Why Read al Aswany?:
Social Oppression and Hierarchy in Egyptian Writer Alaa al Aswany's Fiction

By

Peter Thompson

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Abstract

This paper is a literary analysis of Egyptian writer Alaa al Aswany's novels *The Yacoubian Building* and *Chicago* and his short story collection *Friendly Fire*, with a special emphasis on the first work. This analysis of al Aswany's fiction is unique in that no single work of English literary criticism has considered all three books together in such depth. The paper discusses why someone should read or study al Aswany's fictional work and uses the above-mentioned works to support the claim that one should. In the literature review, this paper surveys the critical reception of al Aswany's novels and short stories. The paper then argues that al Aswany is a writer of the people whose work carefully and convincingly recreates Egyptian society, including the people and their struggles. Included in these struggles is social oppression. The paper examines the major forms and motifs of social oppression in al Aswany's works and shows that sex, the largest topic of social oppression in al Aswany's works, also becomes a metaphor for the social oppression in general of the Egyptian people. Through his portrayal of Egyptian society, al Aswany follows in the footsteps of Egyptian writers before him who understood that changing society and writing novels goes hand in hand. The paper concludes with the statement that, though al Aswany may not be a great literary writer, his fiction does give an entertaining peek into the motivations behind the Egyptian unrest of the last few years and the motivations behind possible future unrest.

Key Words: *Alaa al Aswany, The Yacoubian Building, Egypt, Arabic literature, social oppression*

Introduction

This thesis begins with a literature review, in which I survey the articles, book reviews, and books that relate to Alaa al Aswany's life and works of fiction. The first section covers biographical information about al Aswany, including his early life, his professional career, his political activism, and his place as a writer. The next three sections summarize critical reception of al Aswany's three major works in this order: *The Yacoubian Building*, *Friendly Fire*, and *Chicago*.

In the body of the thesis, I first explain the exclusion of Arabic sources and then introduce the main question "Why read or study al Aswany?" I use a quote from Boyd Tonkin to explain the reasoning that one *should* read and study al Aswany's work.

I first explain how al Aswany is a writer of the people who, out of love for his countrymen, designs detailed and convincing characters. I then argue that, in creating realistic characters, al Aswany also looks deeply at his character's intimate social struggles as well as at the large over-arching social struggles such as problematic history. These struggles are generally types of social oppression, and a rigid social hierarchy compounds the social oppression.

Al Aswany's role as a writer has him following in the footsteps of great Egyptian writers such as Naguib Mahfouz, who understood that changing society and writing novels goes hand in hand. I reiterate al Aswany's own claims that he does not want to be seen as a political writer, but I finally show that occasionally al Aswany not only retells reality but also suggests an alternative.

In conclusion, I argue that al Aswany is an entertaining writer who opens an easy door to beginning to understand not only what drove the unrest beginning in 2011 but also what will drive future unrest in Egypt.

Literature Review

Biographical Information

Alaa al Aswany is an Egyptian dentist, novelist, newspaper columnist, and political activist (al Aswany "Narrating the Revolution"; Cooke). Al Aswany was born in 1957 into a lineage of writers (Jacquemond 244). His father, 'Abbas al-Aswani, was a lawyer and an award-winning novelist who received the state award for literature in 1972 (Cooke). Al Aswany, indeed, began writing because of his father's example. Al Aswany's father told him as a child, "The day you discover that writing is no longer your first priority then you had better stop writing" (Kinson).

Professionally, Al Aswany was trained as a dentist. He first attended a French school before he went on to study in the faculty of dentistry at Cairo University and in the dentistry school at the University of Illinois in Chicago, where his novel *Chicago* is set (Jacquemond 244-5). Al Aswany's time studying in the United States was a turning point in his life. Al Aswany says that, during his stay in Chicago, he had "a clear vision" that he would become a novelist and write about the Egyptian people (qtd. Cooke).

In the early 1990s, the practicing dentist al Aswany became a published writer, with his first two small short story collections releasing in 1993 and 1997 with positive reception (Jacquemond 245). By the late 1990s, Al Aswany had been fighting to publish a larger work of fiction. He submitted pieces to the General Egyptian Book Organisation (GEBO) three times, the last time in 1998 on his forty-first birthday. Al Aswany says he considered then leaving Egypt altogether and migrating to New Zealand. After making one last effort, he got a novel accepted

by an independent Cairene publisher. That novel, *The Yacoubian Building*, became a huge success, making al Aswany's name well-known in the Arab world (Jaggi).

Al Aswany, who has made enough money from his books that he no longer needs to work, nevertheless continues to practice as a dentist because he enjoys meeting the people who come to his clinic, whose stories he often incorporates into his writing (Parker). He resents some of his writing success because it causes him to separate from the common Egyptian man or woman. Notably, al Aswany does not consider his fiction to be political (Kaminski).

Al Aswany continued to write because, as he says, "I like to be with people all the time" (qtd. Metcalfe). He enjoys interacting with people as much as he likes being an observer (Parker). He considers himself a people's writer, and he fits into a tradition of Egyptian writers who not only watch and listen but also take part in the social activism they advocate (Mishra "Beyond the Global Novel").

Nevertheless, Egypt's Arab Spring especially brought al Aswany to the national political stage. He had a significant role in the protests leading up to the February 25, 2011, ousting of then-president Hosni Mubarak ("The Arab Spring"). Unlike other Arab intellectuals around the Middle East during the Arab Spring who shied away from participation in the protests, al Aswany openly criticized his nation's government and spoke to the crowds of protestors in Egypt's Tahrir Square, acting "as a bullhorn for the demands of the protesters" and injecting none of his own ideas (Worth). A year before the protests began, al Aswany published a book titled *Why Don't Egyptians Revolt?*, seeming to prophesy the revolution many had said would never occur (Al Toraifi). When in March of 2011 the unpopular then-interim prime minister Ahmed Shafiq resigned, al Aswany, who had verbally attacked Shafiq on a talk show the night

before the resignation, was hailed as largely responsible for Shafiq's resignation ("The Fall of Ahmed Shafiq").

