Politics, Freedoms and Spirituality in Alaa Al Aswany's *Yacoubian Building*

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Abstract

Although set in the 1990s and published in 2002, Alaa Al Aswany's novel *The Yacoubian Building* conveys the corruption and brutality that led to explosive revolutions in Egypt from 2011. Moreover, his depiction of Cairo-dwellers with diverse class, cultural and gendered experiences functions as a microcosm of the dense forms and histories of contemporary Egyptian socio-political processes. This article argues that the novel's power derives not only from its prophetic insight into Egyptian neo-colonial politics, but also from its expansive exploration of personal and collective freedoms. Connecting ideas about freedom to his scrutiny of how Islamic discourses have been represented and appropriated, Al Aswany shows that aspects of Islam have played a vital part in liberating personal and political struggles. The article therefore demonstrates that Al Aswany challenges Western-centric, orientalist and narrowly rights-based conceptions of social justice by exploring the interconnectedness of sexual, spiritual and political freedoms.

Introduction

First published in Arabic in 2002, *The Yacoubian Building* was translated into English two years later. It has received wide acclaim, having been published in 23 languages and made into a film, reputed to be the

most expensive film made in Egypt.[1] Set at the time of the Gulf War, Al Aswany's novel condemns Mubarak's rule in the 1990s, which involved the Egyptian government's alliance with the US and the growth of a rapacious neo-colonial capitalist economy and state repression. As the novel shows, the expansion of business enterprises, mainly linked to the ruling party, generated rampant corruption, acquisitiveness and rigid class hierarchies and prejudices.

Having recently exploded in a political revolution against the Mubarak regime, Egypt is currently at the centre of upheaval in Arab socio-political processes. Because it is also a site of the radical Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, in the post 9/11 global imaginary the country has become a central source of what Mahmood Mamdani calls "Culture Talk",[2] the view that global conflicts can be traced to essentialised cultural differences, especially those based on religious belief. Stemming from the orientalism of the historian Bernard Lewis[3] and later Samuel Huntington,[4] this view argues that Islamic religious philosophy fuels a fanaticism that justifies the global "War on Terror". Contemporary US imperialism has therefore galvanised a global imaginary fixating on the irrationality, repressiveness and inherent violence characterising countries with Muslim majorities as "fundamentalist".

The liberal-democratic response to social problems in the Middle East has been to advocate a culture of rights, the rule of law and multi-party democracy. In the wake of the Egyptian Revolutions between 2011 and the time of writing, endorsing cornerstones of liberal democracy has been central to popularised arguments and commentary in the West and elsewhere. In recent influential explanations of the failure of

1   See Stephen Murray, "Conceptions about and the Representations of Male Homosexuality in the Popular Book and Movie, *The Yacoubian Building*," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 60, 7, 2013, 1081-1089.

2   Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, The Cold War and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon; Dakar: CODESRIA, 2004), 17-62.

3   Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic*, 1990. Retrieved July 2, 2013, from http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1990/09/the-roots-of-muslim-rage/304643/

4   Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs*, 72, 3, Summer 1993, 22-49.

democracy in Egypt under Mubarak's secular rule,[5] the country's political volatility has been attributed to Egypt's "delayed" modernisation, its perceived paralysis between feudalistic authoritarianism and modern democracy. Thus, where Middle Eastern governments, such as Mubarak's authoritarianism in Egypt, pursue the conventions of secular governance, orientalist discourse continues to undergird explanations of their current politics. Commenting on Egypt in the context of the Arab Spring, Lewis reiterates the ideological assumptions of his arguments during the 1990s:

> The Arab masses certainly want change. And they want improvement. But when you say do they want democracy, that's a more difficult question to answer. ... it's a political concept that has no history, no record whatever in the Arab, Islamic world. ... I think it's a great mistake to try and think of the Middle East in those terms and that can only lead to disastrous results, as you've already seen in various places. They are simply not ready for free and fair elections.[6]

Dealing with similar circumstances to those which drove the Egyptian Revolutions since 2011, Al Aswany raises far more intricate insights into the sources of political upheaval in Egypt. In directly critiquing the commonsensical advocacy of liberal-democratic processes, the novel berates a character described as one of Egypt's leading lawyers and "one of the great intellectuals of the 1940s who completed their higher studies in the West and returned to apply what they had learned there".[7] The narrator continues: "They all had the same reverence for the great Western values — democracy, freedom, justice, hard work, and equality.

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5   Mubarak was inaugurated as President in 1981.
6   Bernard Lewis, quoted in David Horovitz, "A Mass Expression of Outrage Against Injustice," *Jerusalem Post*, 2011. Retrieved September 23, 2013, from http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/A-mass-expression-of-outrage-against-injustice.
7   Alaa Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, trans. H. Davies (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 73.

At the same time, they had the same ignorance of the nation's heritage and contempt for its customs and traditions, which they considered shackles pulling us towards Backwardness from which it was our duty to free ourselves so that Renaissance could be achieved".[8] The use of "us" in this third-person narration — particularly since the narrator in much of the text is often very detached — forcefully introduces an authorial presence into a debate about ostensibly universal rights discourse.

