

## Portrayals of Social Justice and Human Dignity in Muhammad al-Naas's *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table*: An Islamic Ethical Reading

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### Abstract

This article examines the portrayal of social justice and human dignity in Muhammad al-Naas's award-winning novel *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table* (2021) through the lens of Islamic ethical thought. The novel, which won the 2022 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, tells the story of Milad, a sensitive young man from a Libyan family of bakers who defies his society's rigid gender expectations by exchanging traditional roles with his wife, an act that subjects him to communal scorn and psychological alienation. Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach, combining close reading of the novel's narrative structure, character development, and symbolic imagery with an interpretive-analytical framework derived from foundational Islamic ethical concepts, particularly *karāmah* (human dignity) and *'adl* (social justice), as articulated in the Qur'an (especially 17:70) and classical and contemporary Islamic ethical scholarship. The analysis proceeds through thematic coding of the novel's key episodes, dialogues, and narrative interventions, examining how the text represents economic, gendered, and communal dimensions of justice and dignity. The findings reveal that the novel offers a multi-layered critique of Libyan society: first, the community systematically violates Milad's inherent human dignity by reducing his worth to his conformity to gender-based occupational roles; second, the society practices a form of economic and social injustice that contradicts Islamic principles of equitable treatment and solidarity; third, the novel exposes a fundamental gap between Islam's ethical ideals and cultural practices, demonstrating how customary norms (*'urf*) override authentic Islamic teachings; and fourth, through Milad's psychological suffering and eventual alienation, the narrative calls for a reclamation of the Islamic values of compassion, justice, and the inherent worth of every human being. Ultimately, this reading demonstrates that al-Naas's novel is not merely a literary work but a profound ethical intervention that challenges Muslim societies to critically examine the gap between their proclaimed Islamic values and their social realities, inviting a return to the spirit of justice and dignity that lies at the heart of Islamic revelation.

**Keywords:** : Islamic Ethics, Social Justice, Contemporary Libyan Fiction, Muhammad al-Naas, *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table*.

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary Arabic fiction has increasingly emerged as a vital site for social critique, offering nuanced explorations of identity, gender, and justice in societies undergoing profound transformation. Among the most significant recent contributions to this literary tradition is Muhammad al-Naas's debut novel, *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table* (2021), which won the 2022 International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF). Alnaas, born in Libya in 1991, is a short story writer and journalist who obtained a BA in Electrical Engineering before turning to literature. His victory marked a historic moment: he became the first Libyan and the youngest author ever to win the prestigious prize. The novel, written in just six months during the COVID-19 lockdown while Tripoli was under bombardment, has been published in French and is forthcoming in English and Italian.

Set in early twenty-first-century rural Libya, the novel tells the story of Milad, a sensitive young man from a family of bakers who struggles to conform to his society's rigid expectations of masculinity. Milad ultimately abandons the family bakery—a symbol of masculine economic provision—and exchanges traditional gender roles with his wife Zainab, who becomes the breadwinner while Milad assumes domestic responsibilities. This decision, which allows Milad to embrace his authentic self, subjects him to communal scorn, mockery, and eventual psychological alienation. The novel thus offers a powerful critique of hegemonic masculinity and the social norms that enforce it, questioning "static ideas of gender" and championing "the individual in the face of conformity".

### 1.1. Literature Review and Research Gap

Scholarly attention to *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table* has begun to emerge, particularly within the frameworks of gender studies and psychoanalytic theory. One study examines the destructive impact of hegemonic masculinity on individuals and society in the novel, drawing on Raewyn Connell's theoretical framework to demonstrate how patriarchal norms oppress not only women but also men who fail to embody dominant masculine ideals. Another analysis applies Jeffrey Young's Schema-Therapeutic Theory to offer a psychoanalytical reading of the character of Milad. Additional scholarship has explored the individual and social identity crisis in the novel based on Erikson's theory, as well as the function of narrative techniques in al-Naas's work. These studies, while valuable, have predominantly focused on psychological and sociological dimensions of the text.

However, a significant gap remains: no study has yet examined the novel through the lens of Islamic ethical thought, particularly with respect to its portrayal of social justice (*'adl*) and human dignity (*karāmah*). This is a notable omission, as the novel's critique of gender norms, social exclusion, and communal judgment resonates deeply with core Islamic principles concerning the inherent worth of all human beings, regardless of gender or social status. The Qur'anic declaration that God has "honored the children of Adam" (Qur'an 17:70) establishes a foundational principle of human dignity that transcends cultural norms and social hierarchies. Similarly, the Islamic emphasis on justice (*'adl*) as a comprehensive objective of revelation (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*) provides a powerful framework for evaluating social practices that marginalize and dehumanize individuals.

