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REALITY AND APPEARANCE

A LOOK AT THE DARK SIDE OF CAIRO:
LITERATURE AND CINEMA

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Resumen: Este trabajo se dedicará a la literatura y el cine árabe haciendo especial hincapié en una obra concreta, *The Yacoubian Building*, y su autor Alaa al-Aswany. Se va a exponer una breve introducción a este autor y su principal influencia junto con una sección dedicada a cómo ha ido transformándose el cine árabe, siempre tomando como referencia la obra mencionada anteriormente y su adaptación cinematográfica. Además se analizarán dos aspectos fundamentales considerados temas tabúes presentes tanto en la película como en la novela y se ofrecerá una visión del impacto y la censura que trajo consigo la publicación y la adaptación. Finalmente se dedicará una sección a Naguib Mahfuz, autor con el cual Alaa al-Aswany comparte algunas similitudes las cuales serán expuestas y se realizará una comparación entre ambos sobre un tema tabú ya mencionado anteriormente.

Palabras Clave: Cine árabe, temas tabúes, película, novela y comparación.

Abstract: This paper will be devoted to Arab literature and cinema with special emphasis on a specific work, *The Yacoubian Building*, and its author Alaa al-Aswany. A brief introduction to this author and his main influence will be presented along with a section dedicated to how Arab cinema has been transformed, always taking as reference the work mentioned above and its cinematographic adaptation. In addition, two fundamental aspects considered taboo subjects both in the film and the novel will be analyzed, and a vision of the impact and censorship brought about by publication and adaptation will be offered. Finally a section will be dedicated to Naguib Mahfuz, author with whom Alaa al-Aswany shares some similarities which will be exposed, and a comparison between both will be made about a taboo subject already mentioned above.

Key Words: Arab cinema, taboo topics, film, novel and comparison.

CHAPTER I

If literature, reality and fiction are combined and fidelity, rawness and sincerity are added, the masterpiece of Alaa al-Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, is obtained. This work is going to suppose a literary revolution and shortly after, a revolution in the field of the cinema thanks to the great diversity of subjects that touches, all of them showing the hidden and dark face of the Egyptian society.

In this chapter the work of Alaa al-Aswany together with its film adaption is going to be analyzed in different parts, offering a broad vision of both the author and his positions and the main characteristics of Arab cinema.

1. About the author

Alaa al-Aswany was born in 1957, Cairo. He is a well-known Egyptian author that mainly stands out by being really immersed and worried about his own society, the Egyptian society. From the moment he started writing literature, he focuses on offering a critical and revolutionary vision of the hardest problems that surround the modern Egyptian community. Due to this, he has been suffering censorship in several of his published novels.

The most relevant feature about the author is that he is constantly fighting and talking against the injustices in the Egyptian society and always looking at the most forgotten group, the minority of the communities, just as he reflects in *The Yacoubian Building*. Interestingly enough, he has always been in favour of democracy, claiming that the imposition of a dictatorship results in the oppression of the freedom of the human beings. Alaa al-Aswany says:

This country has so much talent. We deserve to be so much better. And I am optimistic that we will be. But, you know, the biggest problem with dictatorship is that a dictator doesn't respect his own citizens. If you seize power and you know that the people can't resist you, there is no way you can respect the people. Our prime minister once said that the Egyptian people are not prepared for democracy, and they need 100 more years. (Mishra, 2008)

What is more, in an interview for El País Newspaper, he compares the democracy with an illness. He says that the illness is the lack of democracy and all the issues that it leads to, such as corruption, poverty or intolerance are like the different problems or difficulties of that illness (Antón, 2007). Alaa al-Aswany maintains this position faithfully along most of his

novels, but mainly in *The Yacoubian Building*, where he is going to present a series of characters who for this reason, the lack of democracy, live a really bitter reality.

1.1. Influences of Naguib Mahfuz

Alaa al-Aswany is an author who follows the same direction previously taken by Naguib Mahfuz. It is inconceivable not to mention the great Arab literary, Naguib Mahfuz, when speaking of Alaa al-Aswany.

One of the main features found in Naguib Mahfuz are, on the one hand, the desire to reflect the injustices and hypocrisies of Egyptian society, and, on the other hand, the interest in politics, trying to denounce the imposition of regimes not favorable to the people. Precisely this idea is going to be a faithful reflection present in the author of *The Yacoubian Building*.

In addition, both Arab authors were against the political regime led by Hosni Mubarak, an Egyptian dictator who ruled the Arab Republic of Egypt from 1981 to 2011. This period of time, 30 years, means a time of repression, radicalism, injustice, and censorship. A time in which free elections in regards to human rights was a dreamy utopia for the majority of the people of Egypt. In fact, Naguib Mahfuz and Alaa al-Aswany have publicly and completely admitted their opposition to Hosni Mubarak in different interviews and press conferences, claiming that all the problems of Egypt are the result of the imposition of the dictatorship and the lack of full democracy. They affirm that people are only able to show their real image in front of a democracy, whereas before a dictatorship, only distorted, ambiguous and hypocritical images will be obtained (Antón, 2007).

Interestingly enough, it is inevitable to see the connection between one of the most famous and well-known works of Naguib Mahfuz, *Midaq Alley* (1947) with the work of Alaa al-Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building* (2002). Alaa al-Aswany deeply shows his admiration for the predecessor with this novel. It is not being affirmed that Alaa al-Aswany has made an imitation of acclaimed work of Mahfuz, but it is possible to capture practically the same essence in both novels. This is not surprising, since both have always affirmed publicly that their main mission is to help the Egyptian people.

