and 'strange uniformity' of plague tradition in literature. He claims that common characteristics reappear, such as themes of reversals, the disintegration and then restoration of social orders, and the overthrow of "all accumulated knowledge and all categories of judgment" (Girard 1974: 833). As a structuralist pattern, according to Girard, the power of plague in literature, both as an actual biomedical disease and as a metaphor, appears as an array of themes with the plague at the center. A thematic assemblage further augments the centrality of plague in plague narratives with four underlying components: epidemic contagion, mimetic rivalry, undifferentiation and scapegoating. Central to this thematic assemblage is the plague around which the other elements of plague literature gather. While some of these components may be more accentuated than others or may unfold only in an immature form, it is less common when even one of them is completely missing (Girard 1974: 840). Citing examples from Shakespeare, Artaud, Dostoevsky and others, Girard argues that all plague narratives in their attempt to highlight the social power of plague accentuate this thematic cluster, whether separately or *en bloc*. Following Girard's approach, the research project developed here argues that the thematic assemblage developed by Girard is readily recognized in Mahfouz's novel, starting with the plague outbreak which leads to social disintegration and ends with the sacrifice of the epic's hero.

Therefore, Girard's theory is employed to explore how the biomedical and social phenomena interact in Mahfouz's novel. The paper investigates how Mahfouz is eager to depict the new sources of 'infection' that have accompanied plague as tools for representing other aspects of life in his community, the alley, which is used as a microcosm for the Egyptian society. The features Girard (1974: 845) assigns to plague narratives, as will be argued, are recurrent themes in *The Harafish*. The novel's narrative structure generates rivalry among mimetic doubles, symbolized by Ashur al-Nagi's (and later his heirs') struggles over sources of power and prestige. Marked with its failure to differentiate, mimetic doubling culminates in a sacrificial crisis that may unfold into a scapegoat practice. Finally, sacrificing an element deemed contaminated allows mimetic doubles to restore differentiation. The main purpose, thus, is to explore the 'undifferentiating effect' of this interaction which is still pertinent to the contemporary COVID-19 crisis.

### 3. Plague and reversal in *The Harafish*

Written in a dense and evocative prose style, *The Harafish* represents a community, a typical Egyptian alley in the region of old Cairo, in the period of a pandemic crisis characterized by various ills related to class stratification and struggles for power and dominance over *fatwana* (strong man's rule). Providing an account of Ashur al-Naji and his heirs across different generations and under diverse conditions, the novel is composed of ten tales pursuing the themes of reversal, collapse and rebuilding of social structures in the post-epidemic alley. Most of the novel's action takes place in the unnamed alley and its surrounding emptiness. The period of time in which the novel's action occurs is not identified either. The lack of any specific framework of the novel's locale or time is the technique Mahfouz chooses purposefully to universalize and perpetuate the social function of plague, which makes his novel apt for a new reading as a plague text in the contemporary crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first tale of *The Harafish* tells the story of Ashur, an orphan child brought up by Sheikh Afra Zaydan, an old, benevolent, blind man, and his barren wife, Sakina. The sheikh loves Ashur excessively and is pleased with his noble qualities, kind-heartedness and dedication since he was still a child. Sheikh Afra hopes that his adopted child would one day use his strength and wisdom to serve his fellows, the *harafish*<sup>2</sup>, and not the devils. Ashur indeed does not let his foster father down as, despite his huge appearance, he is often known for his virtue and kind-heartedness. Yet, after the death of his foster father, Ashur suffers loneliness and isolation. The death of Sheikh Afra is indeed a turning point in Ashur's life as he moves to live with Darwish, Sheikh Afra's younger brother, who is raised in the same house as Ashur. But, unlike Ashur, he is a sinful thug who, after the death of his devout brother, attempts to retain Ashur's potential power to serve his nasty business. Ashur, however, does not accept his offer and decides to earn his living away from Darwish. When Darwish loses hope in convincing Ashur to join him in his business, he abruptly tells Ashur the bitter truth: that he is an illegitimate child.

Ashur leaves the house and gets the job of a cart driver. The years went by. He then marries his master's daughter, Zaynab, and begets three sons. Then Darwish is released from jail and returns to the alley where he starts a new business as a brothel owner. To Ashur's dismay, his three sons shortly become regular house customers. He crosses swords with them and they flee from home.

However, Ashur soon adores Fulla, a slut working at Darwish's inn. He loves Fulla deeply and takes her as his second "lawful wedded wife" (Mahfouz 2015: 29). It is thus revealed that Ashur himself is not unsusceptible to human flaws and lures. In contrast to the obvious saintly dimension to his character, Ashur's full humanity is now highlighted. However, Fulla repents her past after marriage and begets Ashur's next heir, Shams al-Din, whom Ashur "rejoiced as if it had been his firstborn" (p.32). His later days pass in happiness and serenity until the plague outbreak, which turns every aspect of human life in the alley upside down.