Reading al-Naas's novel through this ethical lens offers the opportunity to illuminate the gap between Islam's ethical ideals and the cultural practices that often override them—a tension that lies at the heart of the novel's social critique.

### 1.2. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does al-Naas portray social justice and human dignity in *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table*?
2. What are the manifestations of injustice and dignity violation in the novel's depiction of Libyan society?
3. How can Islamic ethical concepts—particularly *karāmah* (human dignity) and *'adl* (social justice)—provide a critical framework for understanding and evaluating these portrayals?

### 1.3. Scope and Limitations

This study focuses specifically on the novel's treatment of gender roles, work division, and communal judgment as they relate to social justice and human dignity. The analysis applies an Islamic ethical framework, drawing on Qur'anic principles and classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship. The study does not engage in political or legal analysis, nor does it offer a comprehensive survey of Libyan literature or Islamic ethics. Rather, it offers a focused reading of a single novel through a specific ethical lens.

### 1.4. Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative textual analysis** approach, combining **close reading** of the novel's narrative structure, character development, and symbolic imagery with an **interpretive-analytical framework** derived from foundational Islamic ethical concepts. The analysis proceeds through **thematic coding** of the novel's key episodes, dialogues, and narrative interventions, examining how the text represents economic, gendered, and communal dimensions of justice and dignity. This methodological approach allows for a systematic and rigorous engagement with the text while remaining grounded in the ethical concepts that constitute the study's theoretical framework.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Islamic Ethics of Social Justice and Human Dignity

### 2.1. The Qur'anic Foundation of Human Dignity (*Karāmah*)

The concept of human dignity (*karāmah*) occupies a central position in Islamic ethical thought. The Qur'an explicitly establishes the inherent worth of all human beings in the celebrated verse: "And We have certainly honored the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference" (Qur'an 17:70). This verse articulates a fundamental principle: human dignity is not earned through social status, wealth, gender, or conformity to cultural norms; rather, it is a divine gift bestowed upon every human being by virtue of their creation. The word *karāmah* derives from the root \*k-r-m\*, which connotes nobility, honor, and generosity, indicating that dignity is an intrinsic quality of human existence (Kamali, 2002: 12-15).

Classical Muslim exegetes have elaborated on the significance of this verse. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE) explains that God's honoring of humanity encompasses both spiritual and material dimensions, including the gift of reason, the capacity for moral discernment, and the provision of sustenance (al-Ṭabarī, 2001: 15.120-122). Al-Rāzī (d. 1209 CE) further emphasizes that this honor is universal, applying to all human beings regardless of their religious affiliation or moral standing—a point that underscores the inalienable nature of human dignity (al-Rāzī, 1990: 20.180-183). Contemporary scholars have built upon this foundation, arguing that *karāmah* serves as the ethical basis for human rights in Islam and that any social practice that diminishes or denies this dignity constitutes a violation of divine law (Mayer, 2013: 65-68; Abou El Fadl, 2001: 78-80).

Furthermore, recent scholarship on gender justice in the Qur'an has demonstrated that Islamic teachings fundamentally challenge patriarchal interpretations that have historically marginalized women. Wijaya, Muchlis, and Rohmatulloh (2025) argue that Muslim feminists, through critical re-reading of the Qur'an, have discovered a vision of gender justice rooted in equality and mutual respect, emphasizing that the Qur'an itself provides a dynamic concept of gender justice adaptable to contemporary contexts. This reading aligns with the classical understanding of *karāmah* as a universal principle that transcends gender-based hierarchies.

## 2.2. Social Justice ('*Adl*) in Islamic Thought

Justice ('*adl*) is one of the most fundamental concepts in Islam, encompassing both divine and human dimensions. The Qur'an repeatedly commands believers to act justly: "O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives" (Qur'an 4:135). The concept of '*adl* in Islamic thought goes beyond legal equality to encompass a comprehensive vision of social, economic, and political justice (Qutb, 1999: 45-48). Classical scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328 CE) argued that justice is the objective of all divine revelation and that the governance of society must be oriented toward establishing justice in all its forms (Ibn Taymiyyah, n.d.: 28.56-58).

In contemporary Islamic ethical discourse, social justice is understood as encompassing several dimensions. **Economic justice** requires the fair distribution of resources and the protection of the vulnerable from exploitation; **social justice** demands equality of opportunity and the elimination of discrimination based on race, gender, or social status; and **communal justice** involves the collective responsibility to support those in need and oppose oppression (Qutb, 1999: 89-92). The Islamic principle of *takāful* (social solidarity) further reinforces the importance of justice, emphasizing that the community bears a collective responsibility for the welfare of all its members (Kamali, 2002: 55-57). The *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (higher objectives of Islamic law) framework, as articulated by scholars like al-Shāṭibī (d. 1388 CE), identifies justice and the preservation of human dignity as primary objectives of Islamic revelation (al-Shāṭibī, 2004: 2.45-50; Auda, 2008: 34-36).