Referring to the previous mention that in the novel of Al-Aswany it can be possible capture the same essence perceived in the novel of Mahfuz, it basically refers to the fact that, firstly, both novels are set in Egypt and, secondly, both authors are going to present a microcosm, a direct contemplation of the human being. The fact is that, Alaa al-Aswany presents a space where the life of different characters takes place, showing different and varied situations and themes typical of Cairo, in the same way as Naguib Mahfuz in *Midaq Alley*. From this point, it is feasible to make reference to the idea of pastiche by Ala al-Aswany. Pastiche, according to Merriam-Webster dictionary is “a literary, artistic, musical, or architectural work that imitates the style of previous work”. As it has been mentioned before, there is no doubt about the originality and authenticity of the work of Al-Aswany. Only, the enormous repercussion that most of his works have had and have in a large number of countries has to be noticed. The key aspect is that applying the idea of this concept, the idea of pastiche, to the work of Al-Aswany, it could be clearly observed that Naguib Mahfuz for Al-Aswany is a great reference.

2. A look at the world of Arab Cinema

Including in different cultures new techniques, processes, products, customs or even means of entertainment and fun, as is the case of cinema, is not always an easy task, but rather an arduous and complicated process since there will always be people that agrees to include innovations and others, perhaps more conservative and traditional, who strongly refuses. These two perspectives are going to be found when talking about Arab cinema.

Besides, Arab cinema is going to be characterized by a very strong sense of culture and identity. These two notions will mark the character of the cinema in the Egyptian society.

Overall, this point is going to develop some of the most outstanding features of the Arab cinema but centered on the creation of films in Egypt since the novel *The Yacoubian Building* (2002) and the film (2006) are set in Egypt, in Cairo.

2.1. History

“The film medium was invented in the West at the end of the nineteenth century” (Shafik, 2007: 9). After this, paying attention to the story of the Arab cinema, in the year 1896, the first film screenings took place in Egypt. These projections were carried out by the Lumière brothers shortly after the first screening in Paris (Le Festival de Cannes, 2011).

Progressively, different rooms and spaces destined to the projection of films or short films were introduced. Furthermore, by the end of the year 1908 five cinemas were constructing in Cairo:

The foundation of the Egyptian film industry was laid in 1934/35 when the Misr Bank, under the management of Talaat Harb, established the Studio Misr. The following decade witnessed the rapid development of the film industry. By 1948 six further studios had been built and a total of 345 full-length features produced.³³ In the years after World War II, cinema was the most profitable industrial sector after the textile industry.³⁴ Between 1945 and 1952 Egyptian production reached an average of 48 films per year, a number comparable to today's production. (Shafik, 2007: 12)

Furthermore, Viola Shafik (2007) presents some of the most important reasons why Egypt was very successful with the creation of the film industry. On the one hand, she emphasizes that Egypt has always enjoyed a society that accepts a great cultural diversity whose own residents, the Egyptians, played a fundamental role. On the other hand, Egypt was feeling a great attraction for the film industry so it began to combine cinema with well-known musical theaters. From here, a large mass of interested people in that fact started to invest in the film industry and later on, Talaat Harb had the idea of wanting to develop a national film industry but independent. Eventually, by the end of the year 1934 Talaat Harb had built the Misr Studio which “produced 57 films between 1936 and 1956, and 125 films between 1936 and 1960” (Le Festival de Cannes, 2011).

2.2. Sense of culture and identity: Rejection to imitation

Before starting address this issue, it would be quite relevant to mention that “film as a medium was invented in the West” (Shafik, 2007: 4). Due to the fact that it was created in the West, there is going to be an idea in the Arab countries where they started to produce films that they were not original or creative at all since the cinema was created in another geographical space. This fact caused many ups and downs in the Arab film industry. In fact, as Viola Shafik (2007) affirms: “Because its existence is based on a Western technique, Arab cinema is frequently criticized as evidence of Westernization and acculturation” (p. 4).

The establishment of cinema in Arab countries, or in this case, in Egypt, brought with it criticism from different places, especially from European countries. These criticisms made reference to Egypt was following European ideas. “The Arab market was flooded by European products, important areas of the economy were dominated by foreign investors, and native entrepreneurs were hardly able to survive” (Shafik, 2007: 9).

Basically, this criticism is due to the period of colonization that the Arab countries were suffering from different countries such as France, Great Britain and even Italy.

The Arab world, on the other hand, has been struggling with the dilemma of being able to represent its own cultural identity due to a long era of colonisation followed by an era of formal restriction on freedom of expression and creativity under state censorship. [...] At the end of the nineteenth century, with the invention of the cinema in the West, almost all Arab countries were either under direct Western (mainly British, French and Italian) occupation or under a mandate system. Colonisation, nonetheless, helped in transferring the new invention to the Arab world, and especially to Egypt. (Mansour, 2012: 3)

Being the Arab world under the European colonial dependence, many of the films made in these countries were of their possession. As a consequence the Arab films did not represent their own cultural identity. However, Egypt was the only country that was really able to create a national film industry during this period that little by little was opening gap among the most competent industries in Europe. As well Shafik (2007) claims, “With the exception of Egypt, Arab nations had almost no opportunity to represent themselves or their culture by means of cinema until national independence” (p.18).

It will be in 1922 when Egypt gets the independence, and, from this moment the situation changed completely. There was a constant and intensive struggle to try to put an end to European legal rights in the economic field, the Arabic language was introduced as mandatory in different educational institutions and, finally the employment rate for Egyptians native increased considerably. In addition to this, it should be noted that Egypt experienced a massive arrival of immigrants since in the rest of the Arab countries, such as Syria, unfortunately, both social and political restrictions continued to exist.

2.3. Subjects and censorship

These days, the world has a wide variety of film genres, from adventures and animation for the youngest, including science fiction, comedy, drama and thriller, to genres designed for a more adult audience. In addition, any current theme is used to create a film adaptation. Choosing a film on any subject is a simple, quick, easy and legal action in the current century, but, it could be said the same if looking at the past? This is exactly where the notion of censorship will appear all over the place. Not only is there talk about censorship in literature with different novels, plays or poetry, but also in cinema. It could be said that the cinema has been suffering a more drastic censorship due to the simple fact that a film is more explicit and visual.

As Dina Mansour (2012) emphasizes, the development of the Arab film industry will imply a growth in censorship, especially at the beginning of the 20th century. The fact is that censorship will not be imposed only to protect specific norms or notions of morals and religion, but will also be imposed to try to control the propagation of political ideas whose purpose is to criticize foreigners or provoke the emergence of movements that be positioned against the colonizers.

