



The Yacoubian Building

By Alaa Al Aswany
ISBN: 9780060878139

Introduction

Once home to the crème de la crème of Egyptian society, *The Yacoubian Building* is now past its prime. Older residents cling to the faded glories and old-world charm of its past, while newer tenants busily prevent eager arrivals from usurping more space in a building that reflects 70 years of Egypt's social and political upheavals.

Structured as a series of intersecting vignettes, *The Yacoubian Building* follows Taha, the studious doorman's son; his first love, Busayna, who struggles to support her family; Zaki Bey el Dessouki, an elderly yet elegant lothario; Hatim Rasheed, the homosexual editor of a leading newspaper; rags-to-riches millionaire and political aspirant Hagg Azzam; and the wheeler-dealer tailor Malak Khilla, among others, as they conspire, romance, suffer, and dream in the shadow of the historic edifice. Bursting with life, *The Yacoubian Building* vividly provides a revealing glimpse into contemporary Egypt, where a

cosmopolitan past clashes with a tumultuous present.

Questions for Discussion

1. Trace the changes in *The Yacoubian Building* since its creation in the late 1930s. How does the building's degradation function as a metaphor for Cairo's social, political, and economic deterioration?
2. How does pervasive social corruption strip impoverished women, such as Busayna and Saoud, of their last possessions and dignity so they too become morally corrupt? Would you classify Abduh's relationship with Hatim in a similar manner since Abduh needs Hatim's patronage, or is it more complicated?
3. When Zaki tells Busayna, "I can't fathom your generation. In my day, love for one's country was like a religion," how does it cast a dismal light on the choice faced by her generation: to leave the country, or die for religion? Is there another option?
4. Of his first sexual encounter, at age nine at the hands of the servant Idris, Hatim Rasheed "cannot remember any feelings of distress at all." Do you find it odd that Hatim remembers Idris so fondly, while blaming his sexual orientation on his parents' neglect? Do you think moral judgment of pedophilia and homosexuality can be mutable, varying across cultures, or should there be more stringent, universal views?
5. Consider the circumstances that led to Saoud's Faustian deal with Hagg Azzam—"her body in return for her son's expenses." When Fawzi says, "this country is ours . . . we have a long reach and we have all kinds of ways of dealing with people," how does it give credence to the cynical wisdom of Busayna's words to Taha—"make money, Taha, and you'll get everything but if you stay poor they'll walk all over you"?
6. During their first meeting, Azzam and el Fouli repeatedly invoke the Prophet and pepper their sentences with pious phrases such as "God willing." How does contradiction between their utterances and actions underscore the manner in which religion can be a hypocritical mask worn by the corrupt? Is there a difference between Sheikh el Samman's counsel to Azzam, and Sheikh Shakir's conscription of Taha? Do you believe the latter is acting in good faith?
7. How does Kamal el Fouli justify his actions and imply divine sanction when he says, "our Lord created the Egyptians to accept authority"? Can the voting public be said to have a choice when Hagg Azzam's main rival for the party nomination is Abu Himeida, rumored to be "one of Egypt's biggest heroin dealers," whose virtuous Islamic Project is "a money-laundering front"? In the face of such unmitigated corruption, could the fundamentalist Islamist movement, with its promises, in Sheikh Shakir's words, to "make you forget . . . all the bad thoughts that haunt you," be viewed as something that arises to fill a moral vacuum?
8. What are the incidents that propel Taha's evolution from an intelligent schoolboy to vengeful fundamentalist? Are the wealthy tenants of *The Yacoubian Building*, the examination officials, the government's 'blow to the heat' policy inadvertently complicit in his radicalization?
9. Zaki Bey el Dessouki and Hatim Rasheed are secularist Francophiles, yet how do they function as reminders that Egypt was once a more cosmopolitan, tolerant place? How did the "inexorable wave of religiosity" in the 70s lead to the current climate of religious hypocrisy? In a morally compromised environment, does Abaskharon embody the contradictions and complexity of those struggling pragmatically to make a living?
10. Do you find redemption and hope in Zaki's May-December romance with Busayna in the context of the novel, in the author's sympathetic portrayal of Hatim, despite cultural taboos against addressing the subject of homosexuality, and in *The Yacoubian Building* two-year reign as a bestseller in Egypt? Is the fact that Egyptian society embraced such a scathingly critical novel significant for its potential as a true democracy?

About the Author

Alaa Al-Aswany is the bestselling author of three previous books published in Arabic. *The Yacoubian Building*, an immense scandal when first published because of its sexual frankness, has topped bestseller lists for two years and is now a film with a Hollywood-size budget. A journalist who writes a controversial opposition column, he makes his living as a dentist in Cairo.