Recent scholarship has expanded the *maqāṣidī* framework to address contemporary social challenges. Gunawan, Harahap, and Gunawan (2026) demonstrate that Qur'anic social justice is organized around three core dimensions: normative justice (justice as a fundamental value), relational justice (justice in human interactions), and structural justice (justice in social institutions and systems). They argue that a *maqāṣidī* approach, by focusing on the purposes and higher objectives of Islamic law, provides a dynamic framework for addressing modern issues such as inequality, discrimination, and systemic injustice. This perspective is particularly relevant for evaluating social practices that marginalize individuals and violate their inherent dignity.

### 2.3. The Relationship Between Dignity and Justice in Islam

In Islamic ethical thought, human dignity (*karāmah*) and social justice (*'adl*) are mutually reinforcing concepts. Dignity is the foundation upon which justice is built: because every human being possesses inherent worth, they are entitled to just treatment, fair opportunity, and protection from oppression. Conversely, justice is the means by which dignity is preserved and realized in social life: a just society is one in which the dignity of every individual is respected, and injustice is, by definition, a violation of human dignity (Kamali, 2002: 110-115; Abou El Fadl, 2001: 130-133).

This interdependence has profound implications for social critique. When a society treats individuals unjustly—whether through economic exploitation, gender discrimination, social exclusion, or communal judgment—it does not merely violate abstract principles of fairness; it fundamentally denies the God-given dignity of those individuals. The Qur'anic prohibition of oppression (*ẓulm*) is thus inseparable from the affirmation of human dignity: to oppress another is to deny the honor that God has bestowed upon them (al-Rāzī, 1990: 22.45-47). This ethical framework provides a powerful lens for examining social practices that marginalize, stigmatize, or dehumanize individuals, as such practices constitute violations of both justice and dignity (Mayer, 2013: 120-122; Auda, 2008: 78-80).

Almuthaybiri (2026), in his study of gender discrimination in Saudi fiction, demonstrates that novels often draw a distinction between Islamic teachings and patriarchal customs, constructing an implicit Islamic discourse that challenges gender inequality. This finding reinforces the argument that Islamic ethics, properly understood, provides a framework for critiquing social practices that violate justice and dignity—a framework that the present study applies to al-Naas's Libyan novel.

### 2.4. Islamic Ethics and Contemporary Social Critique

Islamic ethical thought is not merely a theoretical framework for understanding moral principles; it also provides a dynamic and critical lens for engaging with contemporary social issues. Throughout Islamic history, scholars have employed ethical concepts to critique social practices that deviate from Islamic ideals, including economic inequality, political tyranny, and social discrimination (Ibn Taymiyyah, n.d.: 28.56-58; al-Shāṭibī, 2004: 2.45-50). In the modern era, Muslim intellectuals have continued this tradition, applying Islamic ethical principles to

issues such as human rights, gender equality, and social justice (Abou El Fadl, 2001: 200-205; Qutb, 1999: 150-155).

Contemporary Arabic literature has increasingly become a site for this ethical critique. Mohtadi and Nabizadeh (n.d.), in their analysis of Islamic approaches in contemporary Kuwaiti poetry, demonstrate that poets often reflect Islamic values such as monotheism, justice, ethics, human dignity, and social reform, using literature as a tool for cultural resistance and the revival of Islamic identity. This tradition of literary-ethical engagement is precisely what al-Naas's novel continues, offering a narrative critique of social injustice that resonates with Islamic ethical values.

This study situates itself within this tradition of ethical critique. By reading *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table* through the lens of Islamic ethics, the analysis aims to illuminate the gap between Islam's ethical ideals and the social realities that often prevail in Muslim societies (Kamali, 2002: 120-125). The novel's critique of gender norms, social exclusion, and communal judgment resonates with Islamic principles of justice and dignity, revealing that what is often justified in the name of "tradition" or "custom" (*'urf*) may in fact contradict the core values of Islamic revelation (Auda, 2008: 112-115). This reading thus demonstrates the continued relevance of Islamic ethical thought as a framework for social critique in the contemporary Muslim world (Mayer, 2013: 200-203; Abou El Fadl, 2001: 250-255).

### **3. Portrayals of Social Justice and Injustice in the Novel**

#### **3.1. The Economic Dimension: Bread, Work, and Social Worth**

In *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table*, bread serves as more than mere sustenance; it functions as a powerful symbol of economic power, social status, and masculine identity. The novel opens with Milad's family bakery, a generations-old institution that embodies the community's values of hard work, provision, and patriarchal authority. The title itself—*Bread on Uncle Milad's Table*—suggests that bread is central not only to the family's livelihood but also to the social order that the community seeks to preserve.

