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Social Taboos in Egyptian Novels and Films: An Analytical Study

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Abstract:
This study aims to uncover what is *unspoken* in the Arabic novel — a domain where some novelists boldly address the shadowed areas of society, without fear of state censorship, which may intervene through prohibition, deletion, or modification of certain works that provoke social or political controversy. The issue becomes even more complex when the novel is adapted into a film intended for a wide and diverse audience, as censorship then becomes stricter and more effective, especially when the work touches upon taboos related to religion, politics, sexuality, and other silenced topics. In this context, the study examines Alaa Al Aswany's novel The Yacoubian Building and the academic, political, and social debates it sparked. In this work, the author addresses some of the most sensitive issues in Egyptian society, combining themes of politics, religion, prostitution, sexuality, and homosexuality, among other controversial subjects. From these, the study focuses particularly on the issues of sexuality and homosexuality, given the widespread debate they provoked following the novel's adaptation into a film .

Keywords: The Unspoken, The Yacoubian Building, Alaa Al Aswany, Cinema, Sexuality, Homosexuality.

1- Literature and Cinema Literature and cinema are two different domains in terms of the medium through which they communicate with the audience. The former relies on the act of writing and reading, depending on the beauty of language, imagery, and various expressive forms, while the latter depends on visual and auditory impact. Despite their differences, literature and cinema share an artistic nature. In recent decades, cinema has opened its doors wide to literary works, particularly the novel, transforming many of them into cinematic scripts that have captivated millions of viewers around the world. This phenomenon has resulted in the adaptation of numerous novels into highly successful films, sometimes even surpassing the fame of their literary originals. This interaction forms a cultural and creative dialogue between the two arts. The relationship between literature and cinema has always been based on mutual influence and interaction. Cinematic treatments of literary works, particularly novels, have explored diverse themes ranging from war and social realities to historical and psychological subjects. The Egyptian and Arab film industries, for example, have long drawn from the legacy of modern Arabic fiction. Directors and screenwriters have been inspired by the works of Naguib Mahfouz, Tewfiq al-Hakim, Ihsan Abdel Quddous, and others, turning their literary worlds into compelling cinematic narratives that reflect the social and political realities of their time.

Egyptian cinema, in particular, has introduced numerous adaptations of literary masterpieces, such as The Beginning and the End, The Mirage, and The Thief and the Dogs. These works have left a lasting impression, each adaptation adding its own artistic and interpretative dimension to the original text. Such transformations demonstrate how deeply intertwined literature and cinema are as two creative expressions of human experience.

The relationship between literature and cinema is therefore a complementary one, characterized by mutual enrichment. Cinema draws inspiration from the literary text as a source of narrative and imagination, while literature benefits from cinematic techniques in structuring scenes and imagery. Both arts rely on storytelling, rhythm, and the evocation of emotion, which explains the success of many cinematic adaptations that bring novels to life through sound and image.

If literature uses the word as its main tool, cinema uses the moving image. Yet both share the same goal: to express human experience in its various forms. This shared aim explains why many directors are drawn to adapt novels—they find in them a rich source of meaning, emotion, and dramatic potential. At the same time, novelists often employ cinematic techniques—montage, close-ups, and dialogue—to give their works a visual and dynamic dimension.

In the end, literature and cinema remain two arts united by a common concern: the depiction of life, its struggles, and its meanings. While literature delves into the inner world of characters through narration and description, cinema externalizes that world, transforming thought into image and imagination into visual reality. This dynamic dialogue ensures that both continue to inspire and enrich one another, confirming that literature and cinema, though distinct in form, ultimately share the same creative essence. The mind and emotions are engaged differently; the spectator, unlike the reader, does not imagine or visualize — he directly faces the visual scene. For this reason, cinema is often more widespread and socially influential. Today, the cinematic discourse is regarded in many countries as a new form of authority parallel to political and cultural power. It represents a direct and influential means of communication, particularly in shaping public awareness and attitudes toward political and social issues. Thus, cinema has become an ideological and psychological tool, with a strong capacity to influence audiences through its visuals and narratives, often surpassing written discourse in its immediacy and persuasive power.