Complementing the author's critique of universal rights is his dismantling of orientalist, Islamophobic and other essentialising judgements about Egypt's "crisis". Describing the author's strategy here, Derek Attridge[9] remarks that *The Yacoubian Building* invites readers to become self-reflexive about their own politics and beliefs and to question preconceived ideas about the context with which this novel deals. I find Attridge's views suggestive because they gesture towards the novel's engagement with hegemonic and globalised ideas about personal and political struggles and freedoms. As lenses through which most readers in the West and elsewhere[10] understand rights, freedoms and justice, the private spheres of sexuality and spiritual belief are wholly separate from the public sphere of politics. The rationalist legacy of the Enlightenment has identified this division as a definitive measure of "modernity". Lailufar Yasim describes this as "a unidirectional view of modernity" that assumes an "'organic' linkage between modernization and secularization".[11] Challenging this teleological view and the post-Enlightenment relegation of religiosity and the spiritual to a "pre-democratic" past, Al Aswany opens up paths into exploring Egyptian politics in ways that complicate

8   Ibid.
9   Derek Attridge, "Afterword: Responsible Reading and Cultural Distance," *New Formations*, No 73, Winter, 2011, 117-125.
10   It is crucial to flag the global dispersal of post-Enlightenment ideas about democratic governance and human rights. Although recent academic, activist and cultural critiques of Western-centric notions of modernity have grown in both the global North and South, these notions continue to be influential.
11   Lailufar Yasmin, "Crisis of Modernity and Secularism: the Cases of Egypt, Turkey and Bangladesh," *Open Democracy: Free Thinking for the World*, 2013. Retrieved September 23, 2013, from http://www.opendemocracy.net/lailufar-yasmin/crisis-of-modernity-and-secularism-cases-of-egypt-turkey-and-bangladesh.

conventional understandings of social justice, progress and personal and collective liberties. Most importantly, he raises philosophically complex ideas about politics, power and freedom with reference to their sexualised, gendered and spiritual implications.[12]

Reconceptualising "power" and "politics"

Al Aswany's novel is obviously concerned with aspects of Egyptian politics and history in both the present and the recent past. Describing the inhabitants of an actual building in Cairo as a microcosm of Egyptian society in the early 1990s, the author uncovers themes of corruption, police brutality, class exploitation and tyrannical rule as well as the political outrage which drove many Egyptians during that period, such as one of the novel's central characters, Taha El-Shazli, to embrace the violent action orchestrated by the Muslim Brotherhood. This account echoes the social tensions and political turmoil that led up to the Egyptian Revolution in January 2011, a revolution that follows the novel's writing, but which the author anticipates.

The novel's prophetic social themes are clearly conveyed through the story of Taha, the son of the doorman of the building. Humiliated by its affluent residents, Taha doggedly works to achieve his childhood dream of becoming a policeman. Rejected by the police academy because of his social background, he becomes a student at Cairo University, where rigid class prejudices once again confirm his social marginality. He eventually joins an Islamist political movement after being recruited by a fellow student and mentored by a militant leader in the Gamaa Islamiya. This involvement transforms his life. For the first time, he acquires a sense of purpose and group belonging. After he is arrested following student protest against the government, he is tortured and raped by policemen

12 The philosophical implications of reconceptualising spirituality and moral good in relation to the political have been explored in writings ranging from Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) to Scott Kugle's *Sufis and Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality and Sacred Power in Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); and *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflections on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010).

and becomes even more devoted to Islamist politics. Following his training in a Gamaa Islamiya camp, he shoots the police officer primarily responsible for his rape and becomes a martyr. Death, in his terms, seems to lead to an ultimate fulfillment:

> He fell to the ground next to the rear wheel of the truck and screamed. Then it seemed to him as though the agony was diminishing … and he felt a strange restfulness engulfing him … A babble of distant sounds came to his ears — bells and sounds of recitation and melodious murmurs — repeating themselves and drawing close to him, as though welcoming him to a new world.[13]

Any reader seeking to equate this view of transcendence with the author's philosophy would need to acknowledge that, in his dying moments, it is Taha's sense of the world that we confront and not that of the narrator. Taha envisions an image of release and serenity through his martyrdom. Moreover, his sense of his salvation is seen to resolve a series of struggles that are emphatically personal and based on his thwarted desires. Apart from social aspirations and ambitions, these include his early relationship with a young woman he has known since childhood, Busayna. Despite their initial intimacy and desire for each other, they drift apart, with Busayna moving increasingly towards a secular way of life that contravenes Taha's growing religious faith. Once Taha joins the Muslim Brotherhood and approaches Sheikh Shakir about his disintegrating relationship with Busayna, the sheikh is unequivocal about Taha's need to end the union: "You must pray and recite the Qur'an … until God brings you relief and promise me, my boy, that you will not see this young woman again, whatever the circumstances".[14]

In essence, then, Taha gravitates towards Islamist politics because his social aspirations, personal ambitions and deep love for Busayna are destroyed. It is as though Islamist politics offers a resolution to his multiple

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13 Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, 243.
14 Ibid., 120.

desires and, in place of any other option, provides psychic, social and political fulfillment. That the Brotherhood becomes an all-encompassing solution to Taha's needs is evident when, before he is given a political mission, he is given a wife by Sheikh Bilal. The rewarding personal and sexual relationship he has with her does not detract from the fact that his new wife has been chosen for him and that ultimately Taha lives a life in which decisions, choices and desires are determined for him.