Going deep a little more in the notion of censorship, it can be said that the use of certain subjects to make films have been suffering censorship for years. However, there are some themes which have suffered much more from this examination as well as especially the well-known topics such as sex and homosexuality.

It is only recently that Arab film and literature have started to approach the subject of sex with unflinching openness. Following that lead, *The Yacoubian Building* is filled with sexual harassment, promiscuity, homosexuality, and even pedophilia, all described in graphic detail. It is also only as of late that authors and filmmakers have begun to examine the omnipotent presence of religion in their society. (Asfour, 2007)

The Yacoubian Building, as Mansour (2012: 1) argues in his article *Egyptian film censorship: safeguarding society, upholding taboos*:

The Yacoubian Building [...] and Cairo Exit (Al-Khoroug, 2009) are examples of films that touch upon what are considered to be culturally sensitive topics and taboos, which are said to “harm public morality” and “misrepresent the tradition and culture of Arab societies.

Taking account the above quotation, the reader will find himself in front of a novel where topics considered taboos for Egyptian society will be developed in an explicit way.

Censorship is nothing more than an imposed prohibition. Because of this, censorship will always be connected to the creation of taboos in any community because it will prohibit reflecting society in a reliable way. Reflecting a problem both in the cultural sphere and in the social sphere where censorship is an obstacle results in a lack of creativity in the creation of different films or short films and, therefore, harms the industry in general (Mansour, 2012: 2).

It is here that both the film and the book by Alaa al-Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, are going to imply a gap or a change in what concerns the notion of censorship. As Ingrid Wassman (2008) points out, literature and, consequently, cinema, should be used as a form of dissemination to try to inform. And, concretely, this is in what Alaa al-Aswany is really going to be outlined. He will be able to present a novel exposing taboo subjects of the Egyptian society openly.

2.4. Influences of Hollywood in Arab film

Although, as it was mentioned before, Arab cinema stands out in its early beginnings for the constant search for originality and creativity, together with the total and complete negation of imitating, it cannot be denied the fact that American cinema will have a great influence in Arab film world. This is due to the fact that the perspective of the Arab countries changed completely. These countries looked to their neighbors with eagerness of modernization and therefore, the so-called "globalization" concept. As Abouelhassan (2009) affirms: "In their pursuit of modernization and creating a sense of national identity for Egyptians, the revolutionary elite preferred Hollywood model to any other cinematic production for more than one reason" (p.11).

One of the reasons why Egypt was trying to enter this modernization process was to try to solve some of the social and economic problems they were facing. In order to supplement this idea, Abouelhassan (2009) points out that "the desire for modernization was the reason behind the adoption of others' cultures. It is modernity that usually functions as the moving force for the work of "globalization" (p. 1). Another reason that helped to create this desire for modernization on the part of Egypt was the good relationship that existed between Egypt and the United States for both economic and military reasons. This reason is not going to be gone in depth because this is not really the main aim of this paper, but it is important enough to continue giving key aspects of why Arab cinema, specifically Egypt, went from wanting an original cinema to imitate and follow many of the features presented in American movies.

The term modernity implies change together with the idea of renovation of the traditional. That is exactly what the author Alaa al-Aswany is going to present to the audience. Considering both the film and the novel, *The Yacoubian Building*, it could be mentioned that are "constructed as a series of vignettes about characters whose fates will soon converge, a stylistic device highly popular in today's Hollywood" (Asfour, 2007). The previous quotation transmits the idea that Alaa al-Aswany breaks with the conventional schemes shown in most Arab literary works, offering a new perspective to the different situations in Egypt, a real and faithful perspective putting aside obscure ambiguities. This is the same as the film represents since it stays faithful to the book at all times.

Now, it is time to mention some of the most important characteristics found in the film, *The Yacoubian Building*, directed by Marwan Hamed.

One of these characteristics is the taste for realism. Hollywood cinema will pay close attention to realism, both in the characters and in the setting. That is, this cinema offers very well defined characters, with established and premeditated personalities, following the same pattern of real life. With regard to the setting, it does not use special effects or other means, but it uses the natural, in other words, it takes advantage of the moment of the day, whether it is night or day. Applying these characteristics to the film *The Yacoubian Building*, this previous mentioned idea can perfectly be observed in it. All the characters can fit or be integrated perfectly into social and daily life with ease, in addition to the fact that no special or visual effect is appreciated. Everything is within the realism to try to give the sensation of approach to the spectator and to try to transmit faithfully the daily Egyptian life and its problems and its internal struggles.

Another characteristic is the idea of superiority or the idea of the "Other". "The Egyptian cinema was following the steps of Hollywood's ideology of "racial domination" that normalized the white race while depicting the black one as a substandard other" (Abouelhasan, 2009: 21). This quotation refers to the fact that in American films a rejection of the black race will be shown, placing it as an inferior society or community. In *The Yacoubian Building*, it is true that clashes between races are not going to be found, but certain confrontations in terms of power. Looking a little more closely at the film or the novel as a whole, it is possible to see in the background the superiority of the rich over the poor or, of the power over the weak. This is the confrontation that will be observed in the case of Taha el Shazli and his humble and poor situation by which it is impossible for him to ascend in the social scale due to the economic position of his family and the job of his father. The situation of this character is what it is known as the situation of the "other". Abouelhasan (2009) goes on to say that "all minor groups were depicted as a different "Other" which is used as a comic object that ignites feelings of fear because of its lack of power" (p. 21).

To finish with this section, it could be referred to what Nana Asfour affirms in an article for the magazine *Words without Borders* (2007):

But instead of ending his book with an explosive bang, one that might leave an indelible mark on the reader, the novelist chooses to keep things light, resorting to a Hollywood-style finale, where everything ties up nicely and happily. Was this intentional irony on the part of Al-Aswany?