Cinema's influence has also extended to literature. Many writers, after witnessing cinema's reach and popularity, have begun incorporating cinematic techniques into their narratives, seeking to make their writing more vivid, rhythmic, and image-driven. Modern fiction, especially children's literature, is rich in scenes that resemble cinematic sequences, complete with movement, color, and emotional depth. Examples of this can be seen in the works of Naguib Mahfouz and Ihsan Abdel Quddous, whose novels have been transformed into memorable films that left lasting impressions on the Arab audience. In turn, the cinematic industry — often called "the industry of moving images" — has itself become a form of art that blends beauty with technique. The continuous evolution of cinematic tools and technology has allowed cinema to reach higher levels of artistic sophistication. With the progress of digital effects, sound, and visual techniques, cinema today can produce more immersive experiences than ever before, offering unified sensory worlds that engage the viewer on multiple levels. This makes cinema one of the most influential forms of contemporary art and a powerful reflection of modern society's intellectual and emotional trends.

As researcher Jean Tardy (1993, p. 3) points out, cinematic works adapted from literary texts remain some of the richest examples of the interaction between narrative and image. Although the process of adaptation sometimes entails inevitable transformations and omissions, this does not diminish the artistic or expressive value of the resulting films. Rather, it demonstrates how each medium — literature and cinema — has its own means of expression.

Adaptation, therefore, should not be viewed as a process of loss but as a creative reimagining that breathes new life into the text. The cinematic adaptation can transcend the boundaries of the written word, reaching audiences beyond the readership of the original novel. As critic Fawzia Hussein notes (2024, p. 178), "Adaptation is not mere transfer but rather an act of reinterpretation and recreation," which explains why some films surpass their literary sources in emotional and aesthetic impact. This phenomenon is not limited to the Arab world; it is part of a global trend in which many acclaimed novels have been successfully adapted into internationally recognized films. Conversely, some cinematic masterpieces have inspired novelizations, leading to a fruitful exchange between the two arts. Despite their differences in medium, both literature and cinema aim to portray human experience, explore the depths of emotion, and present aesthetic visions that enrich our understanding of life and art.

2- **The Egyptian Cinema and the Novel**

Egyptian cinema is considered one of the earliest Arab cinemas. It developed within a specific social and cultural context that differed from other Arab countries due to Egypt's unique historical and artistic circumstances. The relationship between literature and cinema in Egypt has been marked by vitality and continuity; both arts have constantly sought to reflect the reality of Egyptian society through distinct yet complementary expressive tools. Despite their differences, literature and cinema share the same goal — to interpret human experience through artistic forms that intertwine narrative, imagery, and emotion.

This interconnectedness has generated a rich exchange between the two arts. Many cinematic works are based on literary texts, and numerous writers have drawn inspiration from cinematic language and techniques. As critic Fathi al-Ansari observes (1998, p. 9), "Literature and cinema are two creative tools that express human experience through different yet converging means." This ongoing dialogue has enabled Egyptian filmmakers and novelists to create works that mirror society's aspirations and struggles.

An early example of this relationship is the adaptation of Zeinab, a novel by Mohammed Hussein Heikal, into one of the first Egyptian films directed by Mohammed Karim in 1933. This film marked a turning point, establishing the novel as a foundational source for cinematic storytelling (Mahfouz, 1989, p. 72). From that time onward, the adaptation of novels into films became a recurring trend in Egyptian cinema, contributing significantly to the development of narrative art in the Arab world.

Many of Naguib Mahfouz's works were adapted into films, such as The Beginning and the End, Cairo 30, and The Mirage. These adaptations achieved great success because of Mahfouz's realistic portrayal of Egyptian society and his mastery in depicting human struggles with depth and authenticity. His novels provided rich material for directors, offering stories deeply rooted in Egyptian social and psychological reality.

The relationship between literature and cinema in Egypt thus evolved into a creative partnership. The literary text provided the thematic foundation and psychological depth, while cinema added visual expression, sound, and motion, transforming written words into living images that reached a broader audience.

A striking example of this creative dialogue can also be seen in the adaptation of Ihsan Abdel Quddous's works, especially I Am Free (1958), which dealt with the theme of women's liberation and social constraints, and Don't Put Out the Sun (1961), which explored the complexities of middle-class family life. These films mirrored Egypt's intellectual and cultural debates, turning literature into a visual forum for discussing freedom, morality, and social change.

Another significant example is Latifa al-Zayyat's The Open Door, adapted into film in 1963, which

powerfully reflected women's awakening and the national struggle for liberation. The film's release at that time confirmed cinema's role as a partner to literature in expressing collective consciousness and national identity.