Al Aswany has been compared to Naguib Mahfouz, who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988 and is widely considered the greatest Egyptian novelist ("Naguib Mahfouz"; Buchan; Mishra "Where Al Aswany Is Writing From"; Parini). Like Mahfouz, al Aswany has strong political agendas that drive or even interrupt his fiction (Mishra). "As long as we are aiming at the national interest, we have a right, if not a duty, to correct its mistakes and confront it with our own opinions," writes al Aswany ("Waiting for the Military Trial").

Al Aswany has written two novels and one collection of short stories. All of the fiction he has written is published in Arabic.

Critical Reception of *The Yacoubian Building*

Al Aswany published his first novel, *The Yacoubian Building*, in 2002. The English translation was published in 2004. The novel looks at the interconnected lives of the inhabitants of the eponymous building in downtown Cairo. The actual building around which the novel takes place has a special connection to al Aswany because it was home to his first dental clinic (Grippi).

Al Aswany's first novel sold "hundreds of thousands of copies in Egypt alone—a country with 50 percent literacy," according to the international edition of *Time* (qtd. Hanania "Egyptian Author Releases English Version of His New Novel"). The book's popularity spread outside Egypt also, "becoming the first-ever international best seller in modern Arabic literature" (Jacquemond 245). Lorraine Adams aptly sums up *The Yacoubian Building* as four

novels in one: “a bewitching political novel […,] an *engagé* novel about sex, a romantic novel about power and a comic yet sympathetic novel about the vagaries of the human heart” (“Those Who Dwell Therein”). Many reviewers, such as Rachel Aspden, have praised the novel, commenting on how it has “become the bestselling Arabic novel in recent history” (“Voice of the Middle East?”). However, some reviewers such as Pankaj Mishra have criticized *The Yacoubian Building* for “sensationalism” and “a blunt expository style” (“Where Al Aswany Is Writing From”).

Other reviewers have applauded the novel for its direct style and willingness to address social issues. Aspden calls the novel “a straight-talking tale of sex, lies and Islamism.” Jay Parini calls the novel “compulsively readable” (“Between Two Worlds”), and Adams adds, “Even the least politically oriented reader will find it engrossing” (“Those Who Dwell Therein”). Al Aswany’s “eye for details […] and sympathy for his characters” make the novel compelling, and the author “is excellent on the bitterness young Egyptians feel towards” their country, writes Aspden. However, Aspden also admits that the novel “is more old-fashioned melodrama than snappy sociopolitical critique” (“Sex and the City”).

In another article, Aspden describes the novel’s style as “easy-going, anecdotal, comic, occasionally sentimental, and given to the kind of melodramatic scenes […] beloved by audiences of Egypt’s annual Ramadan TV melodramas” (“Voice of the Middle East”). Aspden quotes al Aswany’s own defense of his style against those who accuse his writing “of being too traditional.” Al Aswany says that “there’s been too much experimentalism in Arabic literature” and that “it is very easy to write a text that no one understands.” (qtd. “Sex and the City”).

Alaa El-Deeb, called "Egypt's foremost literary critic" by Wendell Steavenson, is quoted in an article by Steavenson as crediting *The Yacoubian Building*'s "directness" for its success. Responding to critics who consider the novel to be not "proper literature" but "sexed-up melodrama," El-Deeb argues that al Aswany is not a "simple" writer but follows "a clear and straight shortcut to the social and political function of a writer." Humphrey Davies, who translated the novel into English, joins El-Deeb in defending the novel's style: "I think he deliberately avoids arcane words, just as he deliberately avoids arcane ideas, because he wants to communicate" (qtd. Steavenson "Writing the Revolution"). Davies says the book "met a critical need for books to address sensitive issues in Egyptian society—political corruption and social oppression—head on." Davies adds, "There was a sigh of relief in the Arab world: at last, a book that calls a spade a spade" (qtd. Jaggi "Review: A Life in Writing"). Freeman adds that al Aswany's moments of preaching in the novel are passable because of al Aswany's "digressive" style ("As the Arab World Turns").

Egyptian novelist Gamal al-Ghitani says *The Yacoubian Building* "enriched the art of the Egyptian novel" (qtd. Jaggi "Review: A Life in Writing"). Lebanese novelist and critic Elias Khoury says that al Aswany has "reinvented the popular Egyptian novel" (qtd. in Mishra "Where Al Aswany Is Writing From"). Khoury, quoted in another article, adds, "He is read everywhere," further emphasizing al Aswany's effectiveness as a popular novelist (Hanania).

As El-Deeb mentions "the social and political function of a writer," Mohamed Hashem, who published the novel, says that, because the novel deals directly with issues that previous writers avoided writing about, "People felt like it was something they could believe for the first time" (qtd. in Steavenson "Writing the Revolution"). Steavenson muses, "In a sense, [al

Aswany's] political essays are an extension of his novels, containing characters and plots both real and imagined." Al Aswany, however, told Steavenson, "I don't like politics" (Steavenson "Writing the Revolution").

On the other hand, Aspden, even as she praises the novel, admits that the prose is "resolutely affectless—critics say 'flat'—throughout" and that this style "is not a fashionable quality either here or in Egypt" ("Sex and the City"). And, as much as Khoury praises al Aswany for "reinvent[ing] the popular Egyptian novel," he adds, "Literature cannot live without different levels of literary work," implying that *The Yacoubian Building* occupies one of the lower levels (qtd. in Mishra "Where Al Aswany Is Writing From"). Mishra writes, "Cairo, I found, has many readers who doubt the literary quality of Al Aswany's work but who, because they share his politics, would not go on record with their criticism" ("Where Al Aswany Is Writing From"). Asfour seems to criticize the "Hollywood-style finale, where everything ties up nicely and happily," wondering if this were "intentional irony" on al Aswany's part ("*The Yacoubian Building*").