When the book is finished reading and when the film is finish watching, both the reader and the spectator faces a somewhat "happy" ending where everything finds a solution at the end, except for the unfortunate death of Taha. But, regarding the other lives of the characters, it could be said that the author has been taking us throughout the story of the novel upwards, in the sense that circumstances have been crescendo to offer finally an end not as tremendous as the expected one. Nana Asfour (2007) argues that perhaps it was something already forethought on the part of Alaa al-Aswany knowing that his novel, *The Yacoubian Building*, would be took to the cinematographic industry.

3. Realism vs. Fiction

The Yacoubian Building carries us to the middle of Egypt, Cairo, concretely in the year 1990, 20th century. The novel is set in a very famous building called “Yacoubian Building”.

In the novel, the notion of realism and fiction has not clear and defined edges, but instead, they are conflated in the sense that, although the story is somehow fictional because it presents stories and situations which are not real or which have not happened to real people, the way in which they are narrated and developed through the novel transmits the reader the true feelings of oppression, anxiety, sorrow and impotence. Furthermore, the use that Alaa al-Aswany makes of realism is notorious since the Yacoubian Building in fact exists in Cairo. As it can be shown, the entire novel is surrounded by the use of it. With this technique, the author is able to show a very realistic perspective of the modern society of Egypt in the very last of the 20th century.

Besides, not only the realism is transmitted by the real setting of the novel or the problems and different situations, but also through the presentation of the different characters. Alaa al-Aswany creates strong and well defined characters, gifted with intense personalities. His descriptions of all the characters are so credible that, in several occasions, the reader is prone to put himself or herself in the shoes of the characters. Thanks to the marked realism that characterizes the novel, as the novel is being read, the reader often comes to feel deep and

different feelings, such as impotence, anger, joy or even anxiety for the different situations set out. Asking himself or herself what he or she would do if he or she were one of the characters. There are even occasions when the reader comes to reflect on their own culture and society. From a Spanish perspective, the reader is capable of feeling fortunate to be enjoying a democracy and total freedom since 1978.

His realism is such, that many students who have preferred to maintain anonymity affirm that "Aswani's books let people know what is really happening in this country" (p.2), as Ingrid Wassman points out in his article.

Although the novel is very realistic, it cannot be forgotten the fact that Alaa al-Aswany is presenting us a completely fictitious work, where subjectivity has no place. Sometimes, it may be thought that, through some characters of the novel, the author might be showing some of their political positions or ideologies. However, in several interviews to various newspapers he has affirmed that the novel is simply a true reflection of the Egyptian situation that sometimes can end up being hard and unpleasant for the audience.

4. Microcosms: Talking about taboos topics

One thing is clear about *The Yacoubian Building* and it is that Alaa al-Aswany is able to offer an astonishing little universe of the Egyptian society of the end of the 20th century, touching a great variety of topics such as religion, homosexuality, prostitution, hypocrisy, corruption, intolerance, abortion, terrorism and drugs, and also, revealing taboo matters in an open way, without fear of possible threats since, it would be important to mention that one of his main influences, Naguib Mahfuz, suffered a stab in his neck by part of an ultraconservative Islamist, some attacks, and, apart from this, he was put in the blacklist of several Arabian countries (EFE, 2006), and even, he was considered as a heretic.

Although the novel has a rather short length (272 pages) it does not mean that the different topics are not well developed. It is quite surprising how in those 272 pages Alaa al-Aswany is able to develop amazingly all the themes named above, giving a clear image of all that concepts. Thanks to this idea of microcosm, the reader achieves eventually a complete view of the Egyptian society. The same happens with the film, which remains faithful at all times to the book.

Previously, a section about taboo subjects of the Egyptian society has been dealt with that little by little have been included in different literary works and therefore, in cinematographic works. These issues are going to constitute a fundamental aspect both in the novel and in the film, causing great controversy. Among all the aforementioned themes that are found in the novel of Alaa al-Aswany and in the film directed by Marwan Hamed (religion, homosexuality, prostitution, hypocrisy, corruption, intolerance, abortion, terrorism and drugs), religion and the role of the women in relation to the prostitution and the imposed limitations are going to be chosen to analyze since they are the most interesting from a societal perspective.

4.1. Religion as a refuge?

Nowadays, the Arab religion is branded extremist and radical by the image that is obtained from it through news and television media of different attacks at the hands of radical Islamists. So, could the Arab religion really be defined with those two terms? Obviously, the answer is no. Religions or cultures are not extremists or radicals, but people. This is something that will be reflected in *The Yacoubian Building* with one of the main characters, Taha el Shazli.

As a small and quick summary of the situation of Taha el Shazli, it could be said that he is a character that comes from a humble and quite poor family, almost without resources. He is the son of a doorman, his main dream is to join the Police Academy and he is one of the best students with astonishingly excellent marks. Up to here everything is fine; a young boy with a dream that he wants to make it comes true. The suffocating problem arises when he is rejected to join the Police Academy at the moment in which the court of interviews asks him about the job of his father. This moment can be considered as one of the main reasons of the inflection point of this character. Straightaway, Taha decides to go to the University and again here, this character will suffer social discrimination because of the appearance of his clothes and his scarce resources to buy books and material. Therefore, as it can be seen, Taha constantly experiences rejection by part of the society. After these two circumstances is when Taha begins to feel a sense of displacement. He begins to feel the idea of not belonging to his society and the idea that he does not fit anywhere. For this character, his reality is hard and sordid, he understands that he cannot or he is not going to be able to ascend the social

hierarchy or to belong to another rank simply because the job of his father is not considered worthy.

It is after all this that Taha, gradually, is transforming religion into his refuge. At the beginning, he joins Islamist movements thanks to a friend, but little by little, he ends up in a more extremist and radical movement, becoming part of a jihad in the last resort. It is at this moment when “For the first time, he acquires a sense of purpose and group belonging” as Lewis points out (2013). Taha el Shazli finally finds a kind of society that really accepts him without paying attention to neither his economic status nor his social background. He feels comfortable with this new community to the extent that at the end, for Taha “death, in his terms, seems to lead to an ultimate fulfilment” (Lewis, 2013: 106):

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 little by little and he felt a strange restfulness engulfing him and taking him into itself. 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. (Alaa al-Aswany, 2002: 343)

As Desiree Lewis (2013) affirms, “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” (p. 106).