The personal story of why Taha becomes a Jihādist consequently provides the author's political explanation for the rapid rise of militant Islamist politics in Egypt. Avoiding didacticism and blunt polemic, he dwells on the intimate experiences of abasement, betrayal and violation which leave young men like Taha in limbo and wholly receptive to a political movement offering multiple solutions to existential and social dilemmas. Al Aswany's explanation of Taha's politicisation is therefore radically different from the simplistic explanation of Islamism provided by influential commentators such as Lewis:

> In the classical Islamic view, to which many Muslims are beginning to return, the world and all mankind are divided into two: the House of Islam, where the Muslim law and faith prevail, and the rest, known as the House of Unbelief or the House of War, which it is the duty of Muslims ultimately to bring to Islam. But the greater part of the world is still outside Islam, and even inside the Islamic lands, according to the view of the Muslim radicals, the faith of Islam has been undermined and the law of Islam has been abrogated. The obligation of holy war therefore begins at home and continues abroad, against the same.[15]

In contrast to this positing of an irrational atavism*, The Yacoubian Building* analyses the experiences of the many angered Egyptians, especially students, whose social and personal frustrations propelled their dedication to militant Islamist politics. Here the author discredits the myth that

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15   Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," 2.

Islamic fundamentalism grows out of a primordial affiliation to a static "culture" and echoes Fatima Mernissi's claim that "fundamentalism is not archaic, but the product of an extremely modern phenomenon: rapid urbanization and state-funded (and therefore democratic) education".[16] Mernissi discusses the high rates of enrolment among the urban poor and peasants at the Asyut University in Egypt. She traces unrest in the area in the seventies to the deep disillusionment among the youth with "modernity" in the form of global capitalism, growing class conflict and the state's complicity with US imperialism.[17] Confronting Egyptian unrest in the nineties and anticipating the 2011 revolt, Al Aswany shows in the above ways that a social movement deploying the signs and symbols of Islamic cultural traditions offers a seductive panacea for the anomie and distress created by complex experiences of psychic and social oppression.

Contemplating the mobilisation of Islam in relation to particular interests and under certain conditions, the narrator consistently threads a subtle yet consistent critique of how religion is manoeuvred for personal and political reasons among certain Muslims in the novel. On two occasions, a sheikh is directly complicit in supporting a powerful character's self-interest and exploitation of others by invoking the rule of God.[18] Sheikh Shakir, who gives Taha guidance, is often represented as controlling, seeming to coerce rather than teach, so that Taha reaches a situation where "he is now training himself to love or hate people 'in God'".[19] The reader is told that: "He has learned from the sheikh that men are too despicable and lowly to be loved or hated for their this-worldly characteristics. On the contrary, our feelings towards them should be determined by the degree to which they observe God's law".[20]

In the description of particular Muslims' interpretation of Islam as

16 Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), x.
17 Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, x-xii.
18 The powerful Hagg Hazzam easily obtains Sheikh El Samman's blessing when he seeks his approval to secretly marry a second wife and the same sheikh tries to help him persuade this young woman to have an abortion against her will.
19 Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building,* 115.
20 Ibid., 115.

inflexible dogma revolving around violent retribution and unquestioning loyalty, the novel describes the character of Dalwat, the righteous sister of the profligate Zaki. She is described as a joyless moralist whose human feeling is imprisoned by her understanding of Islamic faith as self-denying obedience to authority. She attacks her brother constantly, the violence of her actions and words betraying the harshness of her version of religious faith: "Wise up mister! You could die any day. When you meet our Lord, what are you going to tell Him then, *mister*?"[21] With her last cry Dalwat gives Zaki a sharp shove in the back.

Although Taha's story is central in foregrounding particular meanings and manifestations of Islam, the novel is equally concerned with many narratives of individual entrapment and striving as well as with stories of violent abuses of power. The myriad interlinked plots are episodic and as Christiane Scholte explains, this is largely a result of a modern Arab literary tradition favouring the short story.[22] But the narrative strategy also conveys the enmeshed nature of the lives of different characters, whose stories intermittently intersect but also abruptly diverge in exactly the same ways that their social worlds do. These stories both complement and frame Taha's story so that his becomes one thread in a plot that weaves together different narratives of personal struggles among Egyptians from diverse class, gender and cultural backgrounds. What motivates these struggles and how these characters' specific circumstances are connected to particular cultural, historical and social circumstances is part of the novel's expansive conceptualisation of the political.

The Yacoubian Building, where the powerless and wretched (mainly poor Egyptians who migrate to the city capital) inhabit make-shift dwellings on the roof, while the rich live or work in large apartments below, mirrors a rigid class divide. Many of the stories of the rich, however, are fleshed out in complex ways, with the author avoiding blunt generalisations about power and authority.

The first socially powerful figure that the novel introduces the reader

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21　Ibid., 65.
22　Christiane Scholte, "Street Lives, Roof Lives: Literary Transformations of Arab Urban Spaces after Mahfouz," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47, 5, 2001, 530.

to is Zaki El Dessouki, the son of a former minister and aristocrat. Zaki is a self-indulgent libertine whose inherited wealth allows him to spend most of his life of profligate leisure in his "office", originally intended for him to pursue his engineering career. Zaki maintains a nostalgic view of Egypt's colonial past, and regretfully recalls a period that guaranteed his past potency. He recalls Paris, where he studied, as the apotheosis of cultural enlightenment and superiority. Edward Said,[23] describing his own childhood in colonial Cairo in the 1940s, captures the seductiveness of Zaki's Cairo of nostalgia. In a world where British and French were colonial competitors and where public schools, country clubs, French salons, recitals and concerts were restricted to diplomats and other wealthy French and English residents or tourists and a minority of Egyptian aristocrats, colonial Cairo provided a small group of Egyptians and other Arabs with a sense of uniqueness and cosmopolitanism. Said writes: "Only in that Cairo at that time, could my family and I have made sense … with our absurdly protected minority status".[24] As Said's intepretations of his experience suggests, it is as though Zaki finds refuge in being a Europhile. His colonised consciousness conveys his entrapment in a moment of confused longing, trying to establish a connection to a country which exists only in memory and fantasy.