Reviewers also have made observations about the socio-political issues raised in the novel. As Mishra writes, al Aswany's "urbane manner masks passionately held political opinions" ("Where Al Aswany Is Writing From"). Asfour writes that the novel's characters all fall prey to a "merciless society" in which "only the corrupted and the corruptible can fare well" ("*The Yacoubian Building*"). Asfour also touches on the role of religion in the novel, referring to the character Hagg Azzam, who rigs an election yet justifies his actions as God's will ("*The Yacoubian Building*").

Three writers contextualize *The Yacoubian Building* among other Egyptian literature, including even other Arabic literature outside Egypt. In *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt*, Richard Jacquemond discusses the social and literary role of the Egyptian writer and briefly discusses *The Yacoubian Building* as a popular novel that follows in the "best vein of Egyptian social realism," though it received initially negative reactions because many critics felt the novel did not innovate enough (233). Despite the novel's value, it is appreciated "more for its documentary and political [value] than for its literary value" (236). In *Desiring Arabs*, Joseph A. Massad analyzes the history of sexual desire in the Arab world. Discussing *The Yacoubian Building* in a chapter titled "Degeneracy and Decadence," Massad writes that the novel presents a cast of characters all joined by one common characteristic: "they are all either biologically unreproductive or prevented from being so in one way or another" (340).

Mara Naaman, in *Urban Space in Contemporary Egyptian Literature: Portraits of Cairo*, examines what fictional representations of Wust al-Balad, Cairo's former city center, say about this urban space's changing physical and metaphorical role. Naaman devotes the entire last chapter of the book, before the conclusion, to discussing al Aswany's novel, which is the most modern representation of Wust al-Balad Naaman discusses. Examining *The Yacoubian Building*'s nostalgia, especially as it shows itself in the playboy aristocrat Zaki El Dessouki, Naaman suggests a more romantic reading of the novel, which opposes Massad's more dystopic reading.

Critical Reception of *Friendly Fire*

In 2004, al Aswany published his first collection of short stories, *Friendly Fire*, with the English translation coming out in 2008. The short stories, like *The Yacoubian Building*, look at Egyptians from all walks of life. Once again, the comparison to Mahfouz has been made by at least one review ("Life in Contemporary Egypt").

Published shortly after *The Yacoubian Building*, *Friendly Fire* has been frequently compared to al Aswany's first novel. For instance, Rachel Cooke writes that the two books are similar in that both "hum with the anger and frustration that Aswany has made his own." Cooke adds, however, that readers should not expect the "extravagant cast lists and […] sweeping, soapy plots" of his novels ("Review: People"). Alice Fordham writes that, whereas *The Yacoubian Building* looks at a wide swath of Egyptian society, *Friendly Fire* focuses on the details of specific members of Egyptian society ("Modern Egypt").

Fordham, like many other critics, praises the stories as "powerful, punchy tales that are both uncommonly observant and deftly constructed" ("Modern Egypt"). In another review, the short stories are described as "warm, humorous prose that skilfully marries entertaining characters and vivacious scenes to biting social critique" ("Al Aswany's Barrage of Fire").

Despite praising *Friendly Fire* for "crisp, assured and perceptive" writing and "moments of grace," Morrison writes, "A few [of the stories] should have remained in the drawer" ("*Friendly Fire*").

As with *The Yacoubian Building*, almost every reviewer mentions the social and political overtones. A review tellingly titled "Al Aswany's Barrage of Fire Hits Its Targets" calls the book's novella a "fascinating study of detachment in the face of amorally bankrupt social order." Bankhead similarly writes that al Aswany "pokes fun at the arbitrary nature of success in a

highly bureaucratic culture." Bankhead adds that the stories look at "the opposition between the mores of society and the needs of the individual" ("*Friendly Fire*"). In Cooke's words, al Aswany "will never just let his beloved characters get what they want" ("Review: People"). Tonkin expounds on this idea, writing that the "downtrodden" characters in *Friendly Fire* are "disabled by gender, by class, by religion, by failing bodies and unruly minds" to the point that they turn on weaker characters or sink into "utter meekness." Though al Aswany fights for the distinction between a character's opinions and its author's opinions, Tonkin writes that al Aswany "does rather want his train of thought to run down tyrants in home, ministry, and school" ("The Hidden Shadows").

Critical Reception of *Chicago*

Al Aswany published *Chicago*, his second novel, in 2007, and it was translated into English the following year. *Chicago*, like *The Yacoubian Building*, focuses on a group of Egyptians, but the characters live not in downtown Cairo but in the middle of Chicago, as the title suggests.

The novel has received overall positive reactions. Hanania writes about al Aswany's second novel, "[H]ere is a popular writer who entertains while he informs." Parini calls it "shrewdly conceived" ("Between Two Worlds"). Jim Coan praises the author of *Chicago* as "a fine, observant storyteller" and writes of "a warmth and intelligence informing [the novel's] mostly sad stories" ("Review" *Library Journal*).

However, reviewers were not so kind to al Aswany's second novel as they were to *The Yacoubian Building*. Alfred Hickling writes that the novel is conflicted, partly "a racy campus

novel" and partly "undigested lumps of socio-political commentary that appear to have been cut and pasted from an encyclopedia." Still, despite the first chapter, which Hickling calls "catastrophically pedantic," the novel features some great characters ("*Chicago*").

Focusing specifically on the novel's characters, however, Ligaya Mishan writes that the American characters do not seem like actual Americans. *Chicago* for American readers is "like a fun-house mirror in which we recognize ourselves only intermittently," writes Mishan ("Out of Egypt"). Coan wonders whether the American characters seem unrealistic because of translation ("Review" *Library Journal*). Mishan concludes that al Aswany is simply more concerned with conveying social and political ideas than with accurately portraying Americans ("Out of Egypt").