Apart from the social discrimination that this character suffered, it is relevant to mention the fact that his girlfriend, Busayna el Sayed, who he knows since his childhood, leaves him for various reasons (see section 5.2). Therefore, as it has been commented before, Taha goes introducing himself into a more Islamist politics due to, on the one hand, his social aspirations have been smashed and, on the other hand, his personal life has been slowly faded (Lewis, 2013).

Taha finds his personal fulfilment, his refuge, through religion although in a more radical and extreme way. It is also important to note that the Islamist political movement to which it joins is going to make use of demagoguery, since it offers even a woman, asylum and, most importantly, the false idea of belonging to the community. With this, Taha will feel full with respect to his previous life where the constant rejection was his way of life since this

community is going to offer him the idea of power. Power over oneself and power to be able to choose.

Delving into the story or situation of Taha, it is not a story of why a young boy ends being a terrorist, or being part of a jihad. Alaa al-Aswany is depicting, or rather denouncing and expounding the real situation that young people have to overcome in Egypt and giving the reasons why young people turns to radical political movements:

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. (Lewis, 2013: 107)

4.2. Prostitution, love and necessity

When talking about a woman in *The Yacoubian Building*, a specific character, Busayna el Sayed, quickly comes to mind. Making a quick summary of her story in the novel, Busayna is involved in a situation very similar to that of the young boy Taha el Shazli, surrounded by poverty and scarce economic resources. In fact, both characters, Taha and Busayna are love partners at the beginning. Apart from this, her father dies and the weight of her family falls on her. She really needs to find a job in order to survive and to maintain her family. However, the fundamental aspect is whether she will be able to find it.

Initially, Busayna is a cheerful young woman who wants to face the world wanting to find a job that will help her support her family. But, it will be possible to see how this character is progressively humiliated together with their hopes.

The misfortune of Busayna is simply being a woman. Although this idea may sound a bit harsh, it is the reality that will be found in the novel or film. Alaa al-Aswany presents Busayna as a fighter woman who tries by all possible means to find an honest job where she does not have to receive abuse or manipulation from the bosses, but, unfortunately, this becomes her constant struggle in the Egyptian society.

The main problem of Busayna resides in what Alev Adil (2007) points out: “Busayna, [...], is worn down by the double standards which expect her to provide for her widowed mother and siblings, to guard her honour, and to endure sexual harassment at work”. This quotation expounds the main reason why Busayna accepts prostitution as an escape route. The burden of all his problems ends up destroying her mentally to the point of submission and acceptance.

After the death of her father, Busayna is forced to play the role of man in his family, since she is the person who has to take charge of maintaining both the economy and the family union. The fact is that Alaa al-Aswany presents a strong and courageous female character with some fixed principles who tries to fight with courage and using simply the scarce resources available that she has, but, due to the corruption of Egyptian society, she ends up turning against to all her principles. It is rather frustrating the situation of this character where it is possible to guess the cruel and sad fate that is waiting for her.

Busayna lives with the hope of being able to find a decent job in which she does not have to endure sexual harassment by the part of her respective bosses, but, due to the situation she is facing, progressively she realizes that it is impossible in a so degrading society as in which she lives, and eventually, she ends up prostituting herself, not in such an explicit way, but allowing her boss to abuse her in the back room to earn extra money. Her boss touches her body in exchange for money. She has no choice if she wants to survive. Again, in *The Yacoubian Building*, both the spectator and the reader run into a character surrounded by oppression since this is the goal of Alaa al-Aswany, to reflect the injustices to which all Egyptian society was exposed.

Returning to the previous point about Taha, it can be clearly seen that Alaa al-Aswany is going to offer two young characters, Taha and Busayna, whose future is linked to failure and self-destruction. Although these two characters share this idea, it is important to mention that "while Busayna gives into her dejection until she becomes as indifferent and heartless as her surroundings, Taha seeks solace and reparation in Islam" (Asfour, 2007). However, it cannot be denied the fact that these two young people are going to be the two characters who will suffer the most corruption and injustice in Egyptian society.

Taha has no salvation, he falls into fanaticism for injustice and finally his destiny is death. However, with Busayna something more different and hopeful happens. Tired of facing men who only seek pleasure and abuse her by offering her a miserable salary, Busayna begins to use her own weapons of seduction against Zaki Bey the Dessouki. This fact is going to mark a kind of new beginning for Busayna since she expected to receive the same treatment of abuse that she received from other men constantly. However, Zaki Bey, despite being an engineer, who does not practice it, whose existential goal was reduced to pay for women day after day and to be constantly remembering his best times when he was in Paris and before the Revolution, is going to constitute a hopeful change for our protagonist.

Zaki Bey the Dessouki treats Busayna in a very different way with respect to all the women he has dealt with. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that Zaki Bey is already a very old person and besides, he does not enjoy good health, and, on the other hand, it is due to his fatigue of having enjoyed life with a multitude of women and of not knowing what love really is and what it feels like. This is what is going to make Busayna, who had become a cold woman, distant, without scruples and with intentions to ruin Zaki Bey, fall in love with this man. It is in this moment when she meets the engineer that Busayna feels the heat of a man who does not want to sexually harass her and, in addition to this, she does not have to offer his body to achieve particular purposes.

It is here where to see again another facet of Busayna is possible. It could be said that this character goes through three different phases. The first phase where she is attached to her principles, wanting to be an independent and free woman without needing to depend on a man; the second phase where she simply accepts a destiny imposed against her will surrounded by abuse. The woman who in a first glance appears as strong and brave, now is no more than a woman with both physical and mental freedom taken, accepting prostitution as the only solution in a twisted, savage and cruel society. And, finally, the third phase where again she sees a speck of light and little by little she is able to restore her old self thanks to a man ironically.