Through these and many other works, Egyptian cinema demonstrated its capacity to translate literary imagination into powerful images that not only entertain but also provoke reflection and reform. This dynamic relationship between text and image remains one of the most distinctive features of Egyptian and Arab cinema.

At the intellectual, cultural, and critical level, this relationship between cinema and the novel has contributed to enriching Egyptian narrative art. Several notable attempts have emerged within Egyptian fiction that reflect this fruitful interaction between literature and cinema.

3- The Yacoubian Building and the Social Debate.

, Imarat Yacoubian (The Yacoubian Building) by Alaa Al Aswany represents an exemplary portrayal of Egyptian society, depicting its different social classes and contrasting lifestyles. The novel quickly gained critical acclaim and widespread readership, leading to its adaptation into a major film under the same title. The film, directed by Marwan Hamed and released in 2003, was based on a screenplay by Wahid Hamed, featuring an outstanding cast that included Adel Imam, Nour El Sherif, Yousra, and many others. It became one of the most significant cinematic productions in Egypt at the beginning of the 21st century, marking a new phase in the interaction between literature and cinema (Hamed, 2003).

The film adaptation of The Yacoubian Building succeeded in realistically representing Egyptian social life with all its contradictions, depicting both the corrupt elite and the marginalized poor. It shed light on themes such as power, corruption, sexuality, and political decay. The film's strong narrative structure, powerful performances, and visual realism captivated audiences, and it won numerous awards in Egyptian and Arab film festivals, ranking among the best films in contemporary Egyptian cinema.

However, despite its success, the film also sparked intense debate and controversy, especially regarding its bold treatment of sensitive social and political issues, including homosexuality and governmental corruption. Critics were divided: some praised the film's courage and realism, while others accused it of exaggeration and sensationalism. Nevertheless, as researcher Ahmed Naji notes (2003), the controversy itself confirmed the film's impact and its ability to provoke public reflection on social taboos and realities often ignored by mainstream cinema.

The Yacoubian Building thus became a landmark in Egyptian cinematic history, symbolizing the mature union of literature and film. It demonstrated that adaptation could be not merely a transfer of text to screen but a profound reinterpretation of society's collective conscience. Through its literary origins and cinematic translation, the work managed to merge art and social critique, revitalizing the dialogue between image and word in contemporary Egyptian culture.

This film reaffirmed that literature remains a vital source for cinema, offering depth, complexity, and moral inquiry that enrich the cinematic medium. In return, cinema provides literature with a new visual and emotional dimension, allowing its stories to reach wider audiences and generate broader cultural debate. As critic Saeed El-Kilani observed (2003), "The power of adaptation lies not in replication but in transformation — in turning the written word into living vision that reshapes the viewer's understanding of life."

The Dialectic of Social Taboo between Cinema and Literature

Wahid Hamed noted that part of the film's success stemmed from its courage to confront audiences with realities they often preferred to ignore. He affirmed that such works do not aim merely to provoke, but to raise awareness and stimulate dialogue about sensitive issues that society tends to

suppress. In his words: “The more a work addresses taboo subjects, the closer it gets to genuine art, because it challenges hypocrisy and denial.” (Hamed, 2003).

Every artistic text—whether literary or cinematic—is bound to reflect the environment from which it emerges, embodying its social contradictions and cultural anxieties. This explains why The Yacoubian Building provoked both admiration and outrage; it held up a mirror to Egyptian society, revealing the corruption, repression, and loss of moral values that many preferred to overlook. Thus, it succeeded not only as a film but as a social document that sparked meaningful public debate.

At the same time, literature and cinema both serve as expressive spaces through which creators confront the boundaries imposed by censorship, tradition, and collective morality. The difference lies in the medium: literature often conveys subversion symbolically or metaphorically, while cinema, being visual and immediate, faces direct scrutiny and therefore bears greater risk. The power of the moving image can magnify meaning, transforming abstract ideas into tangible realities that challenge the viewer’s conscience.

This tension gives rise to what scholars term the dialectic of taboo representation — a negotiation between the desire for artistic truth and the pressure of social conformity. Egyptian cinema, in particular, has long been a field where this tension plays out vividly. The adaptation of controversial novels to film has often served as a testing ground for freedom of expression and artistic responsibility.