Parini echoes Mishan's sentiment, deeming the novel's American characters flat and unbelievable. On the other hand, Parini praises the novel's memorable, "Dickensian" Egyptian characters. He adds that al Aswany's skill in "narrative momentum" carries the novel. However, Parini, like Hickling, is not as impressed by *Chicago* as by al Aswany's first novel ("Between Two Worlds").

Dylan Foley views the novel as a satire and "a dark comedy." As Foley examines the novel's "full-blooded characters," he follows with Mishan's statement about al Aswany's socio-political priorities and focuses on *Chicago*'s deeper social themes. The novel paints a picture of "how noble causes and idealism are all squashed by the strongman's boot," and, even in America, the migrant Egyptian students and professors feel the "long arm of the corrupt, dying dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak," writes Foley ("All-Seeing Eyes"). Doug Johnstone agrees that the representation of Egyptians' political views at the time feels convincing, but Johnstone writes

that *Chicago*'s evident ambition is not enough to save it from becoming an incoherent novel that lacks the gravitas of its predecessor ("Ambitious but Flawed").

Critical Opinion of al Aswany as a Writer

The general consensus about al Aswany's writing as a whole falls along with Freeman's statement evaluation: "Al Aswany is more of a carpenter than a craftsman" ("Cairo's Soap Operas"). Tonkin, however, in a review of al Aswany's nonfiction book *On the State Of Egypt*, gives an argument for reading al Aswany that applies to al Aswany's writing in general ("The Courage of a Healer").

Al Aswany says he views a novel as something that, through convincing characters created by the novel's author, allows readers to see the world around them more clearly (qtd. Jaggi). But, as Hassan writes, al Aswany does not expect his writing to spark change ("Fearless Egyptian Author Both Jubilant and Cautious").

Thesis

Alaa al Aswany could easily be called the most popular writer of Egyptian literature at this moment. In fact, *The Yacoubian Building* has been called modern Arabic literature's first international bestseller, and much of al Aswany's success as a writer has come from foreign (including English) translations of his work (Jacquemond 245). As the literature review indicates, quite a bit has been written about al Aswany and his works of fiction, but, with the exception of Jacquemond, Massad, and Naaman, all of these sources are book reviews or brief articles about al Aswany. Very little scholarly work has been produced about al Aswany's fiction.

This is true for three reasons in particular. First, all of al Aswany's fiction was originally written in Arabic. Thus, the scholarly work on al Aswany written in Arabic is probably much more extensive than that written in English. This paper, however, does not refer to any of those Arabic articles or books, though many Arabic sources are cited in the sources used for this paper. Second, al Aswany is a very current writer, having published works only within the last fifteen years. Third, al Aswany is generally considered popular rather than literary, so his fictional works have not been taken as seriously by scholars and academics as, say, the novels of Naguib Mahfouz, to whom al Aswany is frequently compared.

The handicap of not having access to Arabic sources should not detract from the significance of this topic. The question this thesis answers is "Why read al Aswany?" And, as a follow-up question, "Why study al Aswany?" For one thing, Al Aswany provides a personal perspective on Egyptian culture and society, and never has the desire to understand Egyptian culture and society been greater than since the Tahrir Square protests of early 2011. Tonkin, in a review of al Aswany's nonfiction compilation *On the State of Egypt*, explains clearly why

readers should bother reading al Aswany's articles. Though specifically speaking about al Aswany's newspaper articles of which "On the State of Egypt" consists, Tonkin's points could apply to al Aswany's work in general:

> First, these come from Egypt, focus and fulcrum of the Arab transformation, and touch on trends and movements that resonate around the region, and the world. Second, they spring from the conscience and imagination of a witness to upheaval who combines first-rate observation with firm principles and an unerring moral compass. Last, and best, that writer is Alaa al Aswany, a peerless teller of personal stories that reveal a general truth, and one incapable […] of a dull or timid paragraph.

This thesis argues in support of Tonkin's statement. Al Aswany is a writer of the people, and out of a deep love for his people he has carefully created detailed, convincing characters and situations that represent the reality of modern Egyptian society. Al Aswany particularly looks at the social oppression of the Egyptian people. Two major topics of social oppression in al Aswany's work are history and sex. Al Aswany portrays sex as not only an oppressive act but also a metaphor for social oppression in general. Al Aswany also uses a couple motifs to show social oppression. In this portrayal of Egyptian society, al Aswany follows in the steps of Egyptian writers before him. Ultimately, al Aswany does not just show Egypt as it is but suggests a possible solution to social oppression and the resulting unrest in Egypt.

Al Aswany's popularity has often been attributed to his writing style, which so closely mirrors Egypt's famous soap operas (Cooke; Freeman "As the Arab World Turns"; Freeman "Cairo's Soap Operas"; Johnstone "Ambitious but Flawed"). The fact that al Aswany is not generally considered a literary writer but rather considered a popular writer supports the idea that

al Aswany follows in the tradition of Egyptian writers such as Mahfouz who were people's writers, not only novelists and poets but also social activists (Mishra "Beyond the Global Novel").

Rodenbeck, in his book *Cairo: The City Victorious*, points out the distinction between "high" and "low" voice in Cairene society. This division is linguistic in that there is the classical Arabic, which Rodenbeck calls "high" Arabic, spoken by the elite, and which is separate from the colloquial Arabic, which Rodenbeck calls "low" Arabic, spoken by commoners. Al Aswany even alludes to the "high" Arabic when he writes that one of the characters will speak "in a language approaching the classical tongue" to intimidate some police officers (*The Yacoubian Building* 102). Rodenbeck depicts this linguistic division using the Arabic epic of the Mameluke ruler al-Zahir Baybars. According to Cairene tradition, Baybars arrives in the Egyptian capital a conqueror and while there hires a local stable boy named Osman. Osman is an urban commoner and a speaker of the colloquial Arabic, while Baybars is a rich and powerful warrior and a speaker of the classical Arabic. Interestingly enough, it is the lowly Osman and not the elite Baybars who claims the more famous role in the tale (244). This story offers a peek into how the people of Cairo view the relationship between the high and low members of society.