Within this section where it is intended to reflect how Alaa al-Aswany has been able to introduce taboo themes such as prostitution and, therefore, sex, it is crucial to highlight or mention another character surrounded by this environment, although it is rather a secondary character: Abduh. This character will also experience a situation similar to that of Busayna.

Nana Asfour (2007) says: "Al Aswany's Egypt is a cruel place, one that forces many of its citizens into compromising situations. Even men are reduced to a form of semi-prostitution". This refers to the fact that Abduh allows Hatem Rasheed, the editor-in-chief of a major newspaper in Cairo, to have sex with him. Why? What are truly the reasons? Is the reader facing a situation of homosexuality or prostitution?

First of all, it is essential to comment the fact that at first Abduh is quite reluctant to the affectionate behavior of Hatem, branding homosexual relationships as forbidden in religion. But, there comes a time when he is more willing to maintain that kind of relationship with the famous journalist since Hatem offers him money to support his family economically due to Abduh is surrounding by poverty. At this point, a little confusion can be created between if Abduh agrees to maintain relationships with Hatem for pure pleasure and because he is really homosexual with fear of expressing himself freely in his society due to the rejection he would receive, or just because of necessity of maintaining his family. The reader should ask himself then, why does Abduh kill Hatem finally? Was not it love? Could we say that we are truly facing another case of prostitution that is not explicit?

5. Impact and censorship

It could be said that Alaa al-Aswany, censorship, and impact are going to be in a very close relationship. The great recognition of *The Yacoubian Building* (2002), receiving both positive and negative criticisms, is undeniable. Also, it is important to note that this author does not stand out only for this novel, but once he reached the literary peak with his first novel published in 2002 he did not become stagnate and continued to offer and delight the reader with captivating and passionate novels.

Among some of his most outstanding novels, it could be mentioned for example *Chicago* (2007), which was his second novel after *The Yacoubian Building*. However, it will not cause the same impact as his first novel, as Jay Parini (2008) pointed: "Chicago, his eagerly awaited second novel, is not as interesting or fully realized as the first, but you have undeniable charms of its own." Or even, *The Automobile Club of Egypt* (2014), which follows practically the same line found in his first novel, presenting again a critique of Egyptian society and setting the novel in a building that really exists. Finally, one of his most recent novels is *J'ai couru vers le Nil*, published in 2018. In this very new novel, Alaa al-Aswany

offers a ruthless novel recreating an image of unfair imprisonment, rapes of women, torture, imposition of a dictatorship and murders, which are going to be the main ingredients of this novel. This novel will not be free of censorship, but, in fact, it is currently censored in a large number of Arab countries (Larrán, 2019).

Focusing on the impact that *The Yacoubian Building* obtained, it can be said that it was a true revolutionary novel, even being translated into more than ten languages. Alfred Hickling (2015) notes: "His 2002 debut novel, *The Yacoubian Building*, sold more than a million copies, laying bare the political corruption, degrading poverty and rising religious fervor." It was absolutely clear that the Arab society wanted to read its own reflection, savouring all the darker aspects of society. However, not only Arab society was caught up by this novel, but it constituted also an incredible success in other countries:

Aswany's first major novel, *Imārat Ya'qūbiyyān (The Yacoubian Building)*, attracted an unprecedented number of readers in Egypt and throughout the Arab world when it was published in 2002. The first edition sold out in 40 days, and nine more printings were subsequently ordered. The English version appeared in 2006 and was similarly successful. (Bamia, 2019)

"The Arabic edition has already sold well over 100,000 copies, where in Egypt a title is considered a bestseller if it sells 3000 copies over three years. Meanwhile, the French and English translations have sold 130,000 copies". (Wassman, 2008: 3).

Paying attention to the censorship and the problems that he had after his publication and after his film adaptation of *The Yacoubian Building*, it has to be recognized the fact that Alaa al-Aswany was, is, and probably will be in the spotlight by many institutions. Even before the publication, he was suffering from different problems with the government owing to the realism of his novel. The truth is that many people, especially high-ranking politicians, did not like the idea that Alaa al-Aswany reflected in such a true way the Cairo society nor that the director of the corresponding film adaptation, Marwan Hamed, faithfully followed the novel, and this led to different complaints and oppositions especially by political officials. They did not agree on such an explicit reflection of the so-called taboo subjects, such as homosexuality, torture at the hands of officials, political corruption, rapes or religious fanaticism, and they certainly made their position publicly:

Prior to its release, 112 Members of Parliament demanded that scenes dealing with issues that touch upon public morals and traditions be cut, particularly those dealing with homosexuality, claiming that the film defamed Egypt and promoted the spread of “obscenity and debauchery”. [...] Despite the campaign, the film was left uncut thereby violating all existing religious and cultural taboos and achieving groundbreaking boxoffice returns locally and international recognition and praise in the West. (Mansour, 2012: 7)

CHAPTER II

As it was mentioned above, when speaking of Alaa al-Aswany, it is necessary to mention the name of Naguib Mahfuz given the similarities between both authors when it comes to narrating and writing majestic literary works. For this reason, it is necessary to dedicate a section to talk about this author. Chapter II will be devoted entirely to two general matters. On the one hand, the most important points of the life of Naguib Mahfuz will be presented in a summarized manner along with a description of one of his works that has a special relationship with *The Yacoubian Building*. And, on the other hand, a point will be conducted to make a comparison between the two feminine roles that both the novel of Alaa al-Aswany and the novel of Naguib Mahfuz develop.

6. Naguib Mahfuz and Midaq Alley

As a small introduction to this author, Naguib Mahfuz was born in Cairo in 1911 and died in 2006. He was an Egyptian writer who especially stood out for the quality of his narrative works. The most important aspect of this author is that he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988, becoming the first Arab writer to obtain this well-earned recognition.

His interest in literature began at an early age and he maintained that interest throughout his life to his end, offering us a large number of literary works. The journalist McFadden (2006), who wrote for *The New York Times* the news about the death of this great author, argued in his article that “Mr. Mahfuz chronicled the development of modern Egypt, and over five decades wrote 33 novels, 13 anthologies of short stories, several plays and 30 screenplays”.

