

**Alaa Al-Aswany:**  
**A Foucauldian Reading**

*Dr. Eman Helmy El-Meligi*

**Department of English, Faculty of Arts,  
University of Alexandria,  
Damanhour Branch**



## **Alaa Al-Aswany: A Foucauldian Reading.**

**This study tries to read the novels of the Egyptian novelist and short-story writer Alaa al-Aswany with reference to the philosophy and social theory of the French intellectual Michel Foucault. At the heart of the work of both Foucault and Aswany is the tenet of the epistemological power of discourse. Cases in point are discourse in Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* and language which is essential for the communiqué or statement at the end of Aswany's second novel *Chicago*. Knowledge is related to intellectual, political, social and physical force. Foucault's metaphor of the Panopticon underlies Aswany's surveillance, as related to both Egyptian and American intelligence agencies. "Discipline and punish" is a strain common in both Foucault's book with the same title and Aswany's first and second novels *Yacoubian Building* and *Chicago*. Repressed sexuality, homophobic hysteria and queer theory, as related to condemnation by social codes, are dealt with by both Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* and Aswany in *Yacoubian Building* and *Chicago*. Sadism and bodily torture are also closely linked with 'subject formation' in both writers. The medical background of Foucault, the psychiatrist, and Aswany,**

the dentist, is crystal clear in Foucault's *Birth of the Clinic* and *Madness and Civilization* and Aswany's collection of short stories *Friendly Fire*. Madness and the idea of *who* defines abnormality are predominant in both writers. Furthermore, a feminist reading might stress abortion as forced by men on women in Aswany as a sign not only of coercion and oppression at times, but also of consent and complicity of women at other times. An analysis of Islamists is carried out by Foucault in his writings on the Iranian Revolution and Aswany in both novels. Interpretation of history is also related to meaning and truth 'construction' by both intellectuals. Postmodernist rejection of metanarratives and canonicity underlies their work. Nonetheless, Foucault could be seen more as a microtheorist whereas Aswany is both a microtheorist and a macrotheorist who spots 'agency' in state and academic institutions.

The novels of the Egyptian novelist and short-story writer Alaa al-Aswany could be read in conjunction with the philosophy and social theory of the French intellectual Michel Foucault. At the heart of the work of both Foucault and Aswany is the tenet of the epistemological power of discourse. Cases in point are discourse in Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*<sup>1</sup> (55)

and language which is essential for the communiqué or statement at the end of Aswany's second novel *Chicago*<sup>2</sup> (322). Surveillance, bodily torture, imprisonment and capitalism are all closely intertwined. They cooperate to form docile bodies and manufacture the consent of subjects, thus ultimately producing a whole corpus of knowledge and normalizing discourse. In Aswany, the Egyptian and American Intelligence agencies embody the "panopticon" symbol in Foucault, where it is a metaphor for surveillance: "the development and generalization of disciplinary mechanisms constituted the other, dark side of these processes . . . Panopticism constituted the technique, universally widespread, of coercion" (*FR*, 211). Knowledge is related to intellectual, political, social and physical force. "We should admit, rather, that power produces knowledge" (*FR*, 175) and that the machinery of "power relations give rise to a possible corpus of knowledge, and knowledge extends and reinforces the effects of this power" (*FR*, 177). Similarly, in the mechanisms of discipline are combined the "deployment of force", the objectification and reification of subjects, the construction of meaning, and the establishment of truth (*FR*, 197).

Let us say that discipline is the unitary technique by which the body is reduced as a "political" force at the least cost and maximized as a useful force. The growth of capitalist economy gave rise to the specific modality of disciplinary power, whose general formulas, techniques of submitting forces and bodies, in short, "political anatomy", could be operated in the most diverse political regimes, apparatuses, or institutions (*FR*, 211).

Similarly, the epistemological power of discourse, as related to subduing docile bodies and creating obedient subjects, is an undercurrent in Aswany's work. For instance, Aswany's *Chicago* builds up to a climactic event, writing an anti-government statement to be read in the presence of the Egyptian President's imaginary visit taking place towards the end of the novel. In collaboration with the American Professor Graham, Egyptian graduate students at Illinois Medical School have worked very hard to write the statement criticizing the Egyptian system. Graham stands for intellectuals supporting human rights. He supervises the writing of the statement mainly by Nagi, an Egyptian graduate student, together with Professor Karam Doss, a Copt who resolves all differences between him and the

**Muslim Nagi after an initial harsh encounter. Language and phrasing play an essential role in the anti-climactic descending action, starting right after the delivery of the statement. Significantly enough, the one selected by the opposing intellectuals is the impotent and depressed Egyptian Professor Mohamed Salah, working at Illinois University. Once in the presence of the Egyptian President, Salah simply exchanges the critical statement with another, hailing the President's achievements:**

**"A statement from Egyptians living in Chicago". He stopped suddenly, looked at the president sitting on the dais and saw on his face a sort of welcoming smile. . . In a very quick movement, he put the papers he had taken out into his jacket and took out of the other pocket a small piece of paper that he spread in front of him and started reading in a shaking voice, "Speaking for myself and on behalf of all Egyptians in Chicago, we welcome you, Mr President, and thank you from the bottom of our hearts for all the historic achievements you have offered the fatherland. We pledge to you that we will follow your example \_ that we will continue to love our country and offer her our best, as you have taught us. Long live Egypt and may you live long for**

Egypt". When he was finished, there was enthusiastic applause (*Chicago*, 322).

The sudden change of attitude comes through the use of language. Alternate phrasing of the statement makes all the difference. The commending statement replaces the original one denouncing autocracy, emergency law and torture in prisons.

We, the undersigned, Egyptians residing in the city of Chicago, United States of America, feel extremely worried about current conditions in Egypt: the poverty, unemployment, corruption, and domestic and foreign debts. We believe that our country deserves a democratic political system. We believe that all Egyptians have a right to justice and freedom. On the occasion of the president's visit to the United States, we demand the following of him:

*First:* abrogation of the emergency law;

*Second:* implementation of democratic reform and guarantee of public freedoms;

*Third:* election of a national assembly to draft a new constitution guaranteeing true democracy for Egyptians;



*Fourth:* abdication of the president and a promise not to bequeath the presidency to his son, thus opening up an opportunity for a real contest for the presidency based on elections subject to international supervision (*Chicago*, 239).