Plague strikes the alley and death has a shocking toll on its inhabitants sparing neither rich nor poor. People in the alley: "have uncontrollable diarrhea, collapse and die like flies" (Mahfouz 2015: 32). "What's happening to our alley?" wonders

Ashur as catastrophic events are taking place. “Did they descend from heaven or explode out of the depths of hell?” (p.32), he bewilderingly asks. Frightened and horrified, Ashur perceives it as ‘the wrath of God’ (p.33). Plague day by day becomes uncontrollable and the shadow of death hovers above their heads in a scene that immediately calls to mind the aftermath of the contemporary COVID-19 crisis:

The emergency reached gigantic proportions. The path leading to the graveyard hummed with new life. Mourners thronged down it as one coffin followed another and queues of bodies waited to be buried. Every house was in mourning. Not an hour went by without a death being announced. Death swept through the alley, attacking rich and poor, weak and strong, men and women, old people and children indiscriminately, pursuing all alike with the sword of destruction. Other alleys nearby were similarly affected and the whole area was cordoned off to contain the epidemic. Night and day, fractured voices rose in prayer, imploring saints and angles to stop the disaster (p.33)

The plague attacks all aspects of life in the alley, and it seems to Ashur that there is no way to escape death at that time. Until one night, Ashur is inspired by the spirit of his late father, Sheikh Afra, to leave the alley and take shelter into the mountainous outskirts. He decidedly follows the vision. He makes a bid to convince his first wife, his sons and the alley inhabitants to accompany him, but they scorn his offer and accuse him of madness. Genuinely disappointed, Ashur thus escapes with only Fulla and his baby son Shams al-Din into the surrounding emptiness, out of reach of the plague’s devastating toll. They remain in their isolation for six months. During his solitude, Ashur has ample time to meditate on the possibility of constructing a post-epidemic community based on undifferentiation and justice. Yet, Ashur is unable to realize throughout his long years of leadership of the alley that its inhabitants, i.e., the *harafish*, are the real plague for their passivity and compliance. However, upon his return, he feels that ‘he was about to be reborn’ (Mahfouz 2015: 39).

Eventually, when Ashur and his family come back to the alley, they find that plague has ravaged every aspect of life. Being desolate and abandoned, Ashur feels that they move from one wasteland to another:

How silent it was, how empty! Not a door or window open. He went forward slowly, stupefied. The bar, the caravanserai, the café, the houses, all were closed and shuttered. Nothing stirred. No sign of a cat or a dog, not a breath of life anywhere, and the dusty buildings all sunk in the same desolation (Mahfouz 2015: 42).

Plague is an ill wind that blows no good except for Ashur and his family. All the sources of power and wealth in the post-epidemic alley become at their disposal. Upon their return, they resettle in the most luxurious house in the alley, which allures Ashur with its riches: “Whenever he went out in the early morning to fetch

the cart, his eyes were drawn to the Bannan's house. Its purple dome, its awesome bulk, its air of mystery fascinated him. What treasures were left inside?" (Mahfouz 2015: 44). Therefore, they decide to abandon their mean cellar room and move into the abandoned manor house. This reversal in Ashur's life indicates the plague's social power as Ashur moves into a new luxurious house and takes control of the terrain's sources of power and wealth.

The first and immediate effect of plague in the post-epidemic alley is reversal through which Ashur is transformed from one of its down-trodden inhabitants to the owner of its most luxurious palace. This social reversal, according to Girard, is central to plague narrative as, in post-epidemic communities, all categories of differentiation become invalid, and reversal has become the controlling factor:

This destruction is often preceded by a reversal. The plague will turn the honest man into a thief, the virtuous man into a lecher, the prostitute into a saint. Friends murder and enemies embrace. Wealthy men are made poor by the ruin of their business. Riches are showered upon paupers who inherit in a few days the fortunes of many distant relatives (Girard 1974: 833).

Plague, thus, in its both biomedical and 'literary' senses, functions in *The Harafish* as a devastating experience, one which fundamentally subverts ossified social configurations and classes of differentiation. In the post-epidemic alley, social hierarchies are abolished, and the symbol of political and religious power, i.e., the *futawana*, collapses, as Ashur the *harfoush* becomes the master of the alley. Crucially, the novel "exposes the chaos of social breakdowns to reveal that the economic and ideological barriers that society constructs are easily conquered by indiscriminate and capricious forces" (Tarr 2015: 142). Despite being a typical element of literature in general, in *The Harafish*, Mahfouz uses the entwinement of plague and reversal purposefully to rebel against the current state of social structures and values. This interaction between plague and reversal pinpoints plague's social and political aspects. The outbreak of plague in a certain community, as Cooke (2009: 2) notes, "threatens the cohesion of the social bond and calls for action and containment upon a mass scale, involving socio-medico-political, and therefore also ethical, decisions". Thus, the purifying function of plague is seen upon Ashur's return to the post-epidemic alley where markers of differentiation are eroded and the reversal of the social structure dramatized.