This author is going to be surrounded by problems and bitter situations. At first, although he gained much prestige as an author and his novels were sold in different countries in consideration of all the translations that were made, such as in German and French language among others, he did not enjoy a good economic situation. However, thanks to the Nobel Prize in Literature that he obtained, he managed to have a more stable situation in economic terms. To this situation, it has to be added the hatred he raised among some enemies because of the ideologies he presented in his novels or because of what the novels themselves reflected. As it was discussed above, specifically in chapter I, in section 1.1, Mahfuz was constantly threatened by different Islamist radicals up to the point that he once received a

deep and serious wound in his neck that caused him vision, hearing problems and loss of mobility of his right arm. These health problems were not an obstacle for Naguib Mahfuz and he continued to write with will and courage. Fortunately, he managed to escape death after what happened, however, he was later considered as a heretic and threatened with death, so he had to live the rest of his life rather isolated and avoid exposing himself too much to the public.

His novel, *Midaq Alley*, was published in 1947. In this novel, he presents a microcosm that deals with varied issues such as homosexuality, prostitution, hypocrisy, desire, deceit and hope. This novel is one of his best-known literary works and it is considered the most translated novel among all his novels. The film adaptation came from the hand of Mexican cinema in 1994 by director Jorge Fons.

Both in this novel and in the novel of Alaa al-Aswany, realism will again be one of the most relevant defining characteristics. The fact is that *Midaq Alley* is set in a particular part of Cairo where Naguib Mahfuz spent the years of his childhood. In addition, in both works is portrayed in a faithful and real way the Egyptian society: its prejudices, its injustices, and also, the treatment of many taboo subjects in an open way. However, it is crucial to mention that they are not two equal works, but each one is going to address the issues from a perspective and in a very different way. The difference between these two authors resides in what Adams (2006) points out: "Unlike Naguib Mahfouz's predominant focus on Egypt's 1950's middle class, Aswany's shifting searchlight brings out the far-reaching effects of abysmal governance on the most intimate corners of everyday life for everyone".

Apart from this, as it was already said at the beginning of this paper, it would be rather important to say that although the novel is characterized by realism, it should not be forgotten that Naguib Mahfuz offers us an entirely fictional work, like the author of *The Yacoubian Building*. These two notions, realism and fiction, are in a close relationship.

Regarding the reason why Naguib Mahfuz became the first Arab author to get a Nobel Prize, it has to be mentioned his ability to narrate so faithful without falling into simple and monotonous narrations. As Sisken (1989) said: "Although his stories are expressly Egyptian, his themes are universal. For this reason-and in recognition of his skill and compassion as a writer-he was recently awarded the Nobel Prize for literature." Naguib Mahfuz was able to

write loyal stories of the society in which he lived reflecting reality, sometimes coming to be harsh and hateful, but this is what his power as a writer resided in and what resided the strength of his novels. What he narrated in his novels could be happening even in a European country; people and countries saw themselves reflected in his novels because the problems of society where there is no democracy and only imposed dictatorships exist are universal and repeated over and over again. His works were pure mirrors of the problems of life at that time.

7. Contrast: Busayna and Hamida

When reading any of the two works, *The Yacoubian Building* or *Midaq Alley*, the reader is confronted with the direct contemplation of the human being in a certain small space in which different topics are going to be discussed, as it has already been mentioned previously in Chapter I.

This section will be focused on a particular taboo subject, which is prostitution. When considering this topic, it is inevitable to think about the role of women in both novels. For this reason, since the 4.2 point was devoted to an analysis of the role of women and prostitution in the novel of Alaa al-Aswany, a comparison of the similarities and differences that the two female characters are going to present will be developed. On the one hand, paying attention to Busayna in *The Yacoubian Building*, and on the other hand, concentrating on Hamida in *Midaq Alley*.

Previously, a section was dedicated to the character of Busayna in chapter I, so some aspects will be mentioned in a lighter and faster way since due to they are going to be needed again in order to be able to make the contrast, but without forgetting that this point will be more centred on the character created by Naguib Mahfuz in his novel.

Firstly, the common points or similarities that both Hamida and Busayna share will be expounded.

These two characters are placed in a rather similar context. First and foremost, they live in a patriarchal milieu where man is positioned in the first place. And, secondly, they are surrounded by maltreatment, homosexuality, injustice and, demagoguery. Besides, both of them are the result of a corrupt society full of corrupted characters.

It should be also noted that both in the film and in the novel, the characters are going to stand out by their physical beauty but not for this fact, they are not going to have defects. Mercedes del Amo (1997) argues:

Hamida es una muchacha muy bella a la que acompañan también multitud de defectos, tanto físicos como de carácter. Si a su cara y a su cabello, a su talla y a su estatura no hay nada que objetar, en cambio sus manos y su voz son desagradables. Su personalidad es lo menos salvable [...]. Además es ambiciosa, dominante, ignorante, envidiosa, y siente una salvaje aversión por los niños y por las otras mujeres del barrio (p. 20).

Translation into English: Hamida is a very beautiful young girl who is accompanied by many defects, both in terms of physical appearance and in terms of character. There is nothing to object to her face, her hair and her height; however, her hands and her voice are unpleasant. Her personality is the less wild [...]. Besides, she is ambitious, controlling, ignorant and envious, and she feels a wild aversion towards children and other neighbourhood women.

Considering Busayna, Alaa al-Aswany describes her as someone extremely lovely and attractive, but it is true that maybe in *The Yacoubian Building* the image that he offers initially of Busayna is someone that moves more around a line of perfection, being absolutely pretty, cautious, very attentive and pure, and progressively is corrupted by the different situations that she has to overcome. It is the moment in which the reader or the spectator feels closer to this character. Whereas in the case of Naguib Mahfuz, he from the very beginning presents Hamida as someone incredibly beautiful but also full of defects. Anyway, thanks to the fact that both writers develop two different characters very human and blessed with truly defects, the audience can be able to perceive the realism and immerse himself or herself in the novel without any problem. Moreover, the reader or spectator is capable of feeling more connected with the characters that denote features typical of human beings than with characters merely fictitious and artificial. In this sense, both authors transmits us the sense of humanity with both women. Hence, from this aspect the great success of which both Egyptian authors enjoy can be noted.