The narrative reveals that Milad's family expects him to inherit the bakery and continue the tradition of masculine breadwinning. However, Milad is repelled by the physical labor of baking, the heat of the oven, and the monotony of the daily routine. His sensitivity, artistic inclinations, and love for pigeons stand in sharp contrast to the rugged masculinity associated with the bakery. When Milad abandons the bakery and exchanges roles with his wife Zainab—she becomes the breadwinner while he assumes domestic responsibilities—he challenges the economic foundation of his society's gender order.

This role reversal has profound economic and social consequences. Zainab's entry into the workforce as a breadwinner is met with suspicion and disapproval, while Milad's retreat from economic production is met with scorn. The community reduces Milad's worth to his economic function, judging him not by his character or humanity but by his failure to fulfill the masculine role of provider. This economic determinism contradicts the Islamic principle that human dignity is inherent and not contingent upon one's occupation or economic contribution. As

Kamali (2002: 12-15) argues, the Qur'anic concept of *karāmah* establishes that all human beings possess inherent dignity regardless of their social or economic status. The community's reduction of Milad's worth to his economic role thus constitutes a violation of his God-given dignity.

The Department of Arabic Language and Literature at Razi University (2023), in their analysis of the novel, similarly observes that al-Naas critiques the patriarchal system and the oppression imposed on women, demonstrating how economic roles are gendered in ways that violate the dignity of both men and women. This analysis aligns with Gunawan, Harahap, and Gunawan's (2026) argument that structural justice requires the elimination of economic discrimination and the fair distribution of social respect.

### **3.2. The Gendered Dimension: Masculinity, Femininity, and Social Expectations**

The novel offers a searing critique of hegemonic masculinity in Libyan rural society. Milad's failure to embody the ideal of masculine toughness, economic provision, and physical strength marks him as deviant. The community expects men to be strong, silent, and productive; Milad is sensitive, expressive, and prefers the company of pigeons to the bakery. His brothers, who embody the masculine ideal, mock him relentlessly, and his father's disappointment is palpable. The community's judgment is expressed not only through direct insults but also through gossip, exclusion, and the withdrawal of social respect (al-Naas, 2021: 45-52).

This gendered dimension of injustice is deeply intertwined with the Islamic principles of justice and dignity. In Islam, gender does not determine one's worth; rather, the Qur'an declares that "the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you" (Qur'an 49:13). This verse establishes that human worth is based on piety and moral character, not on conformity to gendered roles. The community's condemnation of Milad for failing to embody masculine norms thus contradicts the Qur'anic principle that dignity is inherent and not contingent upon performance of gender roles (Abou El Fadl, 2001: 78-80). Furthermore, the community's rigid gender expectations perpetuate a form of injustice that harms both men and women: Milad is alienated and humiliated, while Zainab, his wife, is burdened with the double duty of breadwinning and household management without the social recognition that would accompany such labor in a male breadwinner.

Wijaya, Muchlis, and Rohmatulloh (2025) argue that the Qur'an itself provides a dynamic concept of gender justice rooted in equality and mutual respect, challenging patriarchal interpretations that have historically marginalized women. The novel's critique of rigid gender roles thus aligns with this Islamic vision of gender justice. Almuthaybiri (2026), in his study of Saudi fiction, similarly demonstrates that novels often distinguish between Islamic teachings and patriarchal customs, constructing an implicit Islamic discourse that challenges gender inequality. Al-Naas's novel participates in this same critical project, exposing the gap between Islamic values of equality and the patriarchal practices that prevail in his society.

The novel portrays Zainab's experience with considerable sympathy. Although she becomes the breadwinner, the community does not respect her for this role; instead, she is seen as having been forced into it by Milad's inadequacy. This double standard reveals the deeply embedded gender inequality in the novel's society—what Qutb (1999: 89-92) identifies as a violation of Islamic social justice, which requires equitable treatment of all individuals regardless of gender. Islam's vision of gender relations is not one of rigid hierarchy but of mutual responsibility and complementarity, as articulated in Qur'an 4:32: "For men is what they earn, and for women is what they earn." The novel's community, in contrast, enforces a gender hierarchy that denies equal worth and dignity to both men who deviate from masculine norms and women who fulfill roles associated with men.

### **3.3. The Communal Dimension: Social Exclusion and Collective Judgment**

One of the most striking features of the novel is its portrayal of the community as a site of social control and surveillance. The village in *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table* functions as what might be called a "judgmental community," where individuals are constantly watched, evaluated, and either accepted or rejected based on their conformity to social norms. The community's judgment of Milad is not limited to his family but extends to neighbors, shopkeepers, and even strangers who express opinions about his unconventional choices.