#### **4. Un/Re-Differentiation in the post-epidemic alley**

Living almost his life as one of the *harafish*, Ashur now is settled in the new palace as the undisputed master of the alley. Ashur's new social position embodies the collapse of signs of differentiation in the post-epidemic alley, which is used as a microcosm for the change that swept the whole society. Plague, thus, contributes significantly to the collapse of distinctions in the social order, a process through which "the poor gain by the death of the wealthy and the everyman is turned beast by the same force" (Thiele 2011: 189). Reflecting on the medical effect of plague to dissolve internal organs and its role in the destruction of difference within

society, Girard (1974: 846) further explains: “This loss of differentiation is medically mythical but aesthetically powerful because it patterns the pathological symptoms on the breakdown of culture, producing an overwhelming impression of disintegration”. Yet, resistance to this process of undifferentiation remains central to *The Harafish* in which the attempts to restore the dominant power system permeates its narrative structure: ephemeral justice is established before the old despotic system is restored. Mahfouz, like Girard, is fully conscious of the influence of the conflictual relationship between un-differentiation and re-differentiation on the social structure, and, therefore, he approaches the plague as a disguise of a more profound social crisis: the perpetual conflict between the *harafish* and *futwaas* (clan chiefs) over sources of power and prestige.

Gradually normal life is restored to the alley where the *harafish* begin to re-inhabit the abandoned houses of the rich. Ashur now is recognized in his new mansion as the “Lord of the Alley” (Mahfouz 2015: 46). He is now known as Ashur al-Nagi (Ashur the Survivor) for being the only one to survive the plague (46). He begins to help his fellowmen with his lately gained wealth to find a job or establish a new business. The *harafish* now see Ashur as “a good, kindly, and charitable man. He was the protector of the poor...they had never known a rich man like this before and they raised him to the ranks of saints, saying God had singled him out and spared him for this purpose” (46). Ashur’s golden age begins as marks of differentiation collapse in the post-epidemic alley and wealth and power are redistributed fairly, and the community seems ephemerally to be at peace with itself.

Unfortunately, things have turned out differently as Ashur is sent to prison because he cannot provide evidence of his newly acquired wealth. However, despite his imprisonment, the love and respect people felt for him are not detracted. By contrast, it may have helped to “create a legendary figure of him, braver and more heroic than before” (Mahfouz 2015: 53). Yet, the attempts to restore the old system of power remain constant and unending. The alley, thus, goes into a crisis of differentiation as, during Ashur’s absence, Darwish becomes the alley’s ruler, and a period of differentiation and stratification begins. The *harafish*’s rights are plundered in the service of Darwish’s gang. It is not surprising then when Ashur is freed from prison, he gets a very warm welcome from the *harafish*, while Darwish’s party vanishes into thin air. Thus, Ashur’s position as the alley’s unrivaled ruler is restored once again:

Ashur al-Nagi became clan chief without a fight. As the *harafish* expected, he set about his duties in an entirely different manner from his predecessors. He returned to his trade as a carter and lived in the basement room of his earlier days. He obliged all his followers to work for a living, thus eliminating the thugs and bullies. Only the rich had to pay protection money, which was used to benefit the poor and disabled. He subdued the chiefs of neighboring alleys and gave our alley a new dignity. As well as the respect of the outside world, it enjoyed justice, honor, and security at home (Mahfouz 2015: 56).

Ashur's returns, earlier from exile and now from jail, are employed by Mahfouz as a symbol of the reinstatement of the undifferentiation pattern, which overlaps with the differentiation theme throughout the narrative structure of the novel: the collapse of the dominant power structure and the restoration of justice and peace to the community. Ashur's second inauguration particularly bears a close connection to Mahfouz's political thought. Mahfouz's account of the un/re-undifferentiation process through which the post-epidemic alley goes is a demagnification of the whole Egyptian society, as El-Enany (2005: 149) notes:

If we translate mythical language into political language rendering government for *fatwana*, exploitative capitalism for *baltaga*, taxation for *itawa*, nation for *hara* and neighboring nations for the other *haras*, then we will have a pretty good, if somewhat simplistic, view of Mahfouz's conditions for the achievement of social harmony as well as harmony among nations.