Nagi and Doss translate the statement they have drafted for Graham who insists that the language of the statement should not be sentimental or rhetorical but precise and definitive. On the other hand, it must not be too militant, otherwise, it will be funny and underestimated (*Chicago*, 240).

Language, therefore, plays an essential role in radically altering the message of the statement and the mission of the four intellectuals. In the following chapter, language is closely intertwined with knowledge as an instrument of power, a tenet that underlies Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Foucault explains how discourse, for instance, clinical, is determined *a priori* (54). "Thus conceived, discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined" (AK, 55). Similarly, in Aswany's *Chicago*,

normalization of individuals through discourse, society, law, education and master narratives simply lead Nagi to imprisonment and Salah to suicide (*Chicago*, 326, 329).

In Aswany's *Chicago*, the incident of mechanically exchanging the statements heightens Salah's own self-afflicted torture. His sense of inferiority and cowardice is aggravated, working as the direct cause behind his suicide, committed soon afterwards. The description of his death is itself symbolic of his terrible psychological disorder: "There was blood trickling from a deep wound on the side of his head, creating a stain that was getting bigger and bigger on the carpet" (*Chicago*, 329). The wound is actually the cowardice he deeply feels for escaping from Egypt at a time of need, instead of joining his former Egyptian beloved in her revolutionary strategies, opposing the government. In the last call that he made from the cellar of his house, itself a symbolic setting, Salah asks Zeinab again the same question he always reiterated: "Your real opinion: am I a coward in your view?" (*Chicago*, 287). Her shocking answer blames him for not carrying out his duty by staying in Egypt, and simply running away.

Foucault's metaphor of the panopticon lies at the heart of Aswany's surveillance motif, as related to both Egyptian and American intelligence agencies. "Discipline and punish" is a strain common in both Foucault's book with the same title and Aswany's *Yacoubian Building* and *Chicago*. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault links physical or bodily torture to knowledge and domination: it is a political investment of the body. The body is invested with relations of power and domination and is caught up in a system of subjection.

This subjection is not only obtained by the instruments of violence or ideology; it can also be a direct, physical, pitting force against force. . . That is to say that there may be a "knowledge" of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them: this knowledge and this mastery constitute what might be called the political technology of the body (*FR*, 173).

Sadism and bodily torture are also closely linked with 'subject formation' in both writers. Penal law, imprisonment, surveillance, and the technology of power are all related to the process of "epistemologico-

juridical" formation (*FR*, 171). Both Foucault and Aswany link capitalism to a system of constituting "civil" slaves, to "corporal punishment – the body being in most cases the only property accessible; the penitentiary . . . forced labour, and the prison factory" (*FR*, 172). In *Chicago*, soon after the delivery of the fake statement, both FBI and the Egyptian Intelligence Agency collaborate to frame the leader of the opposing Egyptian students, Nagi, himself believed to be partially Aswany's autobiographical self-portrait. The conspiracy ends on detaining the postgraduate student for the claimed plotting of a terrorist act against the United States (*Chicago*, 325, 6). Language, playing an important role in the allegation and the subsequent investigation, is linked with the power and the hegemony of state-controlled apparatuses, both in Egypt and the U S. The strain of the epistemological power of knowledge is at the heart of Foucault's philosophy. At the other end, US giant media corporations work to influence public opinion, elections, foreign policy, consumption strategies, marketing of credit cards to reinforce loan systems. Here, economic policy is highly criticized and linked with knowledge (intelligence, media) and power (torture in police

stations and prisons). As Safwat Shaker tortures prisoners in Egypt, the American cross-examiner tortures Nagi at the police station in Illinois (*Chicago*, 224, 326). Sadism and bodily torture are also pivotal in *Yacoubian Building*<sup>3</sup>. Rape of Taha Shazli is a case in point (*YB*, 153). An analysis of the series of injustices leveled at the doorkeeper's son, once a brilliant student, reveals the agency of poverty, police torture, sexual repression and the state apparatuses in creating terrorists. The final bloodshed crowns the life-history of Islamists in the making (*YB*, 242). In the horrible massacre, blood is shed on both sides: both terrorists and the security officer who tortured Taha in prison die in a terrible scene, highlighting the future danger of leaving these two polar forces unchecked in the Arab world.

In his *Society Must Be Defended*<sup>4</sup>, Foucault criticizes normalizing discourses that help define races and sexes as normal or abnormal:

At this point \_ and this is a paradox, given the goals and the first form of the discourse I have been talking about \_ we see the appearance of a State racism: a racism that society will direct against itself, against its own elements and its own products. This is the internal

racism of purification, and it will become one of the basic dimensions of social normalization (*SMBD*, 62).

In Aswany's *YB*, the final wedding of Zaki Bey Dessouky and Busayna could be read as a marriage of monarchic Egypt's aristocracy and Nasserite Egypt's proletariat, in other words, as a reconciliation of capitalism and socialism (*YB*, 245-6). This could be read as one way of dismantling racism such as that perpetrated against the African-American wife of Professor Graham, forced to commercialize her body as a commodity simply because she cannot get any decent job. The final separation between them recalls one of the slogans that Graham has always recollected, being reiterated by racists: "You are White, You are right. You are Black, Go Back" (*Chicago*, 142).

Repressed sexuality, homophobic hysteria and queer theory, as related to condemnation by social codes, are dealt with both by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* and Aswany in *Yacoubian Building* and *Chicago*. In "We Other Victorians", Foucault stresses the deconstructionist<sup>5</sup> notions of absence and silence as a normalizing, defining discourse: "repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence" (*HS I*, 4). The

word 'other' refers to all those condemned by society, especially by the psychiatrist and hysterics, including prostitutes, patients and homosexuals. It is a triple edict of taboo, nonexistence and silence (*HS I*, 5). The psychiatrist here works as an informed agent crystallizing the epistemological power of medical discourse and clinical practice. Repression here stresses the fundamental link between power, knowledge and sexuality (*HS I*, 11). Sex was condemned, shown as a sin that people are guilty of. The problem still persists with urgent need for someone paid to listen to sexual issues of repressed patients. In *Discipline and Punish*<sup>6</sup>, Foucault explains that it is "a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish", an examination done by an observing hierarchy" (*FR*, 197). Psychoanalysis here has a "normalizing function" in Western industrial societies, where "the least glimmer of truth is conditioned by politics" (*HS I*, 5). In "The Repressive Hypothesis", Foucault deals with discourse and subject formation, as related to a rigorous system of "authorized vocabulary", "a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor" (*HS I*, 17).