Yet focalisation is important to what the narrator seeks to convey about Zaki. At the very start of the novel, the reader is invited to view him along with the characters who know him as a sadly dislocated character, cut off from his moorings in a past world, yet determined to cling to its trappings:

> To the residents of the streets he cuts a well-loved folkloric figure when he appears before them in his three-piece suit (winter and summer), its bagginess hiding his tiny emaciated body); with his carefully ironed handkerchief always dangling from his jacket pocket and always of the

23 Edward Said, "Cairo Recalled: Growing Up in the Crosscurrents of 1940s Egypt" in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 268-275.
24 Ibid., 270.

same color as his tie; with his celebrated cigar, which in his glory days, was Cuban deluxe but is now of the foul-smelling, tightly-packed, low-quality local kind; and with his old, wrinkled face, his thick glasses, his gleaming false teeth, and his dyed black hair, whose few locks are arranged … in covering the broad naked bald patch.[25]

As a vignette of a socially dominant character, this is a remarkably sympathetic description. It poignantly stresses the literal and symbolic myopia of the character as well as his resolute yet hopeless effort to maintain a proud public mask. The novel goes on to trace how Zaki's efforts at achieving self-gratification focus on his obsessive sexual interest in women, whom he shamelessly objectifies and seduces.

While Zaki clearly abuses his power in relation to women, and like others of his class exploits subordinate groups' labour and disregards their human dignity, he is described in a much more sympathetic way than many of the other socially dominant characters. Through Zaki, the author opens up a space for us to consider how individual subjects struggle for fulfilment in the face of the limited choices they have available to them. Even though Zaki frequently appears to be a grotesque, exploitative and pitiful womaniser, his implacable search for intimacy and love encourages the reader to understand that his womanising may not be an aggressive need for control, but a human quest for a relationship based on reciprocity.

In another uncharacteristically intrusive comment, the narrator addresses the reader in dealing with Zaki's relationship with one of his lovers (who eventually steals from him): "I have left this space empty because I couldn't think what to write in it. Words are all right to describe ordinary sorrow or joys, but the pen is incapable of describing great moments of happiness, such as those lived by Zaki el Dessouki with his sweetheart Rabab".[26]

A very different kind of socially dominant character is Hagg Hazzam,

25 Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, 3.
26 Ibid., 61-2.

a former shoe shiner who becomes the owner of several shops of the Yacoubian Building neighbourhood "as though to stress his new situation in the area that had once witnessed him as a poor down-and-out".[27] Reputed by the community to have launched his economic success as a drug dealer, he bribes a government official to secure his election to parliament. Hagg Hazzam's combination of political and economic power is explored as a central trend in Egypt's neo-colonial economy, an economy in which many use their access to state resources to consolidate their personal wealth. When he wins an election and becomes a statesman, he believes that he is poised to "catapult to the level of the giants".[28] Hazzam is shown to be obsessed with accumulation, the accumulation of money and power. Hazzam's desire for power extends to the sexual conquest of women. His hunger for sexual satisfaction leads him to marry a second wife, Souad. Her family is paid, committing them to an agreement that she will not have any children by him and that the marriage be kept a secret from his first wife.

Souad's relationship with Hazzam reflects her utter loss of freedom and, like a sex worker, she feigns pleasure to ensure his continued material support of her and her family. When Souad becomes pregnant, Hazzam is outraged and because he is unable to persuade her to have an abortion, he arranges for her to be abducted and drugged in the middle of the night. Regaining consciousness, Souad finds herself in a hospital bed without her baby. Hagg Hazzam's control over others is seen to extend to his absolute control over the sexuality and reproductive rights of women and he acts with total impunity because his wealth and political power allow him to.

In this respect, his aspirations echo those of the unscrupulous politician Kamal el Fouli, who "takes large bribes … covering up his corruption with all sorts of tricks, such as swapping favours and financial privileges that divert millions to leading politicians".[29] The materialist analysis of the Egyptian state and political economy developed

27 Ibid., 50.
28 Ibid., 124.
29 Ibid., 81.

through descriptions of el Fouli and Hazzam is profound. Stereotypical explanations of Middle Eastern states in terms of cultural, behavioural and socio-psychological expressions of atavism and a feudalistic reliance on theocratic institutions are completely debunked.[30] The arrogance, authoritarianism and brazen aggression of a figure like Hagg Hazzam are evidence not so much of a personality out of sync with modern styles of urbane entrepreneurship or governance, as of a businessman and politician who has perfectly understood an environment of neo-colonial accumulation, the primitive accumulation[31] of bodies and of power. It is worth recalling certain postcolonial critics' caustic diagnosis of the postcolonial elite here, an impoverished elite which, lacking all economic autonomy and political independence, turns desperately to prevailing political structures — the apparatuses of nationalist organisations and later, the postcolonial state — to amass power and wealth.[32] In contrast to a fully-fledged bourgeoisie that commands autonomous economic power, the tactics of the postcolonial elite, because it is dependent on the former colonial economy, are necessarily frenzied and brutally coercive. As the ruthlessness of many characters in Al Aswany's novel demonstrates, this precariously-positioned elite consolidates power through overtly exercising force, through pillaging and corruption.