In other words, attempting to account for the proliferation of the plague as a metaphor, it seems for both Girard and Mahfouz that the plague has the power to purge a contaminated social order and call for a new order. In this sense, the 'plague' is a coded representation of the conflict between undifferentiation and redifferentiation besetting the alley, rooted in violence and social decay. Mahfouz (2005: 56), thus, opens the second tale in the epic of *The Harafish* with the question of "will the brightness and the clear skies last forever?"

The quiet and peaceful life led by the people in the alley does not last long as Ashur, at 60, unaccountably, disappears. Already admired by the people as an idol and a saint, Ashur's sudden and enigmatic disappearance restores the order of differentiation to the alley once again as the happy world of the alley gives way to bleak desolation. Ashur's son, Shams al-Din, takes over the reins of *fatwana* after a physical contest over the alley's rule. Shams al-Din follows in his father's footsteps in helping and patronizing the *harafish*. The *harafish*, therefore, truly believe that Ashur al-Nagi lives on as Shamsal-Din's rule is as just as his father's: "Nothing was changed from Ashur al-Nagi's time. Like him, Shams al-Din protected the rights of the *harafish* and muzzled the rich and powerful" (Mahfouz 2015: 69). Shams al-Din's reign is remembered forever alongside that of Ashur al-Nagi.

On Shams al-Din's death, his son Sulayman becomes the clan chief uncontested. Since his early days, Sulayman reminds the alley's inhabitants with his father Shams al-Din and grandfather Ashur al-Nagi. His reign continues the line of justice delineated by his ancestors and becomes "Protector of the *harafish*, muzzled the rich, fought criminals and thugs, and was content to carry his father's trade" (Mahfouz 2015: 96). Like his predecessors, he leads a humble and virtuous life. Sulayman then falls in love with his rich master's daughter. He soon abandons his modest job as a cart driver and succumbs to a lavish lifestyle provided by his wife's acquired wealth. Sulayman now is known as the *futuwwa* of the rich and well-to-do as he is completely immersed in his new luxurious life neglecting the

interests of the *harafish*: “He no longer looked the part of clan chief: he was bloated and indolent, addicted to stimulants and luxury” (Mahfouz 2015: 112). As he is involved in his luxurious life, Sulayman loses his grip on the alley rule as his right-hand man declares himself the clan chief.

Thus, after three generations, the Naji’s family rule is dramatically ended, and the alley goes through a new chapter of differentiation and desolation again. The efforts made by Ashur and Shams al-Din to maintain peace and humility have gone up into smoke: “The scandal in the Naji family was on everybody’s lips. The *harafish* regretted the passing of the old Naji covenant, and considered what had befallen Sulayman and his sons just punishment for his waywardness and treachery. They repeated that Ashur was a saint whom God saved through a dream and would bless through all eternity” (Mahfouz 2015: 112). *Fatwana* is no longer an exclusive property of the Najis. As for the *harafish*, it does not amount to much anymore who would be the *futuwwa*; for now, the children of the heroic Ashur can be as untrustworthy and despotic as any other ruler. It finally seems that once the alley succeeds in recovering from the aftermath of the plague outbreak, it enters into a new age of darkness in which violence spreads like an epidemic.

### **5. The sacrificial crisis and contagious violence in *The Harafish***

The influence of plague on the post-epidemic alley is ambivalent. On the one hand, the epidemic crisis brings violence and intense rivalries over power within the community. The chaos of social breakdown that accompanies plague, on the other hand, shows that the sociopolitical boundaries constructed by society are fragile. For example, the plague actually restores justice to the alley, which is built on tyranny and oppression. Mahfouz uses this ambivalent effect to disguise of a more profound social crisis: violence. His main purpose is to reveal how the people in the alley function within a larger community in a time of crisis. The novel follows a Girardian perspective in its appeal to pursue processes of decay and rivalry over power sources within a post-pandemic community.

Mahfouz’s metaphoric use of plague to recapitulate the decayed social order in Egypt would seem to neatly fit the bill that Girard uses to address how plague narratives function to recognize and neutralize reciprocal violence as a means of stabilizing the community. The failure of Ashur’s heirs to restore peace and justice to the alley is used by Mahfouz as a metaphor for the community’s failure to survive the ‘real’ plague: violence. Violence becomes a more serious threat than the plague itself. The main source of this violence in the novel is mimetic doubling. Girard posits mimetic doubling as the first central feature of the plague narrative, which is born out of intense competitions between rivals to achieve social honor. He perceives mimetic doubling as a scenario wherein plague embodies the mimetic function of desire. This mimetic function of desire is the source of the communal crisis as escalating violence in the alley results from increased communal mimesis that leads to a breakdown of order. As Girard (1974: 837) explains, when two individuals desire the same object (we want what other people want, a tendency Girard sees as endemic in the social order), those individuals imitate each other, and a conflict inevitably arises between them. In terms of their claims to authority

and honor, the alley's rulers, or *Futwwas*, as virtual doubles, signal the conflict among equals that, according to Girard, constantly threatens the social order. Thus, the question of the proliferation of doubles remains central to Mahfouz's idea of social violence.