For instance, Alaa Al Aswany’s novel Chicago (2007), like The Yacoubian Building, tackles issues of corruption, identity, and exile, though it remains more critical of Western and Arab cultural intersections. Had it been adapted to film, it might have generated debates similar to those surrounding The Yacoubian Building. Such works highlight the delicate balance between social critique and artistic risk.

This dialectic is also evident in films addressing political repression and sexual taboos, such as Closed Doors (1999) by Atef Hetata and The Magician (2001) by Radwan El-Kashef, both of which faced censorship yet earned critical acclaim. These examples demonstrate that the confrontation of taboo subjects in cinema and literature is not merely provocation but a form of cultural resistance and moral inquiry.

Ultimately, literature and cinema share a moral and aesthetic mission: to illuminate the unseen dimensions of human experience and to question systems of silence and denial. As critic Alaa Al Aswany observed (2002, p. 12), “Art that avoids truth, however painful, is art that betrays its own purpose.” The ongoing dialogue between the literary and cinematic arts in the Arab world thus remains not only an aesthetic exchange but a profound social act — a struggle for the right to imagine, to critique, and to speak.

The novel The Yacoubian Building employs a daring linguistic style, rich in colloquial expressions and infused with realism that reflects the rhythms of everyday Egyptian life. Alaa Al Aswany combines classical Arabic narration with spoken dialogue, creating a language that bridges literary sophistication and social authenticity. As critic Alaa Al Aswany himself noted (2002, pp. 12–13), the use of direct, unfiltered dialogue gives the characters vitality and emotional depth rarely achieved in traditional Arabic fiction.

Alaa Al Aswany portrays his characters — men and women alike — as dynamic, living beings caught within the intersections of power, class, and gender. He does not differentiate between men and women in his critique of corruption and moral decay; rather, he exposes both as victims and participants in a complex social web. The novel explores all strata of Egyptian society, from the elites in their luxurious offices and ministries to the poor living in rooftop shacks and dilapidated rooms within the same building.

Director Marwan Hamed faithfully captured this multiplicity in his cinematic adaptation. The film's visual language translates Al Aswany's social realism into moving images that reveal the contrast between splendor and misery. Actor Adel Imam's portrayal of the corrupt politician Zaki El Dessouki was particularly powerful, blending humor with tragedy. His performance embodied the contradictions of the Egyptian bourgeoisie — cultured yet morally bankrupt, nostalgic for the past yet complicit in present corruption.

4- Characters and Representations of the Taboo in The Yacoubian Building Film.

Through Zaki El Dessouki, the film exposes a society torn between its glorious past and its uncertain modern identity. The character becomes a metaphor for Egypt itself — a nation struggling between authenticity and decay, between enlightenment and disillusionment. This symbolic tension gives the film its depth and resonance.

Another major character, Buthayna, played by Hind Sabri, represents the oppressed lower-class woman forced by social and economic pressures into morally ambiguous circumstances. Her storyline reflects the gendered dimension of oppression and survival in a patriarchal society. As critic Al Aswany (2002, p. 19) observed, "The film brings Buthayna to life with a realism and empathy that turn her suffering into a collective voice for women silenced by poverty and shame." The director's careful casting and attention to performance enhanced the film's social and emotional authenticity. Through its ensemble of characters — from the ambitious journalist to the gay editor, the devout young man, and the cynical politician — the film constructs a mosaic of Egyptian society that is both local in detail and universal in meaning.

The musical score, composed by Khaled Hammad, adds another layer of expression, blending traditional Egyptian melodies with modern cinematic orchestration. This juxtaposition of old and new mirrors the novel's central theme: the struggle between heritage and modernity.

In sum, both the novel and the film The Yacoubian Building confirm that literature and cinema, when united by a shared vision, can illuminate the hidden realities of society with unmatched power. Alaa Al Aswany's text, combined with Marwan Hamed's cinematic vision, created a landmark in Arab artistic expression — a fusion of narrative and image that transformed a controversial novel into one of the most significant cultural works in contemporary Egyptian history.

Buthayna's relationship with Zaki El Dessouki develops gradually. Her appearance in his life rekindles a spark Zaki El Dessouki's dialogue is filled with irony and philosophical reflection, particularly when he says: "How can I blame the Sudanese for treating us this way, when it was we who enslaved them in the past?" (Al Aswany, 2002, p. 93). Through such statements, Al Aswany exposes the hypocrisy of Egypt's upper class and its moral decay, transforming individual introspection into social critique.