A third example of a socially dominant character situated in unique relations of power is Hatim Rasheed, the aristocratic editor-in-chief of a newspaper. Hatim is in love with a married man, a poor soldier who is considerably younger than him. Like Zaki, Hatim's power is explored in complex ways. He is presented as far more than a predator and capitalist. While Hatim's upbringing and social status lead to his sense

30 An example of this explanation can be found in Timur Kumar, "Why the Middle East is Economically Undeveloped: Historical Mechanisms of Institutional stagnation," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 18, 3, 2004, 71-90.

31 This phrase is used in the Marxist sense of conveying pre-capitalist modes of accumulation, based largely on political control, rather than the "impersonal" logic of controlling the means of production.

32 See, for example, Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (London: Pluto, 1986); Edward Said, "Egyptian Rites" in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*; and Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

of entitlement and assumption that he has a right to power, he is also described as someone who grows up with "painful loneliness ... the feelings of alienation and mental anxiety that the children of mixed marriages have".[33] Hatim's homosexuality also leads to a desperate quest for a solution to his isolation. He inhabits the small gay subculture of Cairo where those who are considered sexual deviants find a momentary sense of solidarity and solace, although their experiences in a world beyond remain acutely painful and repressed:

> Places where homosexuals meet are like hashish cafes and gambling dens in that their patrons belong to all social levels and are of varying ages ... By the same token, homosexuals, like burglars, pickpockets and all other groups outside the laws and norms of society, have created for themselves a special language that enables them to understand one another when among strangers.[34]

Like criminals, homosexuals are ostracised in mainstream society on the grounds of their perceived immorality and social deviance. Hatim's relationship with Abduh seems to restore the pleasure and contentment he experienced as a boy with his first homosexual experiences and moments of intimacy with one of the family servants. When Abduh leaves him, therefore, he is devastated:

> Day by day Hatim's agony increased ... He had spent many years in misery and suffering before finding a biddable and satisfying companion ... He would have to cruise the streets of Downtown to pick up a Central Security recruit who might ... beat him and rob him, as had happened many times before. He would have to return to the Chez Nous ... to pick up some adolescent ... only to have to put up with his vulgarity and greediness.[35]

33 Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building,* 74.
34 Ibid., 36.
35 Ibid., 222.

Three of the main characters in positions of social authority and power have hence been shown to be explored in highly perceptive ways by the novel. One consequence of the depth of Al Aswany's portrayal of these characters is that he diagnoses power as a process rather than simply indicting its particular manifestations. His literary contemplation is concerned with the psycho-social manifestaitons of power. As is the case with Zaki and Hatim, the narrative emphasis on interiority allows us to see characters from within, to acknowledge that the Egyptian elite is fractured and complex and that many yearn for freedoms quite unrelated to material wealth and power. In the case of Hagg Hazzam, a more intrusive critial narrative voice encourages the reader to understand how authoritarianism has been set in place in neo-colonial countries in the Middle East and, indeed, elsewhere in the global South. Authoritarianism, the politics of patronage, nepotism and corruption are shown to be symptomatic of the dependency of a neo-colonial ruling class and its fragile state apparatus and economic base. In the following section, I go on to consider how the author amplifies his insights into power with reference to gender and sexuality. I also raise the implications of his exploration of sexuality and desire in terms of personal and political freedom.

Gender, Sexuality and Desire

It is no coincidence that Al Aswany's attention to political themes such as capitalist exploitation, political corruption, state repression and police violence coexists with constant allusions to the sexual and gendered experiences and desires of his characters. While some readers have found the novel's explicit attention to sexuality and gender surprising,[36] it is in fact an extension of the author's holistic understanding of political experiences.

In her discussion of three of Al Aswany's novels, Amal Kabesh argues that very little has been written about "Middle Eastern masculinity [and] there is a need to open up debate about this".[37] Her analyis compellingly

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36 See, for example, Nana Asfour, "Review of *The Yacoubian Building*," *Words Without Borders*, 2007. Retrieved September 29, 2013, from http://wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/the-yacoubian-building.

37 Amal Kabesh, "Injurious Imperialism: Reflecting on My Father," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 45, 3, 2009, 342.

shows that Al Aswany's novel prizes open this debate.

It is noteworthy that the class positions and political behaviour of dominant male characters in the novel are emphatically gendered. In developing Kabesh's discussion of "humiliation as a trope of colonization",[38] it is useful to consider how certain male characters' psycho-social degradation influences their efforts to define and assert dominant forms of masculinity. At the same time (a theme which Kabesh tends to neglect), many male characters' quests for political power are mirrored in their brutal control over women. For many, a sense of manhood involves demonstrating complete mastery over others and the absolute repression of real emotional attachment and reciprocal feeling.

Certain characters' obsessive need to demonstrate power is connected to distorted expressions of sexual desire that are in fact driven by the compulsion to control and own others' bodies. This is graphically conveyed in the gender performance adopted by the young widow, Souad, whom Hazzam marries. Implicitly realising that her relationship with this older powerful man is one in which her performance of submission is vital to his performance of control, "she plays with skill the role of the jealous, compassionate, yearning, loving wife and like a professional actor she has learned to control her emotions perfectly".[39]

The author often unravels power as a compulsive force which unleashes an insatiable need to demonstrate control over and take possession of others' bodies. A vivid description of this is Malak Khilla, whose "objective is extension and control. An insistent inner force drives him to take possession of whatever is at hand regardless of its power and by any means".[40] It is implied that power engenders a manic behaviour that is more intractable than material oppression. This view discloses patterns concealed by the apparently obvious ascendancy of those who have material or structural power over others. Subject positions for men especially entail their insatiable quest for control and the dehumanisation of those who are socially inferior to them. It is worth stressing once

38 Ibid., 345.
39 Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building,* 125.
40 Ibid., 156.

again, then, how Al Aswany repudiates the notion of a wholly "rational" and secular notion of individual and social freedoms. In many ways, even the frenetic greed and desire for control of Hagg Hazzam are terrifying evidence of the moral and spiritual consequences of entrapment in positions of gendered and classed power.