Therefore, contagious violence is the real plague that Mahfouz views as inherent in human society; it does not have to appear in epidemic form but comes in as tyranny, betrayal, and even death. He conceives of plague as a contagious and mimetic spreading of human conflict. Violence, like the plague, becomes contagious, as Girard (1974: 836) emphasizes that the "plague as a transparent metaphor for a certain reciprocal violence that spreads, literally, like the plague". The novel represents violence as a social pathology emerging from the rapid transmission of imitative violence - violence, as a kind of contagion, almost always begets further violence - born from conditions that encourage individuals to desire the highest honors and privileges for themselves. This desire, however, is ambivalent: on the one hand, it urges the individual to be self-sufficient, and, on the other hand, it tempts the subject for further imitation of the other. Mutual violence, thus, arises as Girard (1974: 836-7) explains:

To imitate the desires of someone else is to turn this someone else into a rival as well as a model. From the convergence of two or more desires on the same object, conflict must necessarily arise...Mimetic desire cannot keep its illusions alive without falling in love with its own disastrous consequences and focusing more and more on the violence of its rivals....Thus, violence becomes reciprocal.

Therefore, one can aptly confirm a mutually close relationship between plague, violence and social disintegration. This relationship accounts for the emergence of competitive antagonism and hostility within the community Mahfouz depicts in *The Harafish*. In the post-epidemic alley, for instance, violence spreads in a contagious way due to the perpetual swapping between undifferentiation, or the collapse of the social structure, and the community's desire for redifferentiation, or the restoration of the social order. The real plague, thus, is "the passive contagion of desire and hatred which, spreading from one person to the next, shakes the very foundations of society" (Girard 2004: 43). Girard adds that the plague becomes a 'transparent metaphor for a certain reciprocal violence' when transferred to the social field due to its latent contagious nature. The power of this metaphor lies in its ability to reveal a form of social violence predicated on mimesis and the contagiousness of mimetic desire, on processes of imitation and exemplification:

The idea of contagiousness implies the presence of something harmful, which loses none of its virulence as it is rapidly transmitted from individual to individual. Such, of course, are bacteria in an epidemic; so is violence when it is imitated, either positively, whenever bad example makes the usual restraints inoperative, or negatively, when the efforts to stifle violence with violence achieve no more, ultimately, than an increase in the

level of violence. Counterviolence turns out to be the same as violence (Girard 1974: 837).

Girard likens violence and counter-violence in post-pandemic communities as contagious viruses that contribute to social order collapse as each individual mimics the other's desire for power and honor. When this desire is mimetically multiplied, reciprocal violence expands among mimetic doubles. Doubles are everywhere in *The Harafish*. The novel's narrative structure is principally based on a series of *futwwana* contests between various mimetic doubles who alternate between benevolent chiefs and brutal tyrants, as Mahfouz told Al-Ghitani (2007: 127) in an interview, "they were like rulers, sometimes just, sometimes oppressive". In other words, in the time of plague, the alley breaks down the barriers set by society to differentiate between social groups. This social differentiation ensures that different social groups function without infectious violence. When differences are eradicated, and the rubrics and values of society are disturbed by epidemics, repressed enmities and inclination to violence augment, threatening to overwhelm everybody in the alley.

The problem of infectious violence is made worse by the emergence of a sacrificial crisis that results from society's need to assign a sacrificial victim to reestablish its normal differences and maintain a sense of oppositional consensus. According to Gardner (2019: 85), the proliferation of the mimetic desire for violence is quashed only through sacrifice, eliminating one party through mimetic violence that will allow the double to emerge as a singularity and restore the degrees of difference integral to the social order. That is to say, peace and unanimity are restored through the reconfiguration of normal social borders, which constitutionally reproduce differentiation and thus order. The answer to this crisis of violence and differentiation is realized through Girard's last element of plague narrative: scapegoating.

## 6. Scapegoating and the *harafish's* revolution

Is there no way then out of this years-long un/differentiation crisis the alley experiences generation after generation? Mahfouz attempts to answer this problem in the last tale of *The Harafish*, 'Mulberries and Bludgeons,' in which mimetic rivalry reaches its peak. Hassuna, the new clan chief, is "one of the worst chiefs ever to hold sway in the alley. He exploited even its most poverty-stricken inhabitants, argued with his hands and feet rather than his tongue, and spread terror through the air" (Mahfouz 2015: 349). The *harafish's* social and political conditions deteriorate as violence and enmity become more contagious and threatening than the plague itself.