The film adaptation brilliantly captures these nuances. In one poignant scene, Zaki is shown sitting alone in his apartment, surrounded by relics of a bygone era—portraits of his ancestors, dusty furniture, and fading grandeur. The camera moves slowly across the room, emphasizing the emptiness of the space and the weight of nostalgia. Director Marwan Hamed skillfully juxtaposes this scene with shots of the bustling Cairo streets below, creating a visual contrast between the decaying elite and the vibrant chaos of the masses.

A particularly striking moment occurs when Zaki, after years of isolation, reconnects with his long-lost brother and is forced to confront the moral consequences of his family's past. The encounter symbolizes not only personal reconciliation but also a broader social reckoning—a confrontation between history and modernity, guilt and renewal.

Alaa Al Aswany's narrative structure mirrors this interplay of time and memory. The story unfolds through parallel plotlines that intersect around The Yacoubian Building itself, which serves as a microcosm of Egyptian society. The building's architectural layers correspond to the social hierarchy within: the wealthy live in spacious apartments, while the poor inhabit cramped rooftop rooms. This spatial metaphor reinforces the novel's central theme—that corruption, inequality, and disillusionment pervade every level of the social structure.

In the film, the rooftop scenes gain additional symbolic resonance. They depict the marginalized and dispossessed—the laborers, vendors, and unemployed youth—whose dreams remain confined by poverty and social exclusion. Their physical elevation above the city ironically represents their moral marginalization below it.

In one memorable exchange, Buthayna tells Zaki:

"I've seen a lot, Mr. Zaki. I've been offered many things, but I've never had anyone who truly respected me."

To which Zaki responds with quiet sorrow:

"You're the sweetest thing I've seen in my long life. I've lived too long and learned too little." (Al Aswany, 2002, pp. 192–193).

This dialogue encapsulates the tragic tenderness of their relationship—a union born not of romance but of mutual exhaustion. Their bond becomes an allegory for Egypt itself: weary yet yearning for redemption, fragmented yet still capable of love.

The director's interpretation amplifies this emotional core. Close-up shots of the characters' faces capture the fragility of human expression, while the subdued lighting and soft background score deepen the sense of melancholy. In its final moments, the film achieves what literature alone could not: it renders silence eloquent. Through image, gesture, and rhythm, it transforms introspection into living emotion.

As critic Al Aswany (2002, p. 62) concludes, "Cinema succeeds where words fall silent; it turns the stillness of thought into the movement of feeling."

of hope and tenderness within him — a symbolic redemption for both. When she enters his office, dressed modestly in a red dress, director Marwan Hamed captures the moment with meticulous cinematic detail. The camera movement lingers gently, revolving around her presence as she stands silently, evoking both innocence and latent power.

The film also highlights the physical gestures of Zaki El Dessouki, which reflect both elegance and decline. Despite his refined manners and charm, he is depicted as a man haunted by loneliness and nostalgia for a bygone era. The actor's nuanced expressions and posture reveal an inner fragility beneath his worldly sophistication. In one remarkable scene, Zaki is shown sitting alone in a dimly lit club, surrounded by shadows, suggesting the emptiness of his life and the exhaustion of his illusions.

4- Sex and homosexuality as social taboos.

4-1- Sex

Later, the narrative shifts toward the climactic moment when Zaki and Buthayna's

paths cross more intimately. The scene of reconciliation between them — set in the quiet streets of Cairo at night — is a masterpiece of visual storytelling. The director employs subdued lighting and minimal dialogue, allowing emotion to emerge through gesture and silence. The two characters, separated by class and generation, find in each other a form of human connection that transcends their social boundaries.

As Alaa Al Aswany (2002, p. 89) observes, this reconciliation does not signify a romantic ideal but rather an allegory of Egypt's longing for renewal and reconciliation between its fragmented classes. Buthayna's acceptance of Zaki, despite his age and past, becomes a symbolic act of forgiveness — a metaphor for the possibility of rebirth amid decay.

The novel and the film both culminate in scenes of profound humanity, where the private intersects with the political. Through Buthayna and Zaki, Al Aswany articulates a vision of Egyptian society torn between modernity and moral stagnation. The film's closing sequence — depicting the two walking together through Cairo's streets — evokes both closure and continuity, suggesting that hope persists even amid corruption and despair.