Both Foucault, as a psychiatrist, and Aswany, as a dentist, have a medical background, closely interwoven in their work with discourse, power, madness and sex. If, in Aswany, abortion and rape relate bodily torture to sexuality and the abuse of women's bodies, rape of men also acts as an undercurrent in *Yacoubian Building*. Rape of men creates a terrorist such as Taha, while it is related to the creation of a homosexual editor-in-chief, Hatem Rashid. Oddly enough, both characters die at the end of novel, Taha in a massacre and Rashid in a murder by his beloved, the poor Upper-Egyptian officer (YB, 230). Homophobic hysteria emerged when this novel was turned into a movie. Soon after its first screening, Muslim Brotherhood members of Parliament and prominent journalists, like Mustafa Bakry of *Osbou'* or *Week*<sup>7</sup> newspaper, waged a war against the openness of the treatment of homosexuality, asking for censoring gay love scenes in the film. Both the novel and the film have dealt with a taboo. For instance, it is somehow unprecedented to offer a sympathetic portrayal of a homosexual person, such as that of Hatem Rashid, the gay intellectual and editor-in-chief. Furthermore, the causes of his behaviour and of the social antagonism against him are all delineated (YB,



178-9). Symbolically, the French educational background of the writer Hatem Rashid has been linked with a prominent politician on the Egyptian scene at the time. Nevertheless, divine punishment for homosexuality is referred to in a dialogue between the poor upper-Egyptian Abd Rabbu, who lost his baby while busy gratifying Rashid's desires, and Rashid, who twists religious evidence to his benefit, ending in his inevitable murder by the beloved whose body he abused (YB, 209, 222, 230). Among the reasons delineated for Rashid's homosexuality are his miserable childhood, severed family ties, his French mother leaving him in the care of a male servant who first raped him as a child, and his father, a high-ranking intellectual, forsaking him for his work. It is the neighbours on the roof who carry the blaming issue, while the omniscient narrator remains objective and unbiased, almost sympathetic. Rashid's behaviour is not depicted by Aswany or the omniscient narrator as an aberration but perceived as such by the other characters. Indeed, one senses a somehow sympathetic portrayal of Rashid, blaming his rich parents' neglect for him as a child for his dilemma, later on. It is particularly this unprejudiced attitude which has caused all the uproar

in Egypt after the film was screened. Equally controversial and revolutionary is Foucault. Himself a homosexual who died of AIDS in 1984, Foucault was closely linked with queer theory.

Repressed sexuality underlines Aswany's novels. Shaimaa Mohammady<sup>8</sup>, the villager postgraduate, convinces herself of having intercourse with her friend Tareq Hassib. To avoid the sense of guilt, she mainly misinterprets religious evidence (*Chicago*, 257). Nevertheless, her abortion as the only way out of the scandal of a pregnancy outside marriage is followed with a glimpse of hope when Hassib goes back to her instead of forsaking her. This, however, does not happen until after the abortion. Significantly, like *Yacoubian Building*, *Chicago* ends on this note of hope. Nevertheless, in both cases, abortion seems to be a forced solution imposed on women. Coercion, however, seems to be with implicit consent on the part of women. Significantly enough, by the end of *Chicago*, anti-abortion demonstrations condemn Shaimaa in front of the abortion clinic and accuse her of having a fake belief. "Are you Muslim?"<sup>9</sup>, wonders one demonstrator, while another sarcastically asks: "Does your God allow the killing of children?" (*Chicago*, 336). In *YB*, the poor

Soad is not merely urged to have an abortion, but physically forced by strong people to do so. The scene where she is attacked by cruel people forcefully injecting her to induce inevitable abortion is a clear indication of the abuse of women's bodies (*YB*, 177-8). What makes matters worse is the religious attire her husband Haj Azzam assumes, paying some ignorant men of religion like Sheikh Saman<sup>10</sup> to twist religious sayings to justify an action forbidden by Islam unless for strictly medical reasons (*YB*, 173). A Feminist reading might focus on this point as an abuse of women's bodies by men. On the other hand, Professor Salah's American wife secretly resorts to mechanical and artificial methods for sexual gratification after her husband's psychological crisis causes his temporary impotence and, eventually, suicide (*Chicago*, 250, 284).

Foucault, in *Madness and Civilization*, relates madness as an abnormality in the eyes of society to civilization, meaning fake progress. "Civilization, in a general way, constitutes a milieu favourable to the development of madness. If the progress of knowledge dissipates error, it also has the effect of propagating a taste and even a mania for study" (*M&C*, 206). Foucault

also links madness to fundamentalist practices of religion:

Religious beliefs prepare a kind of landscape of images, an illusory milieu favourable to every hallucination and every delirium. . . Too much moral rigour, too much anxiety about salvation and the life to come were often thought to bring on melancholia (*M&C*, 204).

Religious fanaticism in Aswany leads to bloodshed at the end of *YB*. This, however, is aggravated by the torture in prisons and the malpractices of security forces. In *Chicago*, Aswany relates fake progress and mechanical capitalist systems to the mental deterioration and eventual suicide of Professor Salah, one of the most touching characters in Aswany's work. Salah's academic and material objectives have all been realized in America; nevertheless, there remains a deep hole inside him, eating him up and undermining all his achievements. Baudrillard's idea of the simulacrum<sup>11</sup> is pivotal on many levels: the original statement and the fake one; life in Egypt and that in the US; Salah's secret life down at the cellar and his outside life at Illinois Medical School. What Salah considers true are his stay in the cellar gleaming with past memories, his virtual

internet links and his phone calls with Egyptian friends he has not met since ages. Salah fixes his old clothes as a token of reminiscence: "The clothes carried within their folds his history, the scent of his *real* days"<sup>12</sup> (*Chicago*, 252). Contrary to this, his true life in the US is seen by him as the inauthentic replica (*Chicago*, 252). Ironically, the cellar that he considers perfect and real is described in the novel as "the Arabian Nights vault", the word "vault" arousing connotations of death; Salah himself is described as a mythical figure: "*he* was no longer there, because he had crossed over to the other side. He had discovered an enchanted world hidden deep in an Arabian Nights vault" (*Chicago*, 251).