In a humble family declined from the noble heritage of Ashur al-Naji, a young boy, called Ashur too, grows up. Ashur II, as we might call him, has matured into a strong, hard-working man like his namesake: "His giant frame and his heavy, attractive features were reminiscent of the first Ashur" (Mahfouz 2015: 350). Like the first Ashur, Ashur II is also fascinated with the tales of the achievements of his great forebears. Fayiz, Ashur's brother, is immersed in a world of sin and

criminality. He has stolen the cart of his master, the One-Eyed Musa, and runs off. As a result, the clan chiefs decree that Halima and her sons should compensate the One-Eyed Musa for the donkey and cart (p.349). When Fayiz is found out, he commits suicide. The Nagi family's life then gets worse as Hassuna, wishing to eliminate any possible menace of al-Nagi lineage from claiming power, expels Ashur II and his mother from the alley in vengeance for offences they do not commit. In other words, being the only remaining rival for Hassuna, Ashur II, to use Girard's words, is identified by Hassuna, Ashur II's double, as a scapegoat to ensure that the current order of differentiation and, thus, the interests of his gang are secure.

In many of his plague writings, such as *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), *The Scapegoat* (1986) and *Mimesis and Theory* (2008), Girard notes the emergence of a "sacrificial crisis" in post-pandemic societies. As Keohane (2020: 2) reflects, Girard conceives the sacrificial crisis as the peak of cultural antagonism that threatens to bring about destructive violence. This mutual antagonism between mimetic doubles ends with the arbitrary selection of an innocent victim as a scapegoat. The scapegoat then is invariably selected from "among those who exist on the social margins, for instance invalids, orphans, the [disabled], resident foreigners, and even kings, . . . who carry what Girard terms victimary signs" (Casillo 1997: 409-10). Scapegoating, adds Girard, promises to break the cycle of retributive violence operating within society. As Syzdykov (2021: 162) further explains, in order for scapegoating to influence society with its homogenizing effect, it is necessary to hold the belief in the guilt of the selected victim. In *The Harafish*, the obvious scapegoat is Ashur II, the last heir of the Nagi family, who must be cleared up through exile to allow a better community to emerge.

In his exile, Ashur II has plenty of time to think of the crisis differentiation and violence threatening his community. He is also occupied by the question of why the *harafish* have not been able to maintain the divine flame once let by his grandfather Ashur al-Naji and preserved by Shams El-din. He believes that people's avidity for power and wealth are the main source of the crisis: "our love of money and power are our two greatest weaknesses" (Mahfouz 2015: 369). He further realizes that the *harafish* themselves are the source of the crisis for their conformity to the existing differentiation order. It is true that his idol Ashur al-Naji puts his wisdom and power in the service of the *harafish* and realizes undifferentiation in the alley, but such undifferentiation does not survive for a long time because its locus, i.e., the *harafish*, have assimilated this power structure. As he one day questioned the *harafish* in the market:

"What could restore our alley's fortunes?"

"The return of Ashur al-Nagi," answered several voices.

"Can the dead come back to life?" he murmured, smiling.

"Of course," someone replied with a laugh.

"When you're alive you're alive, and when you're dead you're dead," he said firmly

"We're alive but not living."

“What haven’t you got?”  
 “Bread.”  
 “Power, you mean,” said Ashur.  
 “Bread’s easier to come by.”  
 “Not at all” (Mahfouz 2015: 371).

Ashur is disappointed at the *harafish*’s response to the crisis as their only concern is to afford their daily needs. Their assimilation of the current oppressive power structure amounts their desire for resistance and change. Thus, he refuses their proposition of becoming the clan chief:

“You’re strong and powerfully built,” said a voice. “Do you want to become clan chief?”  
 “And be transformed like Wahid, Galal, and Samaha! Said another.  
 “Even I became an honest, upright chief, what good would it do?”  
 “We’d live happily under your protection!” said one.  
 “Even if you were happy when I was there what about after I’d gone?” asked Ashur.  
 “It would be back to the bad old days” (Mahfouz 2015: 371-72).