This distinction of voices extends beyond spoken language even into literature. Traditionally, literary work occupies the "high" voice of literature, while nonliterary work takes the "low" voice. Al Aswany comfortably and purposefully speaks in the "low" voice of literature. Speaking about his novels, al Aswany says, "I write for the people, and I trust they can feel and taste literature" (Aspden "Voice of the Middle East?).

Al Aswany displays his focus on "the people" rather than just an educated elite by representing members from all levels of Egyptian society. *The Yacoubian Building* boasts a cast of more than eight main characters, each of whom gets plenty of attention from the narrator. These characters include the rich and the poor, those who have successfully risen from poverty to wealth and those who are trying to rise to wealth. Al Aswany also explores the experience of homosexuals and heterosexuals, the religious (or seemingly religious) and the secular (or indifferent), the abusers and the abused.

Many reviewers have complimented al Aswany precisely for his skill in characterization, particularly characterization of Egyptians. One reviewer has even compared al Aswany to Charles Dickens (Parini). Aspden, in a review of *The Yacoubian Building*, cites the example of the impoverished woman who is seduced by one of the novel's characters and is so poor that her underwear is stitched from bagging which reads "Portland Cement: Tura." There are many other such examples of al Aswany's concerned characterization that disregard his characters' social stature ("Sex and the City").

Before discussing al Aswany's fiction, a brief introduction to the major works is necessary. The novel *The Yacoubian Building*, al Aswany's first published book, tackles the social struggles of Egyptians living in Cairo by focusing on the microcosm of the eponymous Yacoubian Building, which is still standing in Cairo's old city center Wust al-Balad and which was the location of al Aswany's first dental office (Grippi). The novel appears to be set in 1990, considering the prominence of the First Gulf War in the narrative. Ironically, the Arabic edition of the book came out in 2002 during the build-up to the Second Gulf War, which began in 2003.

Al Aswany's second published novel, *Chicago* similarly focuses on a group of Egyptians, but this time adds American characters and an exotic (at least, compared to the Yacoubian Building) locale: the University of Illinois Medical School in Chicago. As with the Yacoubian Building, this school has particular significance for al Aswany, in that he studied dentistry there.

The book *Friendly Fire* is al Aswany's only published compilation of short fiction. As the title suggests, al Aswany uses the short story format to attack and criticize—almost surgically in his precision—specific members of society and, in the process, specific problematic aspects of Egyptian life. Unlike al Aswany's novels, these stories each usually focus on just one character.

In *The Yacoubian Building*, al Aswany portrays a microcosm of Egyptian society that includes a devout gatekeeper's son, an old playboy, a homosexual newspaper editor, and a rising politician. In *Chicago*, al Aswany similarly draws from different levels of Egyptian society, instead placing his characters in the United States rather than Egypt. The cast of Egyptian characters includes an outspoken young poet, a conservative female student, and a corrupt student-union leader.

Adams briefly discusses how al Aswany so sympathetically tells the story of Taha el Shazli, a young Egyptian man who turns to terrorism. Adams writes that the author's "empathy combines with perceptive narrative detail to make the appeal of the cleric richly comprehensible, yielding an entirely credible evocation of the making of a terrorist" ("Those Who Dwell Therein"). Al Aswany does not create a terrorist who is manipulated by devious religious leaders or motivated by mindless anger. Instead, al Aswany paints Taha as a smart, educated, and ambitious Egyptian who is trying to right the wrongs done to him by the government.

Taha's story moves slowly toward his death as a terrorist, and even to the end his motives seem reasonable. He begins his story as a young man who pines for a place in the Police Academy for which he is clearly qualified. When he is refused access to the academy because of his father's lowly occupation, he dejectedly turns to higher education "to exploit his high marks to the maximum" (*The Yacoubian Building* 89). Among the rich students of Cairo University's Faculty of Economics, Taha gravitates toward other poor students, most of whom share Taha's religious convictions. He attends a faculty mosque and makes his first friend, and his new friend invites Taha to meet him "in Tahrir Square"—a seeming foreshadowing to the events of 2011 in Tahrir Square that al Aswany could not have made intentionally, considering *The Yacoubian Building* was published long before the protests there—so they could go to the Friday night prayer, where Taha is first introduced to the influential and radical cleric Sheikh Shakir (92). The sheikh gives an inspirational sermon, which ends with the cheering of "Gihad! Gihad! Gihad!" (97).

Taha continues to wrestle with both his feelings for his girlfriend, whom he sees as immodest, and his duty to resist Egypt's departure from his religious expectations. After Taha is captured during a protest and tortured relentlessly by police, his motivations for resistance against the government become more confused but no less understandable. Maybe it is for this convincing portrayal of a commoner-turned-terrorist that Karen Hughes, an advisor to President George W. Bush from 2001 to 2002, supposedly kept *The Yacoubian Building* on her bedside table (Aspden "Voice of the Middle East?").

Even with *Chicago*'s despicable General Safwat Shakir, al Aswany spends pages delving into the character's mind and exploring his history of changing protocols as a young officer,

moving up in the ranks, and teaching younger officers his especially cruel torture tactics. After several pages of exposition, the narrator asks rhetorically, “Have we learned everything about Safwat Shakir?” In answer, the narrator adds, “There are still two aspects of life that we have not touched upon: power and women.” Al Aswany goes on to describe how Shakir looks—“stone-like,” “hard-chiseled,” and “strong”—before he explains Shakir’s attitude toward women (*Chicago* 227). Likable and unlikable characters both receive attention from al Aswany’s narration.

Al Aswany’s short story collection *Friendly Fire* presents some of the best examples of the author’s detailed characterizations. The collection includes one novella and sixteen short stories, each no longer than twenty pages yet filled with intimate characterization. Just as in al Aswany’s novels, these protagonists hail from all levels of society, whether they are the poor yet educated girl, the ambitious politician, or the disabled Copt schoolboy.