Salah's impotence and eventual suicide are themselves symbolic of his personal psychological crisis. On a broader plane, it could be read as an emblem of the failure of the American Dream<sup>13</sup> of a new Adam living in pristine Eden before the Fall. If Aswany fiercely denounces the Egyptian autocracy and corruption, he is equally disillusioned about American policies. Aswany's condemnation of institutes and master narratives, in general, underlines him as a macro theorist. Interpretation of history is related to meaning and truth 'construction' by both intellectuals.

Postmodernist rejection of master narratives and canonicity underlies their work. Nonetheless, Foucault could be seen more as a micro theorist whereas Aswany is both a micro theorist and a macro theorist who spots 'agency' in state and academic institutions. Especially attacked is capitalism, whether in the United States or in Egypt. *Chicago* starts with an almost documentary report on the historical ethnic cleansing of Native Americans by white colonists. "Many white colonists believed that 'American Indians', even though they were God's creatures, were not created in the spirit of Christ but rather in another imperfect and evil spirit" (*Chicago*, 1). In the course of events, dialogue between Egyptian and American intellectuals reveals condemnation of capitalism, Vietnam War, multinational corporations, globalization, neocolonialism, racism and US foreign policy. Significantly enough, it is the American defender of human rights Professor Graham who levels all critique. Before the actual conversations take place, the omniscient narrator reveals Graham's political background and rejection of master narratives: "John was one of the angry youth rebelling against the Vietnam War, who rejected everything: the church, the state, marriage, work, and

the capitalist system" (*Chicago*, 134). If in 1968, he took to the streets lowering the American flag and wrapping it against a pig as a presidential nominee (*Chicago*, 137), he is still part and parcel of the anti-globalization movement, giving speeches instigating people against "neocolonialism hiding behind multinational corporations" (*Chicago*, 134). Like his Egyptian friend, the leftist Nagi, himself an autobiographical portrait<sup>14</sup> of the author who still writes in the Nasserite weekly *Al-Arabi*, the *Arab*, Graham believes that the only "possibility of creating a better world [is] if Americans got rid of the capitalist machine that controlled their lives" (*Chicago*, 136).

The suicide of the Egyptian Professor Mohamed Salah is evidence that "the American dream was an illusion, a race with no end in sight in which nobody won" (*Chicago*, 134). On the other hand, like the parallel strategies followed by both the Egyptian intelligence and the FBI, similar strains could be detected in the ways demonstrations are curbed in Egypt and the US. "The police hit the demonstrators with all possible means and with utmost cruelty: with thick nightsticks, water hoses, tear gas bombs, and rubber bullets. . . Ambulances carried hundreds [of

students] away, and hundreds of others were arrested" (*Chicago*, 135). Although this scene takes place in America, an identical replica of it happens in Egypt against Islamists who convinced students that

The tragedy was made complete when our rulers submitted to the orders of America and Israel and instead of the armies of the Muslims turning their weapons on the Zionists who have usurped Palestine and befouled el Aqsa mosque, our rulers have issued orders to Egyptian troops to kill their Muslim brothers and sisters in Iraq (*YB*, 141).

Echoes of TS Eliot's "The Hollow Men" are even heard in the slogans reiterated by rioters: "Rulers, traitors, *men of straw!* How much did you sell the Muslims' blood for?" (*YB*, 141). Central Security forces answered first with beatings with huge sticks, soon to be turned into heavy gunfire (*YB*, 142). Once more, the abuse of women's bodies is accentuated, only this time by police as a punishment of demonstrators or to torture detainees by harming women in their families (*Chicago*, 224).

This analysis of Islamists is not only carried out by Aswany in both novels but also by Foucault in his writings on the Iranian Revolution. In their book



*Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the seductions of Islamism*, the authors Afary and Anderson envision the relationship of Foucault to the Iranian Revolution in the light of three factors:

Foucault and the Islamist Revolution in Iran seemed to share three passions: (1) an opposition to the imperialist and colonialist policies of the West; (2) a rejection of certain cultural and social aspects of modernity that had transformed gender roles and social hierarchies in both the East and the West; and (3) a fascination with the discourse of death as a path toward authenticity and salvation, a discourse that included rites of penitence and aimed at refashioning the self (Afary & Anderson, 39).

Foucault has even helped some Islamist students demonstrate at the university when he was in Tunisia. He was even impressed by the idea of martyrdom and was astonished at the way such Islamists gave their life away for a certain creed. Taking into consideration the above-mentioned statement of Foucault relating madness to civilization and religion, and his own condemnation of medical intervention and social denunciation of madness, one senses some sympathy for Islamists or at least justification of their deeds: "mental

alienation, dementia, and delirium – psychiatry was constituted within the asylum as the government of the mad by putting to work a certain technology of power (*Abnormal*<sup>15</sup>, 275). The panopticon, the asylum, and the postmodernist rejection of meta-narratives are all intertwined in Foucault. Similarly, the three are related in Aswany's work. In his collection of short stories *Friendly Fire*, the rejection of master narratives like nationalism, capitalism and Marxism is linked with madness. The first novella starts with a shocking statement that criticizes a famous quotation of an Egyptian political and nationalist leader Mustafa Kamel: "If I weren't Egyptian, I would've wanted to be Egyptian" (*FF*, 9). The psychotic protagonist regards the reputed often-quoted statement as the most ridiculously racist statement he has ever heard (*FF*, 9).

My mind is set free of all myths and I'm proud of this. For I've known many people, even some intellectuals, who have wasted their lives in illusions, deceived by creeds and ideologies like nationalism, religion, Marxism, glittering words that I've realized early in my life how fake they are (*FF*, 12).