Therefore, Ashur II decides to take action, but realizes that he has to deal with the crisis differently. He believes that the only obstacle that impedes his progression towards revolution are the *harafish* themselves. He, therefore, begins to enlighten them with their indiscretion of complying with the current system. They must demand their rights by themselves. All that he can afford is guidance and support. To urge them to take action, he also tells them of a strange dream in which he ‘saw them carrying bludgeons’ (the traditional weapon of *futuwwas* and their men) (Mahfouz 2015: 372). The great Ashur al-Naji inspires him to assume power. Spurred by ‘the ever-burning ember in his chest’ (p.370), Ashur II finally comes back to the alley to end Hassuna’s reign of violence and differentiation. Ashur II’s attempt to assume power is earnestly backed up by a collective uprising against Hassuna’s gang (p.402). Finally, Ashur II and the *harafish* succeed in ousting Hassuna and his henchmen from power due to their numerical superiority and the inspiring leadership of Ashur II:

And then there was a surprise which hit the alley like an earthquake. Nobody was prepared for it. The *harafish* poured out of the lanes and derelict buildings, shouting, brandishing whatever weapons they had been able to lay hands on: bricks, bits of wood, chairs, sticks. They surged forward like a flood of against Hassuna’s men who, taken by surprise, were rapidly forced on to the defensive. Ashur struck Hassuna’s arm and the club dropped from his fingers. He grappled with him, got him in a clinch, and squeezed him until his bones cracked. Then he lifted him high over his head and hurled him into the alley where he lay senseless and robbed of his honor...

In less than an hour the only people left in the alley were Ashur and a group of *harafish* (pp.376-77).

Popular revolution then is the answer offered by Mahfouz to the crisis of mimetic violence. The *harafish*'s revolution brings back to the alley the undifferentiation effect once achieved during the plague, eliminating social hierarchies and categories and destroying specificities. It functions like the plague in its emphasis on undifferentiation rather than order and stratification: "The distinctiveness of the plague is that it ultimately destroys all forms of distinctiveness. The plague overcomes all obstacles, disregards all frontiers. All life, finally, is turned to death, which is the supreme undifferentiation" (Girard 1974: 835). The *harafish*'s revolution can thus be seen as a supreme form of undifferentiation, which reveals Mahfouz's revolt against ossified social categories, ranks and values.

The novel's ending also suggests that 'the virus' against which it wages war are the *harafish* themselves who, due to their passivity and alliance with their oppressors, are responsible for selecting Ashur II as the sacrificial victim. Their involvement in this scapegoating process veils and exonerates the *harafish* from what is really at work, for their passivity augmented the alley's suffering. Mahfouz's final statement reveals that the *harafish* function simultaneously like the virus and the vaccine. In other words, while their passivity causes their suffering, their revolution provides the cure. Thus, when Ashur II is established as the clan chief, he does not overlook his major goal: to make the *harafish* maintain their right to decide for themselves and master their destiny. Thus he imposes two duties on the *harafish*. "the first was to train their sons in the virtues of the clan to maintain their power and prevent it ever falling into the hands of hooligans or soldiers of fortune. The second was to earn their living by a trade or a job" (Mahfouz 2015: 378).

Therefore, scapegoating plays an ambivalent role in *The Harafish*. Although scapegoating becomes the force that drives the narrative structure in the novel through its homogenizing effect of the crisis of undifferentiation, seen for example when the collective identify Ashur II as a scapegoat, the purging of the community is achieved through the same process, i.e., scapegoating, which alternatively results in the birth of a new order. Ashur II and Hassuna, for example, function as mimetic doubles in various aspects as they desire the same thing: to possess power and control over the *harafish*. Only when Ashur II is offered as a scapegoat, the crisis of differentiation comes to an end, though for a short time. Thus, Ashur II plays a double-fold role in response to the un/re-differentiation process operating within the post-epidemic alley. He is chosen as the scapegoat, a sacrifice to end the differentiation, whose expulsion would restore differentiation and order to the community. Yet, his revolution against this differentiation system begins with an unsettling "reversal" or upturning of accepted social relationships and finally leads to undifferentiation.

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude, this study has examined the influence of plague on Mahfouz's novel *The Harafish* from a Girardian perspective. It has been argued that the elements proposed by Girard as being essential to plague narrative, such as reversal, undifferentiation, mimetic violence, and scapegoating, are recurrent in Mahfouz's novel. The Girardian analysis of Mahfouz's text reveals that the plague's influence on the (post)pandemic alley extends beyond its biomedical effect to encompass the re-configuration of the alley's sociopolitical structure. Before the plague strikes the alley, an ossified system of differentiation and inequality have been controlling its inhabitants. The plague outbreak puts an end to the crisis of differentiation that has dominated the community for long. Thus, although the plague has a devastating effect on the alley as it takes many lives, it has a purifying effect on its sociopolitical system. In the post-pandemic alley, undifferentiation, which is understood as the destruction of all differences, becomes the new order as the *harafish* take control of the alley's sources of power and their leader, Ashur al-Naji, becomes the clan chief. Therefore, it has been argued that there is a close relationship between the plague's biomedical and sociopolitical influence. The plague is the driving force behind the reversal of the community's sociopolitical order and the rebuilding of a new community based on undifferentiation and equality.