In different ways from Hazzam's, Taha's personal and political transformation is deeply rooted in a sense of his having been shamed and humiliated in gendered terms. Initially, his social humiliation encourages him to aspire to the conventional masculinity of becoming a policeman, marrying Busayna, and, when this fails, excelling as a university student.

After his detention and rape by policemen, his sense of shame becomes acute: "memories of his detention would rain down on his head like visceral blows — the beatings and abuse; the feeling after occasions on which they violated him sexually that he was weak ... his soft and stammering voice when they told him to say, 'I'm a woman'".[41] Taha's corporeal experience of having been penetrated sexually against his will, his embodied experience of losing his (already subordinate) masculinity and "becoming a woman" are therefore also key to understanding his zealous desire for militant action once he joins the Gamaa Islamiya camp. It is through this route that he believes he can recover and, most importantly, publicly demonstrate a gender performance of militarised and ascendant masculinity.

Like many popular interpretations of authoritarianism and corruption in the Egyptian political economy, understandings of Middle Eastern masculinities have tended to project them as primordial and atavistic, irrationally rooted in intractable traditions. Yet, Al Aswany uncovers the social, cultural and economic processes that shape many men's sense of self; their masculinity is seen to be grounded in various social conditions and as having multiple personal and historical causes.

A similar discrediting of stereotypes is the author's careful analysis of the experiences of Busayna. Far from being cast as a victim of sexual violence or a stereotypical prostitute, Busayna's personal struggles are intricately explored. As a young girl, she is confident, intent on pursuing

41 Ibid., 204.

her studies and deeply in love with her childhood friend, Taha. Busayna starts off as Taha's girlfriend, but grows apart from him after her father dies and she is forced to support her family. Initially involved in incidental forms of transactional sex, she later becomes increasingly strategic about the sale of sex, realising that "her beautiful and provocative body, her wide dark brown eyes and full lips, her voluptuous breasts and tremulous rounded backside with its soft buttocks, all had a role to play in her dealings with people".[42] A series of jobs lead her to increasingly deceptive behaviour and this culminates in her agreeing to assist the unscrupulous businessman, Malak Khilla, to deceive Zaki Dessouki so that Malak can eventually take possession of his apartment.

Busayna's deepening involvement in deceiving others also leads to her mounting guilt and she feels increasingly tormented about deceiving Zaki:

> She never felt with him that she was performing a job she'd been paid for … He respected her feelings, listened to what she said with interest, and told her engrossing stories about the old days … Even their encounters in bed did not leave her with the feeling of disgust that Talal did. Zaki would caress her gently … He had his own magical way of making love … He substituted experience for vigor, as though he were an old player who made use of his exceptional skills to compensate for his lack of suppleness.[43]

Her eventual decision to disclose the trap set for her ageing lover and compromise her material security demonstrates courage and moral integrity. This decision also reflects her effort to deal with her spiritual distress and act on her desire for intimacy with and compassion for someone she comes to care deeply about. To a large extent, the author echoes the views of Islamic feminists who repudiate Western-centric feminist definitions of Muslim women as perpetual victims of "their

42 Ibid., 42.
43 Ibid., 160-161.

culture". As Saba Mahmood's anthropological study of women in Cairo suggests, established models of feminist agency "sharply limit our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose desire, affect, and will have been shaped by nonliberal traditions".[44]

While sexuality is often defined as a site of control in the novel, Busayna's feelings indicate that sexuality is also explored as a source of pleasure and transformation. Irrespective of their class or social circumstances, many characters in the novel are described as erotic beings who resolutely pursue and enjoy sexual experiences with others. In his description of the poor who live in squalor on the roof of the Yacoubian Building, the author dwells on the centrality of sex in the lives of both women and men. The attention to *women's* desires is especially noteworthy:

> As for the women, and without regard for their degree of religiosity or morality, they all love sex enormously and will whisper the secrets of the bed to one another, followed, if they are on their own, by bursts of laughter that are carefree and even obscene ... It would take a skilled painter to convey to us the expressions on the face of a woman on the roof of a Friday morning when her husband has gone down to perform the prayer and she has washed off the traces of love-making ... at that moment, with her wet hair and serene expression ... she has arrived like a rose at the peak of its perfection.[45]

Al Aswany certainly does not question the patriarchal hierarchy that defines women's sexual pleasure only in relation to active male desire. However, he does insist that both women and men, despite the pressures of poverty and oppression, confirm their humanity and capacity for joy

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44 Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology,* 16, 2, 2001, 203.