Another common feature to highlight between both female characters is the fact that they have specific and particular objectives from the beginning. On the one hand, Busayna is conscious about her duty to support and help her family economically together with the idea of being a strong woman and finding an honest job that permits her to maintain her virginity and her principles. On the other hand, Hamida really knows what she does not want in her

life. She refuses to continue being poor and living in the same alley during all her life. Her dream is to have a good economic situation and to abandon the alley that she considers as her prison.

Additionally, both characters appear in the novel and in the film accompanied by young boys. In *The Yacoubian Building*, Busayna is girlfriend of Taha el Shazli in a very first moment, although later on, the relationship is broken. In *Midaq Alley*, Hamida is sought after by young boy called Abbas whom she does not pay much attention for his humble and scarce economic situation. However, another characteristic that they share in that both are represented as pure, they are virgin girls.

To begin with the differences, although both characters seems to be almost the same, if an analysis is made between Busayna and Hamida in a more thorough way, it can be reached the conclusion that both characters are quite opposed in some particular senses.

Busayna gives up to her cruel destiny without further delay after so much failure and different abuses at work. She accepts to destroy her principles and to get in a way of submission. Conversely, Hamida refuses to accept his fate. Although it is important to say that this character shows feebleness when she foresees that her future is the same as her present and because of this, she quickly accepts the courtship proposal of Abbas. Immediately she changes her attitude of feebleness for betrayal when she meets a wealthy man who begins to harass her and abandons Abbas. Taking this into account, Dan Siskin (1989) argues: "Hamida [...] sees Abbas as her best hope out of a life of poverty and monotony in the alley. When, however, she is tempted by the proposal of a wealthy businessman, she quickly forgets her commitment to Abbas". With this quote is quite clear to see that unlike Busayna, Hamida has not got any principles and she is only guided by the material instinct. She even accepts the wedding proposal with a much older man due to the good economic position that this man enjoys.

Another further point that is relevant to comment on it is that while Busayna is unable to deceive Zaki Bey at the end of the story owing to it really is not in her nature as human being; Hamida never hesitates to make use of manipulation to achieve her goals whatever the cost. Naguib Mahfuz presents an unscrupulous character from the beginning of the novel

while Busayna is a character that Alaa al-Aswany is modelling through the novel with different characteristics.

Attending to the personality of these two women, Busayna is depicted as a strong and courageous woman, unable to surrender to the adversities, although finally the corrupt Egyptian society ends up consuming this character. Nevertheless, Hamida moves by envy. She is constantly pays attention to her friends, their clothes, the places in which they live and she only feels envy and desire to get the same or more than her friends. This is the main aspect that will lead Hamida to her own self-destruction.

As the last difference between both young girls, Busayna is a rather independent woman who does not turn to anyone to try to get out of trouble or poverty. What is more, she does not wait for a man that saves her. It is true that her life takes another different direction suddenly when she and Zaki Bey fall in love each other. The important aspect is that Busayna had to accept a less explicit kind of prostitution in order to survive since it was her only option after having tried to fight against the injustices of her surrounded society. On the contrary, Hamida is a dependent woman. She is not really able neither to try to fix her life nor her problems and she is constantly blaming the alley in which she lives and her neighbours for not having rich men to maintain her and please her caprices. It is in this moment when she decides to prostitute herself explicitly in a club. Why? ¿Did she really have no choice or she succumbed to material pleasure? Busayna really had not got choice, but in the case of Hamida, she did that due to his material thirst. Hamida did not love Abbas or the man who led her into prostitution, she simply was eager to achieve someone who could keep her and could satisfy her futile desires. She could have chosen to stay with Abbas even though she did not love him, but at least, she could have maintained both her dignity and her virginity. However, this would have been a happy ending and it should not be forgotten that Naguib Mahfuz offers us a very corrupt society where no one is going to escape from its consequences.

8. Conclusion

Once this paper about Arab literature and cinema, one thing is obvious, *The Yacoubian Building* does not go unnoticed. It is a work that leaves its mark on the reader, especially the Egyptian reader since with the publication of this novel and its corresponding adaptation Alaa al-Aswany gave voice to this society. It contributed enormously to reflect in a single novel the great problems and injustices that threaten the Egyptian society, uncovering without decorum its most hidden reality. In addition, Ingrid Wassman (2008) affirms the fact that the novel was specially written for the Egyptians more than for the foreigners since the work will help them to realize that their society was not as good as they thought. Indeed, Osman (2016) mentions: "What was certain about *The Yacoubian Building* when it was published over a decade ago, and remains true today, is that it forces us, as Egyptians, to think about ourselves and what we have done (and continue to do) to our society".

Moreover, the fact that a large number of people, especially young people, feel really reflected in the work in some way cannot be denied. This is referred due to they are the ones who really suffer the consequences of a broken, decadent and corrupt society where the absence of democracy is more than remarkable. In *The Yacoubian Building*, the youngest protagonists will represent the anxiety, agony and oppression of living in a dark and unfavourable world.

In addition to this, throughout this paper, it has been tried to demonstrate the great literary capacity that this author possesses. As Parini (2008) pointed out: "Alaa Al-Aswany is among the best writers in the Middle East today, a suitable for the mantle worn by Naguib Mahfouz, his great predecessor, whose influence is felt on every page. Yet Al Aswany has his own magic". Alaa al-Aswany will be able to talk about the hidden, to show what nobody speaks in an open manner and without fear of the constant criticisms and censorship. He does not hesitate nor to use controversial topics to revive his novel, neither to mix the edges of realism with those of fiction to take the reader once more to a world as imaginary as it is real at the same time.

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