The father of the protagonist, an unfulfilled painter, foreshadows the eventual and inevitable

detention of his son at a mental asylum (*FF*, 35). The novella ends on a morbid note of the paranoid protagonist further secluded and complaining of conspiracies that put him in this asylum (*FF*, 111).

The interpretation of history, varied and biased as it may be, is clear in Aswany's novels. In *Chicago*, he delineates views of American history and criticizes the ethnic cleansing of native Americans, racism, capitalism and the hegemony of cartels and huge multi-national corporations. On the other hand, in *YB*, he juxtaposes feudal Egypt under King Farouq with the socialist Nasserite rule. He criticizes the consecutive capitalist system eras and the economic open-door policy under Sadat as well as the present state of affairs. Characters like the aristocratic Zaki Dossouky and his sister Dawlat embody the remnants of monarchy in Egypt and harshly criticize the socialist system which has nationalized their property (*YB*, 202). Christine, pianist and singer at the foreign café Maxim, is symbolic of the past metropolitan and more tolerant Cairo (*YB*, 107). At the other end stand poor characters like Busayna, Taha and all dwellers of the roof. Long conversations, and finally the marriage of Zaki and Buthayna, seem to reconcile the capitalist and socialist systems, or

monarchy Egypt of the forties and republican Egypt of the late fifties and sixties (*YB*, 200, 245). The choice of a building named after its Armenian owner seems to be a reference to cosmopolitan Cairo missed by Aswany and many other liberal intellectuals. It might also imply a condemnation of Ottoman persecution of Armenians in history as a purely anti-Islamic incident. Like *Chicago*, there is also clear condemnation of open-door policy, capitalism and globalization (*YB*, 14). Political corruption has managed to help an ignorant shoe-polisher and drug-dealer like Azzam to climb the social ladder and end up being a member of parliament.

The impact of both Foucault and Aswany has been extremely profound and far-reaching. In her book *Foucault and Queer Theory*, Tamsin Spargo traces the great influence of Foucault on subsequent gay and lesbian theory:

Foucault's work and life, achievements and demonization, have made him a powerful model for many gay, lesbian and other intellectuals, and his analysis of the interrelationships of knowledge, power and sexuality was the most important catalyst of queer theory (Spargo, 8).

Foucault's work has helped dismantle the myths of both a unified identity and the binarism of male-female, straight-homosexual strict division, foreshadowing transgender and transsexual identities. Foucault's "*Scientia Sexualis*" is considered his term for Western culture's inscription of the body within normalizing, legitimizing and defining discourses and practices. On the other hand, Foucault's influence transcends special discourses such as those of abnormal patients or queer theory to the groundbreaking postmodern philosophical theory on the epistemological power of discourse and its relation to state apparatuses and institutions, such as the government, school and university, the prison and the asylum. The impact of Foucault's theory transcends the specificities of philosophy, medicine and sociology to inter-disciplinary barriers of literary criticism, linguistics and literature.

Similarly, Aswany's work has been regarded by many critics as groundbreaking. Indeed, his novels have sold more than ten editions in less than six months, a phenomenon that Arabic literature has missed for ages. Classics or critically-acclaimed literary works used to be appreciated and discussed only by a small circle of intellectuals and critics. With the advent of *YB* and

*Chicago*, literature has retrieved its original impact on Egyptian readers of different educational backgrounds and various walks of life. Classics have started to become bestsellers again. Furthermore, the translations of the books into twenty-two languages were widely acclaimed throughout the world. Even the film based on his novel *YB* was screened in England and France. Many symposia followed the screening of the film and the book-signing ceremonies held in Europe and the US. Indeed, two copies were published of his novel *Chicago* by Harper Collins in the US: one paperback, the other hard cover, which denotes the circulation of his books abroad. This Egyptian public interest and universal acclaim has made critics and readers alike feel that Aswany is reminiscent of Nobel-laureate Naguib Mahfouz, the father of the Arabic modern novel. In his essay "Al Aswany: Drilling for the Truth" in the *Time*<sup>16</sup>, Scott Macleod tries to analyze the overwhelming success and impact of Aswany:

Al Aswany's rich tableau of everyday lives and devastating social commentary have made him a wildly popular novelist in his native Egypt and the best-selling Arab writer both in the Middle East and abroad. A tale about the lives of various Egyptians living in Chicago,

the book is already in its 12<sup>th</sup> Arabic print run, having sold 100,000 copies since its publication a year ago. Post 9/11 readers outside the Middle East are more interested than ever in understanding Arab societies, and many of them are becoming devotees of Al Aswany's writing. Last fall, a translation of *Chicago* became an immediate best seller in France, where Al Aswany was paid front-page homage by *Le Monde*. (Macleod).

Indeed, Aswany's novels in translation were bestsellers not only in Egypt but also in Europe. Aswany himself has been awarded many Arab and international literary and political prizes. Reading Aswany in conjunction with Foucault explains many psychological, philosophical, sociological and postmodernist strains in his work. These have had a universal, human impact worldwide.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The following are the abbreviations of titles of Foucault's books, as used in the essay:

*Archaeology of Knowledge: A K*

*Foucault Reader: FR*

*Society Must Be Defended: SMBD*

*History of Sexuality I: HS I*

*Madness and Civilization: M&C*

<sup>2</sup> The edition used is the translation by Farouk Abdel Wahab. American University in Cairo Press, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> The edition used is the translation by Humphrey Davies. Harper Perennial: NY, 2006. Henceforth abbreviated as *YB*.

<sup>4</sup> The book is a collection of lectures originally delivered at The College de France 1975-1976.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault's role as a postmodernist is discussed in Horace Fairlamb's *Postmodernity and the Question of Foundations*, Cambridge University Press, 1994; ed. Linda Nicholson's *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Routledge: NY, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> I have been informed by the chapters included in *The Foucault Reader*: "The Body of the Condemned", "Docile Bodies", "Panopticism", "The Carcereal", and "Space, Knowledge, and Power".

<sup>7</sup> A cultural note is necessary here. In the Arab world, homosexuality contradicts malehood, especially in Upper Egypt from which come both the journalist Mustafa Bakry and the officer in *YB*. In Upper Egypt, man is not even socially allowed to shed tears because it is a sign of weakness. On the other hand, the Koran, like the Bible, ethically denounces homosexuality as a aberration of God's creation.