45 Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building,* 5.

through experiencing sexual desire. The roof-dwelling poor women, like the women in the stories by the Egyptian woman writer, Alifa Rifaat,[46] resolutely struggle for and aspire to sexual satisfaction and pleasure and so confirm their agency, self-worth and freedom. The attention to women's sexual desire, of course, counters the orientalist trope of Muslim women as sex-less victims. It also discredits a Western-centric agenda, driven especially post 9/11. Listing US feminism as one of the constituent elements in the War on Terror, Hester Eisenstein observes: "It is particularly useful for the purposes of Islamophobia that Islamic societies in general be perceived and portrayed as uniquely oppressive to women".[47]

Busayna, who initially confronts her older lover with loathing, eventually comes to see him as a soul mate. In retrieving her temporarily suppressed recognition of a fulfilling life based on intimacy and respect, she is prompted to respond positively to Zaki's compassion. She therefore regains her capacity to act on her desires, refusing a future determined by her class and gendered circumstances:

> She thought what was happening between them was strange and unexpected. She remembered that only yesterday she'd tried to trick him and get hold of his signature, and she felt ashamed. It occurred to her that the trick she'd played on him yesterday had been her last try at resisting her real feelings towards him. Inside she'd wanted to flee from her love for him ... Now she is facing her true feelings and she understands them clearly.[48]

The novel ends with their marriage, and although the partnership between Zaki, a sixty-five year old womaniser, and Busayna seems an unlikely ideal union, it is implied that their relationship promises deep

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46 See Alifa Rifaat, *Distant Views of a Minaret and Other Stories*, trans. D Johnson-Davies (London, Ibadan and Nairobi: Heinemann AWS, 1985).

47 Hester Eisenstein, *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women's Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2009).

48 Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, 187.

fulfillment for both of them. It is particularly interesting to compare Busayna's alienation from Taha with her growing trust in Zaki, who tells her: "You were in need and when you're in need you don't think. Busayna, I don't want you to live in the past. Everything that happened to you is a page that's been turned and is done with".[49] This ending seems outrageously unrealistic. But it may be symbolically significant that the idea of knowing another other across the boundaries of class and age is what the author is primarily concerned with.

The author's invocation of ideas about authentic emotion, trust, mutually satisfying sexual desire and intimacy might seem — from the point of view of a pragmatic and materialist understanding of subjectivity and freedom — extraordinarily naïve. Yet it is by identifying individuals' possession of intense and deep moral instincts that the author uncovers the spiritual dimensions of what it means for individuals to be free.

While conventional feminist models of women's agency and empowerment are fixated on women's direct responses to patriarchal and heterosexist subordination, there are other ways of exploring women's agency and its political consequences. Busayna's profound transformation conveys the extent to which we can "think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination en-able and create".[50]

As argued previously, Zaki is shown to have an expansive capacity for loving others and a burning desire to be loved in return. Busayna recognises this depth and it is Zaki's receptiveness to intimacy and reciprocity that releases her own depth of feeling. In the novel's concluding description of the marriage between Busayna and Zaki, the author offers an ending that is not simply romantic, but that conveys the capacity of two people, seemingly utterly different, to discover trust and intimacy in relation to each other, and, in so doing, to attain ultimate fulfillment. This personalised, expansive and holistic view of freedom is central to the novel's reconfiguring of the political.

49 Ibid., 200.
50 Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent," 205.

Uncertain Endings and Redefined Freedoms

Although the socially taboo relationship between Hatim and Abduh seems to be free from the exploitative violence characterising the relationship between Hagg Hazzam and Souad, it ends in a violent and tragic confrontation. After Abduh's young son dies, he is convinced that he is being punished for his homosexuality and disappears. When Hatim eventually finds him and persuades him to come home with him one more time, they end up fighting. Hatim lapses into abusive name-calling, and, enraged, Abduh lashes out and kills his former lover.

This episode is disturbingly abrupt and melodramatic and seems to echo a tradition of pessimistic narratives of the catastrophe that inevitably haunts homosexual relationships. Stephen Murray suggests that "The character of Hatim is very much like the 1950s American portrayals of doomed, effeminate masculinity-craving homosexuals".[51] Yet, Al Aswany does more than repeat the formula of the doomed fate of homosexual relationships. The context of the gay men's relationship is formidable prejudice and restriction and the combination of Abduh's transgression of his "proper" roles as a husband and father within the institution of heterosexual marriage, the class boundary between Abduh and Hatim, and the taboo against homosexuality all create insurmountable obstacles. What is important, then, is how external pressures lead the two to turn against each other. In qualifying his generally critical views of the author's heteronormative perspective, Murray goes on to say: "This is the presumptively heterosexual narrator's representation of Hatim's interiority, a cultural model of homosexual suffering not invoking the sin paradigm, but portraying difficulties and limited choices very much like those homosexual orientations faced in North America of the 1950s and 1960s".[52]

What should still be explored, though, is why the implausible relationships between Zaki and Busayna is celebrated at the end of the novel, while the tragic formula that "the gay character does not live, let alone live happily ever after" is firmly established.[53] I want to suggest

51 Murray, "Conceptions about and the Representations of Male Homosexuality," 1082.
52 Ibid., 1086.
53 Ibid., 1087.

other subtexts here. Hatim, who is also of "mixed race", finds freedom and pleasure in a relationship with someone who is the "wrong" gender and from the "wrong" class; so too does the entire gay subculture, which unsettles the fixed categories and boundaries according to which Egyptians are expected to live, interact and socialise. At one level, the happy marriage between Zaki and Busayna could be read as a fable that bluntly celebrates heteronomativity. At another level, by transcending their social incompatibility and resolving their personal struggles, Busayna and Zaki symbolically realise the possibilities of individual quests for freedom. The violent breakdown of Hatim's and Abduh's homosexual relationship can also be seen symbolically: it represents the quest for autonomy and desires that challenge the most entrenched divisions and prejudices in Egyptian society, those which the novel is determined to expose and indict.