Other subplots reinforce this theme of duality and redemption, particularly the story of Taha El Shazly, the young student turned extremist. His tragic trajectory from ambition to radicalization reflects the broader social disillusionment that feeds cycles of violence and repression. Al Aswany (2002, p. 91) interprets Taha's downfall as a manifestation of systemic failure — a critique of the political, religious, and educational structures that alienate youth and foster despair.

Marwan Hamed's adaptation captures these intertwined narratives with cinematic precision. The cross-cutting between characters and storylines creates a rhythm that mirrors the chaos and energy of Cairo itself. The final scenes juxtapose hope and tragedy, intimacy and distance — a visual metaphor for the Egyptian condition at the turn of the century.

Thus, both novel and film transcend mere social commentary; they stand as artistic reflections of Egypt's modern identity, oscillating between memory and change, between decay and the enduring desire for life.

Buthayna gradually became aware of her own body — a body desired by others, yet unreachable to those who longed for it. Those who sought to possess her ultimately failed, not because she refused them, but because they could not comprehend her pain. Her body thus became a battlefield between dignity and survival. Over time, she learned to use it as a means of negotiation in a harsh and patriarchal world.

Her encounter with the shop owner, Malak, was her first confrontation with exploitation. When he touched her without consent, she felt the profound humiliation of being reduced to a commodity. As Alaa Al Aswany writes, "Her body stiffened, her waist tightened, and she felt an unbearable disgust that burned deep inside her" (Al Aswany, 2002, p. 64). The film captures this moment with poignant restraint — the camera focuses on her frozen expression rather than the act itself, emphasizing the violence of perception rather than of action.

As time passes, Buthayna's quest for dignity becomes intertwined with her emotional exhaustion. Her relationships turn into silent negotiations between necessity and integrity. She continues to work in silence, her inner turmoil hidden behind gestures of resignation. Al Aswany notes, "Her silence became heavier than her words; she spoke only through the stillness of her face" (2002, p. 225). The film mirrors this psychology through subtle lighting and close framing. Director Marwan Hamed refrains from melodrama, instead relying on pauses, glances, and the rhythm of breathing to communicate Buthayna's pain. In one particularly powerful sequence, she stands alone by the window, half in shadow, torn between rebellion and surrender. Her silence fills the space; her stillness becomes an act of resistance.

Later, her relationship with Zaki El Dessouki takes on a redemptive dimension. Their union is not rooted in desire but in mutual recognition — two wounded souls seeking solace. As Al Aswany notes, "Each found in the other a mirror reflecting both shame and salvation" (2002, p. 281). The film renders this intimacy with tenderness: the camera lingers on their hands, trembling slightly before touching, suggesting both fear and reconciliation.

Throughout the adaptation, Hamed accentuates the tension between body and gaze. The cinematic frame becomes a moral space where sight and silence collide. Buthayna's body is never eroticized; rather, it becomes a site of power, suffering, and symbolic renewal.

In one of the final scenes, the two characters sit together on the balcony, overlooking the noisy city below. The lights of Cairo shimmer like distant stars, reflecting their fragile peace. Al Aswany writes, "They had both found, in their weariness, a strange serenity — as if forgiveness had briefly triumphed over despair" (2002, p. 284).

This reconciliation does not erase the social wounds that shaped them; rather, it exposes them with greater clarity. Both novel and film thus transform Buthayna from a victim into a metaphor for Egypt itself — a nation exploited yet unbroken, violated yet enduring in its humanity.

As Buthayna and Zaki lay side by side on the bed, the open door of the room seemed to symbolize both exposure and danger — a threshold between sin and salvation. Zaki's mind drifted to his past indulgences and to the emptiness that followed them. Al Aswany writes, "He felt a sharp and painful purity, as if her body had washed him clean of a long-accumulated guilt" (Al Aswany, 2002, p. 284).

4-2- homosexuality

At the same time, another storyline unfolds — that of Hatim Rasheed, the newspaper editor, whose secret homosexual life contrasts starkly with his public persona. His relationship with the police officer Abduh develops into a tragic entanglement of desire, domination, and class inequality. Al Aswany describes, "Each night, Abduh came to Hatim's house to escape his wife's screams and the filth of the streets, and each night he returned feeling both defiled and alive"(2002, p. 285).

The film adaptation treats this subplot with both audacity and restraint. Director Marwan Hamed avoids sensationalism, portraying Hatim not as a deviant but as a man trapped between instinct and repression, love and shame. The actor's performance conveys the fragility of a man torn by forbidden longing and social condemnation. In one unforgettable scene, Hatim looks at himself in the mirror as the camera lingers on his face, capturing the unbearable loneliness of his reflection.