The novel depicts how gossip operates as a mechanism of social control. Every move Milad makes is observed and commented upon; his decision to keep pigeons is ridiculed, his willingness to help with household chores is seen as unmanly, and his refusal to work in the bakery is considered a betrayal of his family and community. The cumulative effect of this communal judgment is what al-Naas portrays as psychological torment, leading to Milad's eventual alienation and withdrawal from social life (al-Naas, 2021: 78-85).

This communal dimension of injustice resonates with the Islamic critique of social practices that marginalize individuals based on conformity to custom (*'urf*) rather than ethical principles. As Auda (2008: 112-115) observes, the objectives of Islamic law include the preservation of human dignity and the protection of individuals from harm. When a community collectively judges and excludes an individual for failing to conform to arbitrary norms—norms that may have no basis in Islamic teachings—it violates the Islamic principles of justice and compassion. The Qur'an explicitly warns against mockery and contempt: "O you who have believed, let not a people ridicule [another] people; perhaps they may be better than them" (Qur'an 49:11). The community's treatment of Milad, particularly the ridicule and mockery he endures, stands in direct contradiction to this ethical injunction.

Al-Naas's novel thus offers a powerful critique of communal judgment as a form of injustice. The community's demand for conformity crushes individuality and denies the dignity of those who do not fit its narrow expectations. In this sense, the novel challenges Muslim societies to reflect on the relationship between communal norms and Islamic values, asking whether practices justified as "tradition" may in fact constitute a form of oppression that violates the very principles of justice and dignity that Islam seeks to uphold (Mayer, 2013: 120-122).

The Department of Arabic Language and Literature at Razi University (2023) confirms that al-Naas's novel critiques the patriarchal system and the oppression imposed on women, which extends to the communal judgment of those who violate gender norms.

### **3.4. The Psychological Dimension: The Internalization of Injustice**

The novel's most profound exploration of injustice lies in its portrayal of Milad's psychological suffering. Milad is not merely a victim of external social judgment; he internalizes the community's scorn, experiencing shame, guilt, and a profound sense of inadequacy. The narrative, which is told from a close third-person perspective, allows readers access to Milad's inner world, revealing the torment of a man who cannot be what his society wants him to be.

Milad's internalization of injustice manifests in several ways. First, he experiences social anxiety; the novel describes his discomfort in public spaces, his avoidance of social gatherings, and his fear of being seen or judged. Second, he struggles with identity confusion, as he is torn between his authentic self and the self that society demands. Third, he experiences a loss of agency and self-worth, feeling that his choices have no value because they are not validated by the community (al-Naas, 2021: 102-108).

This psychological dimension of injustice is particularly significant from an Islamic ethical perspective. The violation of human dignity is not only an external matter; it also has profound internal consequences. When individuals are repeatedly told that they are worthless, inadequate, or deviant, they may come to believe these judgments, experiencing what Mayer (2013: 200-203) describes as the internalization of oppression—a state in which the oppressed adopt the oppressor's view of themselves. The novel suggests that the community's injustice does not end with its external condemnation of Milad; it continues through the damage it inflicts on his psyche, undermining his sense of self and his belief in his own worth.

This insight resonates with the Qur'anic insistence on hope and the rejection of despair. Islam teaches that human beings are created in the best of forms (Qur'an 95:4) and that despair is a sin (Qur'an 12:87). The community's systematic degradation of Milad, which leads him to despair, thus constitutes not only a violation of his dignity but also a violation of the Islamic principle that every human being is worthy of hope and redemption. By depicting Milad's psychological suffering, the novel exposes the full extent of the injustice inflicted upon him, revealing that social injustice is not limited to material deprivation but extends to the emotional and spiritual realm. Mohtadi and Nabizadeh (n.d.) similarly observe that contemporary Arabic literature often uses poetry and narrative to reflect Islamic values and critique social injustice, demonstrating the power of literary expression to address psychological and spiritual dimensions of oppression.

## **4. An Islamic Ethical Reading: Dignity Violated, Justice Denied**

### **4.1. The Violation of *Karāmah* (Inherent Human Dignity)**

The concept of *karāmah* (human dignity) in Islamic thought is rooted in the Qur'anic declaration that God has "honored the children of Adam" (Qur'an 17:70).

As Mohammad Hashim Kamali demonstrates in his comprehensive study, *The Dignity of Man: An Islamic Perspective*, this dignity is inherent and inalienable, bestowed upon every human being regardless of gender, social status, or economic function. Kamali examines the measures that Islamic law (Sharī'ah) has taken to protect human dignity and to promote it in social interaction, emphasizing that dignity is not contingent upon conformity to cultural norms or the performance of specific social roles (Kamali, 2002: 12-15).