There is Nadia, the young educated girl looking for a job as a French teacher in the story “Latin and Greek.” As she waits for her job interview, the girl reflects on her father, who never went to university, and her friend, who made fun of her for constantly studying. An especially poignant scene takes place just before the interview as she observes a statue of Venus. Al Aswany uses the statue to reflect the girl’s pain back to her: “There was, in the silence of the gods, something with which she was familiar” (*Friendly Fire* 146) At the moment the girl fails to speak French when she is called upon to do so, al Aswany does not explain why, but the reader feels this girl’s pain, “a pain of which gods of smaller size were incapable” (146).

There is Kamil, the politician with grand ambitions to become prime minister of Egypt in “Waiting for the Leader.” Al Aswany introduces the protagonist as he is giving a passionate

speech about a deceased leader, but he uses a minor incident, a group of people fighting over food, to show the politician's progression to obsession until, at the very end of the story, the politician waits hopefully on a street-side for the miraculous return of a dead man.

There is also Izzat, the Coptic schoolboy who has an artificial leg yet longs to ride a bike in "Izzat Amin Iskandar." Al Aswany knowingly depicts the boy's eating a sandwich and reading a book while his classmates rush out to recess, smiling at them so as not to make them pity him. When Izzat gets the chance to ride a bike, something he is so excited to try, he lets out "a strange, drawn-out, cracked cry that sounded as though it had been long imprisoned within his chest" (*Friendly Fire* 164). And after he crashes, Izzat says, "with the ghost of a smile, 'Did you see me ride the bike?'" (165). The reader might guess that, for all the heartfelt detail he injects into the story, al Aswany was once that studious boy.

In his concern for detail and his concern for his characters, al Aswany produces, as Aspden writes, "an absorbing portrait of the struggle to survive" ("Sex and the City"). Though he hints in his fiction at huge issues such as the legitimacy of the First Gulf War, corruption in Egyptian politics, and racism in the United States, al Aswany also focuses on the daily struggles of his many characters and in so doing reveals the deeper problems in society.

Al Aswany seems to see power as the most common problem in Egyptian society. The power is displayed in the form of a rigid social hierarchy, and oppression of weaker characters by stronger characters perpetuates (or is perpetuated by) this rigid hierarchy. Ultimately, as Asfour writes, al Aswany's characters "are all victims of their merciless society" ("*The Yacoubian Building*").

Reading al Aswany's first novel, the first problem connected with power that one encounters is one that has developed with the oppressive passage of time. As one character in *Chicago* says, "Egypt, like so many countries in the third world, is suffering from many deep-rooted problems that have accumulated over centuries. Your lifetime and my lifetime would not be enough to fix these problems" (271).

This problem of time (or, more accurately, of history) is embodied most prominently in the Yacoubian Building itself. The building's architecture hearkens to a time when European influence in Cairo was at its peak. Not only did both the French and the British have their turns in occupying Egypt, but also, during their occupation, rich foreigners populated the capital city, residing particularly in the Yacoubian Building and other buildings like it, until the 1952 Revolution. Thus, the building—now inhabited by both Egypt's rich and, on the roof, its poor—persists as a reminder of European influence and of happier times in Egypt. The change in the building's tenants seems to be a positive and beneficial shift, but rich and poor living together does not mean that the rich cooperate with the poor or that the poor love the rich. Abaskharon and Malak's plot to take Zaki's apartment shows that. Even the past revolution repeats itself through Taha and his religious friends, with punishing results for the members of that revolution. The building in which all these characters live keeps the characters from social and biological reproductivity (Massad 342).

The novel *Chicago* demonstrates the importance of history immediately by starting the novel with a recount of the city of Chicago's history. Al Aswany begins by explaining the Algonquin root of the word *chicago* and discusses the massacre of the Native Americans by the

European colonists before explaining another tragedy more recent in Chicago's history: the Great Fire.

> More than a hundred and thirty years have passed since the Great Fire but its memory lived on like a scar on a beautiful face, recalled by Chicagoans from time to time sorrowfully and emotionally. The word "fire" acquired a different meaning for them. If anyone, anywhere in the world uttered the word, it wouldn't have quite the same impact as it would in Chicago. (*Chicago* 5)

Though fire itself does not reappear in the novel, Chicago's oppressive history replays itself in the novel's central characters, burning their ambitions and relationships to ashes.

Zaki el Dessouki, the first character the reader meets in *The Yacoubian Building*, also embodies to a lesser degree the oppression of history. He is old at the beginning of the novel, old enough to remember the revolution and to have felt directly the repercussions of it. His father was a wealthy lawyer whose possessions were confiscated during the revolution, and as a result Zaki Bey lost much of his family's wealth along with the possibility of a prominent political career. Though the revolution's ripples are strongly felt by all, even almost forty years after the revolution, Zaki feels them especially strongly.

However, Al Aswany demonstrates that not only the past but also the present is responsible for Zaki's problems: "It must be said, however, that the failure that Engineer Zaki el Dessouki has met with in his professional life should not be attributed entirely to the Revolution; it stems rather, at base, from the feebleness of his ambition and his obsession with sensual pleasure" (*The Yacoubian Building* 5). Al Aswany goes on to explain that an infatuation with women is Zaki's main problem. In the case of his affair with Rahab, his sexual relationship with

a woman causes misfortune to him that ultimately precipitates in his losing much of his possessions to his sister. This points to probably the biggest source of power struggles in al Aswany's fiction: sex.

Al Aswany does not shy away from the risqué, and characters engage in sex often. Indeed, one reviewer calls *The Yacoubian Building* "a raucous, bawdy tale" (Freeman "Cairo's Soap Operas"). In both al Aswany's novels, sex not only binds many of the characters together but also represents an act of oppression that damages one or both of the people involved.

