BOOKS

A literary understanding of Egypt's unrest

The Yacoubian Building

Alaa Al-Aswany

Translated by Humphrey Davies

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As a Canadian of Egyptian descent, I watched with great interest the coverage of the revolution unravelling in Egypt. My colleagues, many of whom are shocked by these events, have bombarded me with questions and comments, seeking a more rounded view of the revolution. To answer these questions, I refer them to this groundbreaking novel by Alaa Al-Aswany. A dentist by trade who completed his postgraduate training in Chicago, Al-Aswany founded the Egyptian political movement, Kefaya (Enough).

The Yacoubian Building, which holds the distinction of being a best-selling Arabic language novel in both 2002 and 2003, is an honest and unapologetic account of life under the

back to a period of great postcolonial optimism in Egypt following the successful revolution of Gamal Abdel Nasser that ushered in major socio-political change. Since that period, optimism has given way to hopelessness and frustration as Egyptian society has

Shakespearean proportions. From the underprivileged doorman, Taha, and his forbidden love, to the corrupt business dealings of the ruthless Hagg Azzam, no member of this cross-section of Egyptian society is spared the author's critical brush.

Al-Aswany's narrative constructs a colourful world where the lives of the building's residents intersect at multiple levels. This intriguing plot structure boldly touches on government corruption, cultural mores and the home-grown forces behind terrorism. The picture Al-Aswany paints of his homeland is at once disturbing and distinctly humbling.

Many issues under contemporary debate in the Middle East are approached in this novel, leading to a story that is both compelling and visceral in scope. This honest and intuitive cultural assessment of contemporary Egypt will enhance readers' understanding of how a stalwart regime of 30 years can tumble to the ground in a mere 18 days at the hands of thousands of frustrated youth.

As a future physician, I can only say that I am inspired by the many physicians and medical students in Egypt who hung up their stethoscopes and marched the streets of Cairo in solidarity with the people of Egypt. This brilliant novel provides some context as to why our colleagues in Egypt took this chance.

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Mubarak regime. It illuminates the dark shadows of Egypt's alleys and provides insight into the current level of frustration in the Middle East.

The driving force behind Al-Aswany's narrative rests in the novel's namesake and historic edifice, the Yacoubian apartment building. Built in 1934 in "high classical European style," prior to the Egyptian Nationalist Revolution in 1952, the building harkens

become more oppressive and corrupt. The building bears the scars of this process, and has slowly decayed along with many of its inhabitants' aspirations for the future.

The author uses the building's inhabitants as a microcosm of contemporary Egyptian society. By chronicling the daily lives of its diverse inhabitants, *The Yacoubian Building* recounts a modern day tragedy of