Member of Parliament Mustafa Bakry has submitted a referendum on the film, asking for censorship of the scene of homosexuality. He is also editor-in-chief of the successful, independent weekly newspaper *Osbou', Week*.

<sup>8</sup> She could be taken as representative of social pressure for girls to get veiled. This is frequently read by liberal writers like Aswany as repressing women's instinctual needs.

<sup>9</sup> This is another reference to the gap between religious attire and steadfast belief and good behaviour, in other words, between appearance and reality. Foucault criticizes Victorians for this. Similarly, Aswany denounces this flaw, prevalent nowadays in the Arab world. See the twentieth question on Wahhabi religion in the interview I have had with Aswany.

<sup>10</sup> Sheikh Saman is another character which represents hypocrites abusing religion for political ends, purely secular reasons. It is also a commentary on secret marriages carried out by men speaking in the name of religion, but who are actually the farthest from Islam.

<sup>11</sup> See Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations*. Trans. Paul Foss *et al.* Semiotext[e]: US, 1983, and *The Illusion of the End*. Trans. Chris Turner. Stanford University Press: California, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> Stress mine.



---

<sup>13</sup> See Aswany's answer to the 21<sup>st</sup> question in my interview with him.

<sup>14</sup> See Aswany's answer to the 22<sup>nd</sup> question in my interview with him.

<sup>15</sup> The book includes a number of lectures delivered at the College de France in 1974-1975.

<sup>16</sup> Scott Macleod,s essay "Al-Aswany: Drilling for the Truth" in *Time* magazine of Wed, 5<sup>th</sup> Feb, 2008.

---

## Works Cited

Afary, Janet and Kevin Anderson. *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution:*

*Gender and the Seductions of Islamism.* University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2005.

Al-Aswany, Alaa. *Friendly Fire.* Mirret: Cairo, 2004.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Yacoubian Building.* c 2002. Trans. Humphrey Davies. Harper Perennial: NY, 2006.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Chicago.* c 2007. Trans. Farouk Abdel Wahab. American University in Cairo Press, 2007.

aswany@maktoob.com

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations.* Trans. Paul Foss *et al.* Semiotext[e]:1983.

Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization.* c1961. Trans. Richard Howard. Routledge: London, 2007.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Archaeology of Knowledge.* c 1969. Trans. A. Sheridan Smith. Routledge: London, 1997.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France: 1974-1975.*

Eds. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni. Picador: NY, 2003.

---

\_\_\_\_\_. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France: 1975-1976*. Eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Picador: NY, 2003.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality: I*. c 1976. Trans. Robert Hurley. Penguin: London, 1998.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. Penguin: London, 1984.

Macleod, Scott. "Al-Aswany: Drilling for the Truth" in *Time*, Wed., 5<sup>th</sup> Feb, 2008.

Spargo, Tamsin. *Foucault and Queer Theory*. Icon Books: Cambridge, 1999.

### **Interview with Alaa Al-Aswany:**

1. Dr. Aswany, from your novels I cannot detect your ideology, but from your articles, you sound like a Nasserite.

\_ What you say is really positive because it means that I've managed to present my characters independently with their own logic. Indeed, it is a terrible flaw for an author to intervene in the natural sequence of events or impose his own ideas. His characters should never be his own

---

mouthpieces. As regards my own affiliations, I'm a socialist, a democrat and a supporter of a secular state based on citizenship, where religion is separate from politics.

2. One can detect affiliations with Michel Foucault, the French philosopher. Strains, for instance, like the Panopticon and surveillance, 'discipline and punish', abnormality and the clinic, as well as queer theory. What do you think?

\_ My school education was French. It might be unconscious. Anyway, I am not astonished at all because human ideas and points of view always interact and overlap.

3. The use of the multiplicity of tenses and narrative points of view in your novels reminds one of Bakhtin's 'carnavalesque' 'polyphony'. There is also the idea of metafiction through the poet-narrator in *Chicago*. Does this reflect a postmodernist philosophy or a commentary on this age?

\_ In the art of narration, having many narrators and points of view endows the story with novelty and does not make it boring. Anyway, I am not preoccupied with theoretical

---

considerations. I always apply the definition of the novel as a life on the paper that looks like our daily life but it is more significant, beautiful and profound. I also believe in the classification of novels into lively or vivid novels and dead ones. This is said by my Italian publisher Filtrenelli who insists on publishing only vivid novels. So the challenge is to create novels and characters that are lively. Therefore, I try not to be preoccupied with theoretical issues because I know threatening to art this is.

4. Critics have regarded your novels *Yacoubian Building* and *Chicago* as groundbreaking phenomena since for the first time nowadays, classics have become as profitable as bestsellers. How do you explain this overwhelming success: is it the narrative technique, the political audacity or breaking taboos such as homosexuality?

\_ Thank you. Literary criticism is not the task of the author himself. Ethically and professionally, the novelist should only write and let the critics analyze the impact of his work. However, let me tell you that nowadays, political audacity and people's craving for critique of political corruption are not enough to make a novel successful. In fact, such topics were tackled in many

---

other novels. Gabriel Garcia Marquez says that a good topic does not guarantee the success of a novel. If the novel was good, however, it presents a good subject, even if it is a simple love story. In this case, it fathoms new depths and unravels new dimensions of human love.

5. The Yacoubian Building has been regarded as a microcosm of Egypt, while *Chicago* as portraying US-Egyptian relations. Characters like the corrupt politician Kamal el-Fouly and the homosexual editor-in-chief Hatem Rashid were interpreted as references to certain politicians in Egypt at the time the novel was written. On the other hand, did political events like the Egyptian President's visit to Illinois at the end of *Chicago* really take place? (312) How would you comment on the political import of your work?

\_ Linking characters to public figures is an accompanying phenomena of realistic novels. This means that the "suspension of disbelief" has worked. Many novelists have gone through this like our mentor Naguib Mahfouz, Ihsan Abdul Quddous, Fatehi Ghanem and Dostoevsky. Literary characters are not real persons but real-to-life in the sense that they are a combination of people that I have

---

met throughout my life but cannot be identically portrayed. Literary characters have a separate life of their own. The President's visit is totally a figment of my imagination. Anyway, this means that the illusion was almost realistic!