From this perspective, the community's treatment of Milad—reducing his worth to his failure to embody masculine economic roles—constitutes a fundamental violation of his God-given dignity. Milad's own words reveal his awareness of this violation: "أن مسألة الخبز تشبه الحياة، على الأقل حياتي" ("The issue of bread looks like life, at least my life") (al-Naas, 2021: 30). The novel symbolizes society as a bakery and people as dough, where "the Bakery represents the social and cultural norms that shape and create people". Milad, though clever in making bread, is "soft as dough and easily shaped by the societal norms", yet his refusal to conform to the rigid masculine mold renders him vulnerable to the community's judgment. Al-Naas emphasizes that "men and women in society are soft and easy to shape like dough, while society puts pressure on them to shape them according to its norms and stereotypes". The novel thus dramatizes what Kamali identifies as the tension between Islam's ethical vision of inherent human worth and social practices that deny that worth—a tension that ultimately leaves Milad "shaped by society, leaving him with no choice".

The Department of Arabic Language and Literature at Razi University (2023) confirms that al-Naas's novel critiques the patriarchal system and the oppression imposed on women, which extends to the communal judgment of those who violate gender norms. This analysis aligns with Gunawan, Harahap, and Gunawan's (2026) argument that structural justice requires the elimination of economic discrimination and the fair distribution of social respect.

#### **4.2. The Denial of 'Adl (Justice)**

The Islamic conception of justice ('*adl*) extends beyond legal equality to encompass a comprehensive vision of social, economic, and communal fairness. In his seminal work *Social Justice in Islam*, Sayyid Qutb articulates that justice in Islam is not merely a legal principle but a comprehensive moral and social obligation that requires the fair distribution of resources, equality of opportunity, and the elimination of discrimination. Qutb argues that social justice demands that every individual be treated with equity and that society bears a collective responsibility to protect the vulnerable from exploitation and oppression (Qutb, 1999: 89-92).

The novel's society, however, practices a form of economic and social injustice that systematically violates these principles. Milad's role reversal with his wife Zainab—he stays at home performing domestic duties while she becomes the family breadwinner—earns him the community's scorn. As the novel's description reveals, "While the unconventional arrangement suits Milad, he unknowingly earns the community's scorn. When his cousin finally breaks the village's

true opinion to Milad, a series of tragic events are set into motion". The community's judgment is expressed not only through direct insults but also through gossip and the withdrawal of social respect. Milad recounts how he repeatedly heard the phrase: "عيلة و خالها" ("a family and its maternal uncle Milad") in different places, and that "وصلت شهرتي حتى في أحياء المدينة، وأنا أحاول مسحها .... سمعتها حتى ضقت بها " ("My reputation spread through the city's neighborhood. I try to erase it..... I heard it till I could not stand it anymore") (al-Naas, 2021: 75). The community's failure to practice equitable treatment thus constitutes a denial of 'adl as Qutb conceives it—a denial that exposes the gap between Islamic ideals and social realities.

Wijaya, Muchlis, and Rohmatulloh (2025) argue that the Qur'an itself provides a dynamic concept of gender justice rooted in equality and mutual respect, challenging patriarchal interpretations that have historically marginalized women. The novel's critique of rigid gender roles thus aligns with this Islamic vision of gender justice. Almuthaybiri (2026), in his study of Saudi fiction, similarly demonstrates that novels often draw a distinction between Islamic teachings and patriarchal customs, constructing an implicit Islamic discourse that challenges gender inequality.

#### 4.3. The Subversion of Islamic Values by Cultural Norms

One of the most significant contributions of Islamic ethical thought to contemporary social critique is its capacity to distinguish between authentic Islamic teachings and cultural practices that have come to be justified in the name of religion. Khaled Abou El Fadl, in his influential work *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*, argues that divinely ordained law is frequently misinterpreted by Muslim authorities at the expense of certain groups, including women, and proposes a return to the original ethics at the heart of the Muslim legal system. Abou El Fadl demonstrates that what is often presented as "Islamic" may in fact be a product of patriarchal cultural norms that have been superimposed upon Islamic teachings (Abou El Fadl, 2001: 78-80).

The novel dramatizes precisely this dynamic. Milad is raised in what the novel describes as a "feminine house" surrounded by his mother and sisters, and this upbringing does not prepare him "to live in his tyrannical patriarchal society". The community's condemnation of Milad is justified in the name of tradition and custom ('urf), yet it fundamentally contradicts the Islamic principles of dignity and justice. The novel critiques hegemonic masculinity in contemporary Libyan society, with Al-Naas "rejecting traditional masculinity and criticizing the societal norms that enforce rigid gender roles". Through Milad's internal conflict, the novel presents a "contradiction between the idea of masculinity assigned by society and his true self". Furthermore, the novel exposes how these "gender roles perpetuate violence, especially domestic violence," and "asserts that it is difficult to challenge these roles". By exposing this gap, the novel invites readers to question whether practices justified as "Islamic" are in fact faithful to the ethical spirit of the tradition—a question that lies at the heart of Abou El Fadl's project.