The characters Taha and Zaki in *The Yacoubian Building* present an example of how sex binds otherwise separate characters together. Taha and Zaki are opposites. Taha is young, but Zaki is old. Taha is the son of a lowly gatekeeper, yet Zaki is the son of a former prime minister. Taha is devoted to God and religion, whereas Zaki is devoted to women and sex. Taha is poor and earnestly pursues a law enforcement career, while Zaki is rich and lacks any sort of ambition beyond lust. Al Aswany seems to heighten this contrast by intertwining their lives without having the two ever meaningfully interact. Taha's father Abaskharon is described initially as Zaki's closest servant, but the deeper connection becomes Busayna, who is Taha's girlfriend at the outset of the novel yet Zaki's wife at the end. This connection in fact seems to be positive, especially in light of the novel's final pages which romantically portray Zaki and Busayna's wedding.

Excluding Zaki and Busayna's relationship, there are only two sexual relationships portrayed in al Aswany's novels as ultimately positive. However, even these relationships are prematurely interrupted by situations brought on by social oppression. In *The Yacoubian Building*, Taha and his wife Radwa enjoy a happy marriage until Taha, driven by vengeance and

frustration at the government that has mistreated him, takes part in a terrorist attack and is killed. In *Chicago*, Carol and Graham seem satisfied until Carol, driven by shame and frustration at the society that has disrespected her, sleeps with an employer to keep her job and forces her and Graham's separation. These characters who seem to have relationships that support each other rather than oppress each other still succumb to sexual degeneration (Massad 340).

Excluding these rare positively-portrayed relationships, the sexually-involved characters in *The Yacoubian Building* cause harm to their partners and themselves as a result of their relationships. Hatim Rasheed, a successful journalist, maintains a homosexual relationship with Abduh Rabbah, a poor soldier trying to support a distant family, that causes Abduh guilt and leads to Hatim's death. Hagg Azzam marries Souad Gaber but treats her as a mistress and forces her to have an abortion when she gets pregnant, and even after divorce Azzam is haunted by his memories of Souad. Busayna el Sayed is repeatedly sexually harassed by her employers. Though not in a sexual relationship, Taha is sexually tortured by his captors after being caught in an anti-government protest.

As in *The Yacoubian Building*, Al Aswany's characters in *Chicago* live closely together and share a connection to the University of Illinois's Medical School, some as students, others as professors. Yet these characters, though in such close quarters, have limited connections to each other. Sex does not intertwine their lives. Tariq and Shaymaa are romantically involved, Danana and Marwa are married, Salah and Ra'fat are good friends, Nagi and Karam become good friends, and so on. Nagi, who seems to be Al Aswany's analog in the novel, ties the rest of the relationships together, but even then the characters are mostly estranged from the others.

This does not mean, however, that sex is not an oppressive force in al Aswany's second novel. Probably the most significant quote from *Chicago* regarding sex comes from Danana, the student-union leader who seeks to instill the fear of the Egyptian government into those students who have left their home country. Thinking about his abusive relationship with his wife, Danana remembers something a friend told him, "that every woman's deepest desire was to be violently raped" (*Chicago* 110). This thought is reinforced by another quote about sex being not "a two-way human interaction but […] a violent, one-sided, male act during which a woman enjoyed being raped" (110). Al Aswany uses Danana, who is effectively the representative of the Egyptian government in the lives of the migrant Egyptian students, to draw a clear parallel between Danana's attitude toward sex and the Egyptian government's attitude toward control. Just as women desire to be "violently raped," the Egyptian people desire to be brutally oppressed.

As the political godfather Kamal el Fouli similarly explains, "Our Lord created the Egyptians to accept government authority" (*The Yacoubian Building* 84). El Fouli adds, "The moment you take power, they submit to you and grovel to you and you can do what you want with them" (85). Even this language has sadomasochistic sexual overtones. El Fouli is saying, in essence, "The Egyptian people desire to be socially and politically raped." In fact, such a portrayal of sex suggests that the entire presence of sex in the novels, for which al Aswany is often criticized by conservative and religious readers, analogizes his female characters' plight to the situation of Egypt as a nation. As Adams writes, "Perhaps what makes the eroticism of [al] Aswany's novel so provocative is the way that […] '*The Yacoubian Building*' illuminates tyranny

through sexual predation, longing and despair" ("Those Who Dwell Therein"). The same could be said for *Chicago* and *Friendly Fire*.

Two other recurring motifs of oppression occur in *The Yacoubian Building*. The first is shoes. In Arab culture, feet are one of the most unclean parts of the body, considering that they repeatedly touch the ground (Gammell). Thus, any form of shoe, including boots, shows disrespect. For instance, the millionaire statesman Azzam, thinking back on his time as a poor worker in Cairo, remembers when "the residents of [his] constituency Kasr el Nil […] held out their shoes to him for him to clean, and looked down on him from above, and generously [gave] him their pennies" (*The Yacoubian Building* 124). The idea of cleaning shoes for pennies is disgusting enough to Azzam, a self-respecting Egyptian man, but the idea of those whom he represents in the People's Assembly once looking down on him as they shoved their shoes in his face is horrific.

In a speech during a demonstration, the speaker proclaims, "'We will not be shoes that the Americans can put on and off as they please!'" (*The Yacoubian Building* 142) This reference to shoes explains the idea that some Egyptians, maybe many, feel that the United States steps on, uses, and walks all over Egypt. This idea of oppressive colonial powers is elsewhere subtly communicated through the comparison of Malak Khilla, Abaskharon's crafty brother, to a great colonial power (156). Through the use of boots, particularly by security forces against Taha and other prisoners of the police, al Aswany illustrates the government's oppression of the Egyptian people. One example is when the soldiers assault Taha, "beating him and kicking him with their huge boots" (150).