Although the plague epidemic has soon died out, its undifferentiating effect is transformed into a crisis of mimetic violence between the novel's mimetic doubles. Born out of fierce rivalry over the alley's sources of power and prestige, violence, which spreads like the plague, restores to the alley its pre-pandemic system of differentiation. The analysis also reveals that post-pandemic violence expands into a sacrificial crisis. Crucially, the analysis reveals that the sacrificial crisis brings about the collapse of all forms of knowledge within the community. Searching for order and peace, the community's expulsion of the scapegoat, i.e., Ashur II, is thought to resolve the chaos caused by mimetic violence and, thus, to restore the old pattern of differentiation and order to the alley. Yet, the scapegoat mechanism fails to achieve its purpose because it is interrupted by the *harafish*'s revolution, led by Ashur II. It now becomes clear that the *harafish*'s revolution represents Mahfouz's political statement: although the people might succeed in surviving the plague, social 'diseases' like violence are more serious.

Therefore, Mahfouz's novel acquires an added value that amplifies our perception of the plague's function in literature, where the plague's biomedical and sociopolitical influence converge. Because it is set no time in history, *The Harafish* can be seen as a 'prophecy' in anticipating the forthcoming social diseases in the contemporary post-COVID-19 world without yet knowing what this world will be: violent? revolutionary? Or an assemblage of both? The discussed scenario of reversal, undifferentiation, and mimetic violence can be seen as an exploration of the unknowable future, which involves the possibility of reproducing the diabolical powers of the past. Thus, the study calls for further research on the interaction between plague's biomedical and social ills in post-COVID-19 literature, which, in turn, is vital in coping with the contemporary pandemic crisis. The value of this study lies in being the first to apply Girard's concepts of plague to one of the most

understudied works of Arabic literature, *The Harafish*, and to incorporate Mahfouz's thinking into the contemporary pandemic crisis.

### Endnotes

1. The Arabic title is *Malhamat al-Harafish* (in English: *The Epic of The Harafish*). Henceforward, the novel will be referred to as *The Harafish*.
2. *Harafish* (sing. *harfush*) is a medieval Arabic word used to carry a negative meaning such as a ruffian, a rogue or a violent person involved in crime. Mahfouz, nonetheless, employs the term to refer to the oppressed, marginalized members of society. See El-Enany, 2005: 211.

Muhammad Yousri  
Department of English Language and Literature  
Kafrelsheikh University, Egypt  
ORCID Number: 0000-0001-7240-8062  
yousry87@gmail.com

## References

- Al-Ghitani, Gamal.** (2007). *The Mahfouz Dialogs*. Translated by Humphrey Davies. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Casillo, Robert.** (1997). 'Twilight of the sacred: René Girard reappraised'. *Annals of Scholarship*, 11 (4): 405-31.
- Cooke, Jennifer.** (2009). *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- El-Enany, Rasheed.** (2005). *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning*. London: Routledge.
- Fleming, Chris.** (2004). *Rene Girard: Violence and Mimesis*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Gardner, Hunter.** (2019). *Pestilence and the Body Politic in Latin Literature*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Girard, Rene.** (1974). 'The plague in literature and myth'. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 15 (5): 833-50.
- Girard, Rene.** (1978). *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.
- Girard, Rene.** (2004). *Oedipus Unbound: Selected Writings on Rivalry and Desire*. London: Stanford UP.
- Keohane, Kieran.** (2020). 'Sacrifice, gift and general economy: moral foundations for rebuilding economy and society after coronavirus'. *Constellations*, 28 (2): 1-14.  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-8675.12545>
- Mahfouz, Naguib.** (2015). *The Harafish*. Translated by Catherine Cobham. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Pamuk, Orhan.** (2020). 'What the great pandemic novels teach us'. *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-orhan-pamuk.html> (Retrieved on 1 August, 2021).
- Syzykov, Al-Tair.** (2021). 'Literature and culture in Rene Girard's mimetic theory'. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language*, 9 (2): 160-69. [http://www.ijscel.net/article\\_246002.html](http://www.ijscel.net/article_246002.html) (Retrieved on 13 January, 2022).
- Tarr, Clayton.** (2015). 'Infectious fiction: plague and the novelist in 'Arthur Mervyn' and 'The Last Man''. *Studies in the novel*, 47 (2): 141-57. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26366644> (Retrieved on 12 January, 2022).
- Thiele, Matthew.** (2011). 'Plague in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: A Girardian reading of Bottom and Hippolyta'. In Rebecca Tatora and Ernest B. Gilman (eds.), *Representing the Plague in Early Modern England*, 185-200. New York: Routledge.
- World Health Organization.** (2020). 'WHO director-general's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 11 March 2020'.

<https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020> (Retrieved on 20 March, 2020).