6. Many see Nagi as an autobiographical sketch? Do you approve of applying the biographical approach or queer theory to your work, I mean specialized critical approaches?

\_ The biographical approach should be used reservedly. Not any event or character should be linked with a counterpoint to the writer's life history. So if Nagi gets drunk, I will be so too. The biographical approach is not justified; such critics take liberties and consider significant events true-to-life. For example, Dostoevsky's imprisonment in Siberia could inform some episodes in his novels but not all incidents can be applied literally to the author's personal life. As for Nagi, he is a leftist poet who opposes the government and reads a lot about Islamic history. However, I object to his behaviour, especially always getting drunk, easily provoked, and

---

unable to have permanent social relations. That is why I do not welcome the biographical critical approach.

\* I am specifically referring to your postgraduate study at Illinois Medicine College in Chicago. There are also similar intellectual strains. Both of you are opposing political activists, doctors and writers. The writing career was not rewarding at the beginning, so you both have to keep the medical career as a financial support.

\_ True!

7. The fact that Nagi was somehow paranoid about his Jewish girlfriend might be interpreted by some extremists as typical of all Arabs and not a personal or individual case?

\_ It is unique literary character not a mouthpiece or an emblem. It is a special case: a poet who cannot write any more, so he gets drunk to the extent that he becomes obsessed as to who has betrayed him. When I present a veiled woman like Shaimaa Mohammady who has a relationship outside marriage, this is not a commentary on all veiled girls.



---

8. Some readers might see the relationship of Nagi and Windy as an invitation for normalization. What do you think?

\_ There are very long conversations in Chicago between Nagi and Windy that show the reader that the only time where the Jews were not persecuted was during the Islamic state. Arabs distinguish quite well between Judaism and Zionism. The former is a respected divine religion; it is the latter that we are against. Even Abdul Nasser who was wrongly accused of evacuating the Jews, it is historically proven that he only asked the Zionists who were proven to be spies to leave Egypt. He never criticized unbiased Jews who were not Zionists. Normalization is an out-of-context accusation. There are whole texts and speeches said by Nagi in the novel that criticize Israel. This discouraged some translators from translating the novel. (271, 303)

9. It is true that there is a harsh critique of both the East and West. Take, for example, the condemnation of the historical ethnic cleansing of Native Americans at the beginning of the novel. You also denounce the maltreatment of suspects by the Egyptian Intelligence, the

---

CIA and the FBI (326). Is the latter based on first-hand experience since you have always been a political activist?

\_ Despite this critique, *Chicago* will be published as a hardcover edition by one of the greatest publishing houses in New York: Harper Collins. Thank God, I'll be published by the same place where the novels of Gabriel Marques are published.

10. DO you supervise the translation of your works?

\_ I do not, but when people criticized the Italian translation, I told the publisher who got it revised by another translator:

11. I love the detective-like cinematic technique of arousing suspense and reaching a climax at the end of each episode, then suddenly you stop at the climax and move to another sub-plot. Are the technique and structure conscious or spontaneous?

\_ This aesthetic effect is actually unconscious. It is like wearing clothes with harmonious colours without meaning it.

12. Do you believe that the film or the TV series version help your novels be widespread, or do you they flatten the

---

profound philosophical tenets in the novels? Do you supervise them?

\_ I do not. I am not responsible for them. Our mentor Naguib Mahfouz used to say that he is responsible only for the original written text. Notice that there are rules of adaptation like never changing the message or ideology of the novel. The point is that literature kindles the power of the imagination. That is why some lovers of literatures believe that any dramatic adaptation will certainly fall short of the splendour of the original text. This happened to me when I first watched *Brothers Karamazov*, despite the great production.

13. Some journalists and Muslim Brotherhood members of Parliament condemned the somewhat sympathetic portrayal of the gay editor-in-chief Hatem Rashid. The character was even totally cancelled in the TV adaptation, and exchanged with a politically corrupt journalist. The series, however, was daring as regards social, religious and political critique. Does censorship upset you? On the other hand, as a doctor, how would you explain queer relationships: are they genetic, psychological or hormonal?

---

\_ First of all, literature is not an ethical touchstone; a writer is not supposed to pass judgements but gives way to the expression of the point of view of the other.

Secondly, there are many types of homosexuality like the acquired in *Yacoubian Building*, resulting from frequent rapes by the male servant during childhood. This induces early sexual pleasure before puberty when he cannot tell the difference. There is also psychological homosexuality when the boy is constantly treated by his parents as a girl. This is widespread in Egypt when he does not yet know the feeling of a male and is most susceptible to homosexuality. A third type is hormonal or genetic; it is present in Europe. We also have the transsexual dancer Sally here in Egypt, who has both types of genitalia.

As for the sympathetic portrayal of the homosexual, this reminds me of *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* where unfaithful women are portrayed in a favourable light. Dostoevsky spent some time as a political prisoner in Siberia jail. There, he learnt not to judge the Other. Dostoevsky was a noble aristocrat who suffered at the hands of fellow prisoners who were murderers and

---

children rapists. Nevertheless, he portrayed them as human beings in his novels.

14. It is really commendable how your portrayal of Taha's extremist wife in *YB* is neither biased nor ironic. You do not demonize the characters you disagree with!

\_ There is always the kind human nature inside all of us; Taha's wife is a human being. This is not a justification of extremism but a warning that the government has to heed for terrorism to be contained. Symptoms are not solely to be cured but the roots of the disease. This is what we have learnt in medicine and should be applied to human behaviour and society. Egyptian and Arab communities suffer from the disease of autocracy, whose symptoms are political violence, injustice, terrorism and religious extremism.

15. Some people would detect a terribly melancholic and morbid strain in your work. Is it a foretelling of the future of the Arab world?

\_ This is your interpretation. I myself was shocked by the massacre at the end of *Yacoubian Building*. I slept and woke up to find myself writing the eventual wedding scene. I felt like rewarding the poor girl Bothaina who

---

has suffered all her life. I really do not manipulate or control the lives of my characters. They are more or less spontaneous.