It is noteworthy that Hatim, in his last encounter with Abduh, uncharacteristically resorts to vicious verbal attacks, while Abduh becomes a murderer. Their psychic and spiritual disintegration, conveyed in a section of the narrative immediately before the concluding description of the marriage of Zaki and Busayna, is the author's bleak portent: the consequences of repressive institutions and laws not only have the potential to destroy individuals' relationships, but also to dehumanise them.

At a stage when his relationship with Abduh seems to be thriving, Hatim says:

> Our Lord is Big and He has true mercy, nothing to do with what the ignorant sheiks in our village say. There are lots of people who pray and fast and steal and do harm. Those are the ones Our Lord punishes. But us, I'm sure that Our Lord will forgive us because we don't do any-one any harm. We just love one another.[54]

Hatim's words resonate as a defense of mutually beneficial desire and

54   Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, 134.

reciprocity throughout the novel. His simple explanation of the primacy and sacredness of love and the erotic is a potent dictum that validates the courage of those who search for and find it.

Hatim's comments are reminiscent of the words of Souad's first husband, with whom she shared a life of poverty but also great happiness. Before her arranged marriage to Hazzam, her first marriage was to a man she loved and with whom she felt "her body burning … She would make love with him hotly and melt, swooning in pleasure".[55] When she registers embarrassment to her first husband, he confirms the sanctity of sexual desire in very similar ways to Hatim's response to Abduh: "What's the matter with you girl that you're so shy? Did we do something naughty? It's God's law, you silly girl".[56]

At these moments, the author almost fictionalises Scott Kugle's views about sexuality and Islam:

> In comparison with many other religious traditions, it has often been noted that Islam is a religion that has evaluated sexual life positively. Articulating the integral relationship between spirituality and sexuality is one way that the Prophet Muhammad challenged his society. It remains for us, today, to continually struggle with that challenge … Scholars in the contemporary period have not lived up to the standards and frankness of pre-modern Islamic scholars, and much work has yet to be done on the question of sexuality in Islamic scripture, law, and society … The most basic goal … is to return to us contemporary Muslims the "awe and bewilderment" that al-Ghazali felt when considering sexual pleasure.[57]

The complex narrative strands tracing individuals' desires in *The*

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55 Ibid., 126.
56 Ibid.
57 Scott Kugle. 2003. "Sexuality, Diversity and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslims." Retrieved September 25, 2013, from http://othersheepexecsite. com/Other_Sheep_Resource_Sexuality_Diversity_and_Ethics_in_the Agenda_of_Progressive_Muslims_by_Scott_Siraj_al_Haqq_Kugle.pdf.

Yacoubian Building therefore come together in the conclusion's delineation of the outcomes of different personal quests: a repressive world destroys the possibility of happiness between a homosexual couple whose early relationship and eventual conflict symbolise the possibilities for and destruction of struggles for multiple social, spiritual and erotic freedoms. A militant Islamist dies with the illusion that he has found freedom and authority — in the face of his extremely limited options to find dignity. A wealthy old man and a poor young girl, defying conventions in which partnerships like theirs are inevitably exploitative, find joy, freedom and integrity in their union; metaphorically, this conveys some sense of optimism in Egyptians' capacity to struggle for freedoms on their own terms.

Al Aswany's response to Egyptian socio-political struggles is neither to romanticise social solutions, nor to present a bleakly pessimistic view of Egypt's future. Moreover, although *The Yacoubian Building* is often categorised as a realist novel,[58] its fragmented structure, the narrative's attention to many characters' interior lives and the symbolic import of its multiple plots convey the complexity of individuals' social, political and personal struggles. Consequently, Al Aswany transcends notions of freedom entrenched in post-Enlightenment rationalist modernity, implicitly conveying the potential for and extreme difficulties of discovering modernities and cosmopolitanisms that are not Western-centric and that acknowledge specific historical, political and religious histories.

Secular Western democratic ideals ignore the deeper levels of individual freedom and well-being which Al Aswany confronts in his attention to individual experiences and desire. It may in fact be the sensitive probing of the personal, spiritual and ethical foundations of individuals' struggles in *The Yacoubian Building* that has led to the popularity of the novel in the West. As a legacy of Enlightenment reason, modern political philosophy cannot accommodate the breadth of personal and social yearnings for freedom, particularly the desires which both transcend and exceed the physical, material and practical

58   See Scholte, "Street Lives, Roof Lives", 530.

resources that individuals may be afforded access to. Familiar with or sated with these, many acknowledge the need for a vision of freedom that nurtures a human need for existential and spiritual well-being.

The utopian energy and determination that drove the Egyptian Revolution welled up from a powerful source, one that fiercely resisted the resilient authoritarianism of the Mubarak regime. It is this energy that *The Yacoubian Building* uncovers in its description of Egyptians from different backgrounds and classes. Refusing the binary of the "good Muslim" (who embraces secular democracy) and the "bad Muslim" (who rejects democracy for a repressive and atavistic fundamentalism),[59] Al Aswany explores how an Islamic heritage is constantly redefined and appropriated in relation to dynamic social and political circumstances. He configures Islamic discourses as sets of moral, spiritual and religious values that change over time and among different groups and individuals, also showing that varying constructions of Islam will always be central to struggles within Muslim communities. Equally important, he shows how aspects of Islamic beliefs have played a part in the liberating personal and political struggles of Egyptians, struggles in which the psychic, the spiritual and the material have been vitally interconnected.

59   See Mamdani's use and critique of this binary in *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*.