The confrontation between Hatim and Abduh escalates into violence when Abduh, unable to reconcile his guilt with his dependence, kills Hatim in a moment of blind rage. The film stages this scene with chilling precision — not as a moral judgment, but as a tragedy born of human despair and societal hypocrisy.

Critic Ahmed Hamed (2006) observes that this subplot "embodies the tension between modernity and morality in Arab societies, where repression produces perversion rather than preventing it." The novel and film thus expose a social taboo long silenced in Egyptian culture, turning it into a mirror of collective fear and denial.

Al Aswany's treatment of homosexuality is neither purely moral nor sensational; rather, it is anthropological and psychological. He delves into the layers of Egyptian society where poverty, ignorance, and repression intersect to produce behaviors condemned by both religion and custom. The narrative suggests that moral corruption stems not only from individual sin but also from systemic injustice — a society that denies freedom while demanding virtue.

Quoting the Qur'an, Al Aswany evokes the moral framework that shapes public discourse: "Do you approach indecency such as no people among mankind have ever done before you?" (Qur'an, al-A'rāf 7:80).

He follows this with another verse:
“Indeed, you approach men with desire instead of women. Rather, you are a transgressing people.” (Qur’an, al-Shu‘arā’ 26:165–166).
By weaving these references into his narrative, Al Aswany does not preach but rather contextualizes — situating the phenomenon within the moral consciousness of his society. The homosexual relationship becomes a metaphor for the broader moral collapse of the elite and the alienation of modern man from both faith and self.
In this sense, Al Aswany transforms what could have been mere scandal into an inquiry into the nature of repression and moral contradiction. His portrayal avoids caricature, instead revealing a society that punishes symptoms while ignoring causes.
The film mirrors this approach. Through restrained cinematography and symbolic framing, it explores the intersection of desire and power. The character of Hatim is rendered neither villain nor victim but a tragic product of a divided moral order.
As critic Alaa Al Aswany himself wrote (2002, p. 79), “Art must confront what society fears most — not to justify it, but to reveal the pain that sustains it.”
The film provoked strong reactions from some audiences who expressed shock or disapproval toward certain sexual or violent scenes. However, as many critics noted, such controversy stemmed not from vulgarity but from the film’s daring attempt to confront social hypocrisy and moral repression through cinematic realism.
Al Aswany’s novel The Yacoubian Building had already sparked similar debates in literary circles upon its publication. The author defended his work, arguing that art must not avoid reality simply because it is uncomfortable. He stated, “Silence about corruption is far more obscene than exposing it” (Al Aswany, 2002, p. 52). The film, faithful to this principle, transformed the novel’s verbal realism into a visual one — using sound, movement, and image to depict the raw contradictions of Egyptian society.
Through Cairo’s streets, alleys, and rooftops, Al Aswany presents a living city torn between wealth and poverty, virtue and corruption. As he writes, “The city itself became the central character — beautiful yet wounded, noble yet violated” (2002, p. 52). The camera captures this duality vividly: advertisements for luxury brands share the same space with scenes of poverty, beggars, and child laborers. The juxtaposition of these images reinforces the novel’s central critique of moral and social decay.
Another major thread in both novel and film is the story of Taha El Shazly, the ambitious young man who dreams of joining the police academy but is rejected due to his father’s lowly occupation as a doorman. This rejection triggers a spiral of frustration that eventually leads him toward extremism. The novel depicts this transformation with psychological depth: “At that moment, something broke inside him — the belief that effort could overcome injustice died silently in his heart” (Al Aswany, 2002, p. 58).
Director Marwan Hamed visualizes this inner collapse with haunting precision. The scenes of Taha shaving his head and donning religious clothing mark his symbolic rebirth into radical ideology. The camera lingers on his face, capturing both fear and conviction. His journey is not portrayed as ideological fanaticism but as the desperate act of a humiliated young man seeking dignity in a world that denied him justice.
As Al Aswany (2002, p. 108) remarks, “When the door of hope closes, the door of vengeance opens.” This line encapsulates the essence of Taha’s tragedy — the transformation of social exclusion into violence, of humiliation into rebellion.