16. "Egyptians are the easiest to be led or ruled". Such a controversial opinion is terribly derogatory in *YB*. Another is the anti-nationalistic statements that consider some revered patriotic statements racist in *Friendly Fire*. Is that a postmodernist rejection of such metanarratives as nationalism and patriotism?

\_ I am not to account for the political views of my characters. Things could be said by an intelligence agent who tries to rationalize the torturing techniques he uses with political opponents, or by Kamal el-Fouly to curb his sense of guilt for his political corruption in *YB*.

\* Or by a psychologically or mentally unstable character in *FF*.

16. Was the choice of the Yacoubian Building, originally designed and owned by the architect Jacob Armenian, head of the Armenian Community in Egypt, symbolic of your condemnation of the historic Ottoman massacre of Armenians, or is it generally an emblem of the European Other?

---

\_ This choice could be unconscious. However, I am sure that it is a reference to a more tolerant, open and cosmopolitan Egypt. We used to have the European community thriving down town in Cairo, while one third of Alexandrian residents were European. However, I undoubtedly disapprove of any type of ethnic cleansing.

17. Have you read Thierry Meyssan's *The Big Lie* and *Pentagate*? Generally, what is your opinion of 9/11?

\_ As far as I am concerned, it is still ambiguous and vague. However, I am sure that Taliban and Ben Laden, as documented, used to be reinforced by the CIA. Ben Laden's brothers were business partners with prominent political leaders in America.

18. What do you think of the *Wahhabi* herd mentality, especially with you're your enlightening texts interpreting religion in your novels?

\_ The *Wahhabi* tide has originally come from Saudi Arabia and has distorted the tolerant, moderate version of Islam in Egypt. We used to be more religious; now we are more keen on Islamic attire but not the religious essence. Five reasons are behind this widespread current:

---

First, the Iranian Revolution seemed to threaten the Saudi political system and religious leadership, based on *Wahhabi* thought. So Saudi Arabia paid millions of dollars to spread *Wahhabi* ideas, as a reaction against the Iranian Shiite tide. All religions are essentially the same, but it is your reading of religion that determines everything. The Egyptian reading of Islam has always been the most moderate of them all.

Second, the oil price surge, dating back to the 1973 war was a determining factor.

Third, Sadat's use of religion inside the state was also important.

\* Which turned against him, later on.

Yes. Fourth, due to the economic crisis, Egyptians worked in the Gulf and came back with *Wahhabi* thought which appeals more to the uneducated poor.

Fifth crucial factor is the absence of political participation inside the university. Activists moved from the campus to the mosque which cannot be closed. There is a vast difference between religious people and Islamists or fanatics. They are obsessed with the female body, self-righteous and against the civilian rights of everyone.



---

Women have to be treated as minds and souls, as human beings, not only bodies.

19. Considering the harsh critique of historic ethnic cleansing of Native Americans, capitalism and CIA, do you consider the impotence and eventual suicide of Prof. Salah in *Chicago* symbolic of the death of the American Dream, especially with the incredible nostalgia he felt towards Egypt all the time?

\_ Leftists in the US do not believe in the American Dream. Nevertheless, they do not regard it as pure evil. I and many Americans no longer believe in the American Dream as regards the political and economic system. However, the American democratic experience is very unique as a whole continent. There are many positive elements like hard work which led to progress. Nevertheless, it is the hegemony of the cartels and multinational companies whose budget surpasses that of whole nations. These tycoons help elect the presidents, set formula for foreign policy, and dominate the media with sole purpose of making the public ignorant. I was there in Illinois, Chicago, when Kings of General Motors and Steel industry were puppeteers during Reagan's rule. The

---

Elites are invisible but ruling both the media and education.

20. So now you admit that the poet Nagi in *Chicago* is partially a self-portrait, right?

\_ [Laughing] Yes.

\* I mean as an opposing, protesting intellectual.

\_ The first time I arrived in the US, I opened the window and found people eating from the garbage bins. I was terribly shocked. True they looked better than our beggars; they wore gloves and had sticks to pick the garbage with, but they were essentially beggars. Only then I realized there was another America!

21. Would you interpret the resort of Salah's beloved, Zeinab, to bureaucratic governmental work as a failure of her political activism? Do you think that her revolutionary tendencies are all ultimately quelled and that she has eventually turned into an ordinary woman?

\_ I do not think she failed. Zeinab is respectable and revolutionary. She is the only one at work who did not get veiled. Her interpretation is that Egyptians did not find justice in this world, so they looked for it in the Afterlife. That is why there is a huge tendency for *hijab*. Her final

---

words to Salah about his past cowardice were the direct cause behind his suicide.

\* Indeed, Salah's scenes at the cellar or the basement are among the most touching moments in literature.

\_ He regretted his decision to quit and leave her and Egypt at a time of need, namely, her revolutionary struggle. That is what he told his American wife. At least, it is a realistic portrayal.

One of my friends who emigrated to the US once told me that nobody is happy in Egypt except perhaps NDP members. Nevertheless, he said that when he was poor in Egypt, he was happy. In the US, he was financially well-off, relaxed and comfortable but unhappy.

My colleagues who are married to American wives cannot render a joke into English because of cultural differences. In Egypt, intellectuals suffer; in the US, they do not. However, there are other problems that we do not know of until we get there. I have seen French people of Arab origin treated by French passport control officers as second-rate citizens, always reminded that they are inferior. She was ordered to go back, get her passport, and, thus, miss the domestic flight, although all other

---

French passengers like her were simply allowed to check-in only with their IDs!

22. What is the role of women in your life?

\_ My mother supported me. My second wife, who is originally from Alexandria, also helped me a great deal. My first marriage ended because of literature. My second wife never cared whether I would be rich or not. She supported me in all cases and shared my dream.

23. What about the literary influences?

\_ Dostoevsky and Mahfouz greatly influenced me. I have also had a French education at the Lycée Français du Caire, where I studied classics first simplified and abridged, then we did the originals, later on.

My father and friend, himself a writer, Abbas el-Aswany, exposed me to writers from Latin America, Anglo-Saxon, English, and also to the masterpieces of Arabic literature, like Asphahany's *Aghany*.

\* Thank you for your time.

---

*I had the interview with Alaa Al-Aswany at his clinic in Cairo in September 2007. The translation from Arabic is mine.*