Another motif of oppression in *The Yacoubian Building* is seen through legal agreements, especially broken ones. Agreements, like sex (and sometimes involving sex, in the case of Azzam and Souad's marriage), oppress one or both of the characters involved. For example, the literal contract drawn up between Azzam and el Fouli at first seems to be a simple monetary transaction from Azzam in exchange for Kamal's fixing a political race in Azzam's favor. However, when Kamal further demands a quarter of the profits from one of Azzam's newly acquired companies, Azzam realizes that he has made a deal with the devil, that "the ones who put [him] into the People's Council can take [him] out of it" (*The Yacoubian Building* 211). Ironically, Azzam also abuses Souad because of their marriage agreement because of her getting pregnant. The chain of abuse continues, even forcing Kamal to submit to the Big Man's request for a share in the profits.

Legal agreements also hold sway in *Chicago*, in which all the students study at the University of Illinois under a scholarship that can be quickly taken away if the students displease the Egyptian government. A fellow Egyptian student warns Nagi, one of al Aswany's core characters in the novel, "[D]on't alienate Ahmad Danana. Everything here is in his hands. If he turns against you he can ruin you" (*Chicago* 94).

Though al Aswany's characters are portrayed on a level playing field, in the sense that al Aswany gives no more attention (and maybe even less) to the rich and powerful than to the poor and powerless, the representation of Egypt's rigid social hierarchy remains intact. As a review of *Friendly Fire* observes, "The Egyptian habit of being part of a group, which defines one's social status, echoes the gregarious instinct present in all human beings" ("Life in Contemporary Egypt"). Thus, by drawing attention to the social hierarchy in Egypt particularly, al Aswany is

also drawing attention to hierarchy in the rest of the Arab world and the rest of the entire world generally.

In "An Administrative Order," a story from *Friendly Fire*, Uncle Ibrahim presents a clear example of this rigid hierarchy and how it entails oppression. Ibrahim is a lowly employee at a hospital and does odd jobs that overall he enjoys. When he receives a promotion to gatekeeper, a job which is supposedly better but which Ibrahim hates, Ibrahim changes from a "kindly," "cheerful," "good" man to a more and more despondent and cruel one who ultimately violently assaults an old woman (133-4). Al Aswany's very short story makes the point that the hospital administration's oppression of Uncle Ibrahim by forcing him to work a job he hates ultimately results in his oppressing the old lady, thus reinforcing the hierarchy of oppression.

As Tonkin explains, al Aswany's "downtrodden toilers and dreamers inwardly rebel, outwardly surrender, and turn their stifled wrath on those even weaker than themselves" ("The Hidden Shadows"). In effect, oppression carries down the chain of hierarchy. This especially creates a cycle of oppression when characters like Azzam rise from poverty only to treat those socially beneath him with the same disrespect with which they were treated while still poor. In the novella *The Isam Abd el-Ati Papers*, the narrator says, "A mere servant that's your Egyptian" (*Friendly Fire* 3). In *Chicago*, a character says, "Egyptians by nature are subservient" (120). Al Aswany portrays Egypt "as a landscape of humiliation, submission and defeat" (Tonkin "The Hidden Shadows").

It could be easy to read al Aswany's fiction as simply a statement of the reality in Egypt or, worse, a representation of what al Aswany believes is right. For instance, when Hatim is

brutally murdered by his lover, the assumption could be that al Aswany opposes homosexuality. The truth is the opposite, or, more precisely, that al Aswany does not take sides.

As Jacquemond writes in his book *Conscience of the Nation*, al Aswany fits the two-fold job of an Egyptian writer: to take an omniscient view of society and to tell the stories of the oppressed to the oppressors (4). And, like a "conscience" for Egypt, Al Aswany not only presents in his fiction all aspects of Egyptians' lives, including the realities of modern Egyptian society, but also draws special attention to the aspects of Egyptians' lives that are problematic. Ultimately, his love for the Egyptian people compels him to critique and even condemn the social problems he sees around him (Adil).

Al Aswany defends his fiction as nonjudgmental, arguing that "the point of literature is to understand rather than to judge" (Aspden). Al Aswany has no political expectations for his literature. Instead, he says, "Literature is not a political strategy. If you want to change the political reality, be involved in activism" (qtd. Hassan). But he himself also understands the dual role of an Egyptian writer, that politics and art cannot be separated. As Ahmad Salih says, "Art without politics is not art" (qtd. Hopwood). As much as al Aswany seeks to separate his opinions from the opinions of his characters, Tonkin writes that al Aswany still seems to hope that his work will oppose "tyrants in home, ministry, and school"—that is, oppression in all of its forms ("The Hidden Shadows").

Every once in a while, al Aswany breaks from his avowed objectivity and tries to not only portray reality but suggest an alternative. The clearest example of this is what Massad calls "a social alliance" and a reviewer called a Hollywood ending: Busayna and Zaki's wedding in *The Yacoubian Building* (Asfour). Massad and the reviewer both mock the ending, which seems

unrealistically happy next to the bleak goings-on of the rest of *The Yacoubian Building*, as well as the entirety of *Chicago* and most of *Friendly Fire*. Al Aswany's binding together of a poor young commoner with a rich old aristocrat is much like the epigraph—"Democracy is the solution"—he so often affixed to his newspaper articles (Steavenson).

The answer to the question "Why read, let alone study, al Aswany?" is simple. Egypt is still in turmoil. Two presidents have been forced to step down within the last three years, and before them were thirty years of an uninterrupted presidency. Al Aswany has conveniently condensed Egyptian life—sympathetic, detailed, and believable—into entertaining forms, and his fiction looks at all aspects of social oppression that have driven the Egyptian people to resist their government. Political oppression only scratches the surface, as sexual oppression and rigid social hierarchies magnify the problem. Al Aswany may not be a great literary Egyptian writer, but he follows in the tradition of Egyptian writers who understood that changing society and writing novels goes hand in hand. His fiction opens the door to beginning to understand not only what drove the unrest beginning in 2011 but also what will drive future unrest in Egypt. That is why one should read al Aswany.

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