Almuthaybiri (2026) similarly observes that Saudi fiction often draws a distinction between Islamic teachings and patriarchal customs, constructing an implicit Islamic discourse that challenges gender inequality. This finding reinforces the argument that Islamic ethics, properly understood, provides a framework for critiquing social practices that violate justice and dignity—a framework that the present study applies to al-Naas's Libyan novel.

#### **4.4. The Novel's Call for a Return to Authentic Islamic Values**

The higher objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*) provide a framework for evaluating social practices and institutions based on their fulfillment of fundamental human goods, including the protection of dignity, the establishment of justice, and the promotion of compassion. Jasser Auda, in his *Maqasid al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach*, presents a systems approach to the philosophy and juridical theory of Islamic law based on its purposes, intents, and higher objectives. Auda argues that for Islamic rulings to fulfill their original purposes of justice, freedom, rights, common good, and tolerance in today's context, they must be understood as dynamic and responsive to changing social conditions (Auda, 2008: 34-36, 112-115).

Gunawan, Harahap, and Gunawan (2026) further develop this *maqāṣidī* framework, demonstrating that Qur'anic social justice is organized around three core dimensions: normative justice, relational justice, and structural justice. They argue that a *maqāṣidī* approach provides a dynamic framework for addressing modern issues such as inequality, discrimination, and systemic injustice. The novel's implicit call for a return to the authentic values of Islam—compassion, justice, and the inherent worth of every human being—resonates with this *maqāṣidī* perspective. By depicting the tragic consequences of a community that has abandoned these values in favor of rigid cultural norms, the novel invites readers to reflect on what it truly means to live in accordance with the higher objectives of Islamic revelation.

The novel questions "fixed ideas of gender" and champions "the individual in the face of conformity". Yet the ending of the novel is profoundly tragic. Milad, unable to bear the weight of societal pressure, succumbs to madness. In one of the final scenes, he says: "هيا، لتذوق الخبز، نضعه على الطاولة و نحضر المربي و الزبد، هل " ("Let's taste the bread. We will put it on the table and bring jam and butter. Do you need tuna? After we eat, we can see Zaineb, she is still sleeping in the bedroom") (al-Naas, 2021: 202). Until the end, "Milad denies that he killed his wife because this action does not belong to his true nature". Al-Naas emphasizes that "this act of madness is the result of the pressure of society on men who could not fulfill the rigid gender role". The community's systematic degradation of Milad, which leads him to despair, thus constitutes not only a violation of his dignity but also a violation of the Islamic principle that every human being is worthy of hope and redemption. As Auda suggests, the *maqāṣid* are "the heart and the very philosophy of Islamic law" (Auda, 2008: 34)—a heart that the novel's community has lost but that Milad, in his vulnerability and humanity, paradoxically embodies, even as he is crushed by the very society that claims to uphold Islamic values.

Mohtadi and Nabizadeh (n.d.), in their analysis of contemporary Kuwaiti poetry, demonstrate that literature often serves as a tool for cultural resistance and the revival of Islamic identity. Al-Naas's novel participates in this same tradition, using narrative to critique social injustice and to call for a return to the ethical values at the heart of Islamic revelation.

## 5. Conclusion

### 6.1. Restatement of the Thesis and Summary of Arguments

This article has examined the portrayal of social justice and human dignity in Muhammad al-Naas's *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table* through the lens of Islamic ethical thought. The analysis has demonstrated that al-Naas's novel offers a profound critique of social injustice and the violation of human dignity in contemporary Libyan society. By depicting the tragic consequences of a community that enforces rigid gender roles and punishes those who deviate from them, the novel exposes the gap between Islam's ethical ideals and the oppressive social realities that often prevail in Muslim societies.

The analysis has proceeded through several interconnected dimensions. **First**, the economic dimension revealed how bread functions as a symbol of social worth and masculine identity, and how the community's reduction of Milad's worth to his economic function contradicts the Islamic principle of inherent human dignity (*karāmah*) (Kamali, 2002: 12-15; Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Razi University, 2023). **Second**, the gendered dimension demonstrated how rigid gender expectations harm both men and women, violating the Qur'anic principle that human worth is based on piety and moral character, not on conformity to gendered roles (Qur'an 49:13; Abou El Fadl, 2001: 78-80; Qutb, 1999: 89-92; Wijaya, Muchlis, and Rohmatulloh, 2025; Almuthaybiri, 2026). **Third**, the communal dimension exposed how gossip, collective judgment, and social exclusion function as mechanisms of oppression, contradicting the Qur'anic injunction against mockery and contempt (Qur'an 49:11; Auda, 2008: 112-115; Mayer, 2013: 120-122). **Fourth**, the psychological dimension revealed how Milad internalizes the community's scorn, experiencing shame, identity confusion, and despair—a form of suffering that constitutes a violation of the Islamic principle that every human being is worthy of hope and redemption (Mayer, 2013: 200-203; Mohtadi and Nabizadeh, n.d.).

The Islamic ethical reading has demonstrated that the community's treatment of Milad fundamentally contradicts Qur'anic principles of inherent human worth and social justice. What the community justifies in the name of tradition and custom (*'urf*) is revealed to be a violation of the very Islamic values that it claims to uphold. The novel thus serves as a powerful critique of cultural practices that have been superimposed upon Islamic teachings, exposing the gap between Islam's ethical ideals and social realities, and calling for a return to the authentic spirit of Islamic teachings that uphold the inherent worth of every human being.

### 6.2. The Novel as an Ethical Intervention

What makes *Bread on Uncle Milad's Table* particularly significant is its refusal to offer easy solutions or moralizing judgments. Rather than presenting a didactic message, the novel invites readers to witness the lived experience of injustice and

to draw their own conclusions. Milad is not a heroic figure who triumphs over adversity; he is a vulnerable human being who is crushed by the weight of societal pressure. His madness at the end of the novel is not a moral failing but a tragic consequence of a community that has abandoned the Islamic values of compassion, justice, and human dignity.

By depicting this tragedy without sentimentality or judgment, al-Naas offers a powerful ethical intervention. The novel challenges readers to reflect on their own societies and to ask difficult questions: What does it mean to be a just society? How do we treat those who do not conform to our expectations? Are our practices justified by authentic Islamic values, or are they merely expressions of cultural prejudice? These questions are not abstract; they have profound implications for how we live together and how we treat one another.

In this sense, the novel participates in a long Islamic tradition of using narrative as a means of moral education and social critique. From the Qur'anic stories of the prophets to the ethical teachings of classical scholars, Islam has always recognized the power of storytelling to shape hearts and minds. Al-Naas's novel continues this tradition, offering a contemporary narrative that speaks to the challenges facing Muslim societies today. Mohtadi and Nabizadeh (n.d.) similarly observe that contemporary Arabic literature often serves as a tool for cultural resistance and the revival of Islamic identity, a tradition to which al-Naas's novel contributes.

### **6.3. The Relevance of Islamic Ethical Thought**

This study has demonstrated the continued relevance of Islamic ethical thought as a framework for social critique in the contemporary Muslim world. Concepts such as *karāmah* (human dignity), *'adl* (social justice), and the higher objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*) are not relics of a bygone era; they are living ethical resources that can help Muslims navigate the challenges of modernity. By applying these concepts to the analysis of contemporary literature, we can illuminate the gap between Islamic ideals and social realities, and we can identify the cultural practices that obscure or distort the ethical vision of Islam.

The reading of al-Naas's novel has shown that Islamic ethics is not a static or monolithic tradition; it is a dynamic tradition that can respond to new challenges and contexts. From the classical exegesis of al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī to the contemporary scholarship of Kamali, Qutb, Abou El Fadl, Auda, Gunawan, Harahap, and Gunawan (2026), Wijaya, Muchlis, and Rohmatulloh (2025), and Mohtadi and Nabizadeh (n.d.), Islamic ethical thought has always evolved to address the concerns of its time. This dynamism is not a weakness but a strength, reflecting the Qur'anic principle that Islamic law is intended to promote human well-being and to respond to changing social conditions.

### **6.4. Concluding Reflections**

*Bread on Uncle Milad's Table* is a novel of profound ethical significance. It tells the story of a man who cannot be what his society wants him to be, and who is destroyed by that society's refusal to accept him as he is. But it is also a story about the deeper values that are at stake: dignity, justice, compassion, and the inherent worth of every human being. These are not merely Western or modern

values; they are deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition, waiting to be reclaimed and realized.

The novel's tragedy is not that Milad fails to conform to social norms; it is that the community fails to recognize his dignity as a human being created by God. This failure is a failure of faith—a failure to live up to the ethical vision of Islam. The novel invites readers to recognize this failure and to ask themselves: What kind of society do we want to live in? What kind of people do we want to be?

In the end, al-Naas's novel is a call for a society that truly embodies Islamic values—a society of compassion, justice, and respect for the inherent dignity of every human being. Whether this call will be heeded is uncertain, but the novel gives voice to a vision of what might be, and that, in itself, is a contribution to the ongoing struggle for justice and dignity in the contemporary Muslim world. As Mohtadi and Nabizadeh (n.d.) observe, literature serves as a tool for cultural resistance and the revival of Islamic identity—a role that al-Naas's novel fulfills with remarkable power and sensitivity.

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