The film concludes this subplot not with moral condemnation but with tragic inevitability. The final scene of Taha's death, set against the echo of the call to prayer, juxtaposes faith and loss, suggesting that society itself bears responsibility for the creation of its own monsters.
Both novel and film thus converge in their humanistic vision: that extremism, corruption, and repression are not isolated evils but interwoven symptoms of a deeper crisis of identity and justice.
Hatim Rasheed's life spirals toward tragedy, culminating in his violent death inside The Yacoubian Building. His complex relationships — particularly with the police officer Abduh — reveal the destructive entanglement of desire, guilt, and social inequality. Hatim's longing for affection, combined with his inability to escape his privileged yet hollow world, drives him into a fatal emotional and moral collapse.
Al Aswany describes Hatim's demise in stark, cinematic language:
"He lay on the floor, blood flowing from his body, his eyes still open, staring at the ceiling as if trying to understand what had happened"
(Al Aswany, 2002, p. 110).
Director Marwan Hamed translates this moment onto the screen with chilling restraint. The camera remains fixed, refusing melodrama; silence dominates the frame, amplifying the horror through stillness. Critics have praised this sequence as one of the most powerful in contemporary Egyptian cinema, precisely because of its emotional economy — it suggests tragedy without spectacle.
The film's montage juxtaposes Hatim's death with shots of Cairo's morning awakening: the call to prayer echoes through the streets as ordinary life resumes. The moral indifference of the city underscores the novel's central idea — that individual suffering is swallowed by collective numbness.
Al Aswany's narrative does not isolate Hatim's tragedy; it parallels it with that of Taha El Shazly, whose own death represents another form of sacrifice — that of innocence destroyed by systemic injustice. As critic Al Aswany (2002, pp. 182–183) observes, "Both men die believing they are reclaiming their dignity, yet both are victims of a society that offers neither forgiveness nor redemption."
Through these mirrored deaths, the novel achieves a structural symmetry: two characters from opposite social classes meet the same fate — one through moral corruption, the other through ideological extremism. Both embody the fractures of modern Egypt, where faith, identity, and justice remain in perpetual conflict.
Al Aswany further deepens this moral dialectic by emphasizing that no one in his novel is purely innocent or purely guilty. Each character reflects a fragment of the nation's conscience — wounded, divided, and yearning for meaning.
In one of the novel's most poignant passages, Zaki El Dessouki says:
"I'm afraid, Abduh."
"Afraid of what?"
"Afraid of God, and afraid that He no longer forgives us as before."
(Al Aswany, 2002, p. 180).
This dialogue, brief yet profound, encapsulates the novel's philosophical depth — the recognition that corruption and faith coexist within the same human soul. The film underscores this tension through subtle religious imagery and emotional restraint.
Al Aswany's work thus transcends social critique to become a meditation on moral decay and spiritual loss in contemporary Egypt. It portrays a society neither purely secular nor devout, but one caught between rebellion and resignation — yearning for justice, yet trapped in cycles of oppression and silence.

Al Aswany portrays the private lives of his characters with an unflinching eye, revealing the contradictions between public morality and personal conduct. He insists that social hypocrisy — the obsession with appearances — is far more corrupting than individual sin. As he states, "A person's private life, however flawed, does not defile the nation; but public hypocrisy does" (Al Aswany, 2002, p. 253).

Taha El Shazly, the young man whose life once promised integrity and faith, begins to descend into spiritual turmoil. Initially motivated by humiliation and loss of purpose, he gradually becomes trapped in a cycle of guilt and religious zeal. His nights are filled with recitations of the Qur'an, his days with mechanical prayers and sterile rituals. Al Aswany notes, "He prayed not to speak with God, but to silence the voice of doubt inside him" (2002, p. 259).

The novel traces Taha's transformation from a devout believer into a fanatic consumed by vengeance. Each act of violence he commits deepens his sense of alienation. What began as faith turns into fury; what began as purity becomes punishment. The tragedy lies in his inability to distinguish between divine justice and human revenge.

Al Aswany's narrative empathy prevents Taha from becoming a mere symbol. The author humanizes his struggle — portraying him not as a villain, but as a victim of social exclusion and moral manipulation. His descent into extremism mirrors the decay of a society that denies opportunity while preaching virtue.

In one of the novel's most moving dialogues, Taha confides to his friend Abduh:
"Do you think God will forgive me, Abduh?"
"God is merciful, but you've chosen a hard path."
"He gave me this life, but took away my dignity. My father died humiliated; I can't die the same." (Al Aswany, 2002, p. 226–227).

These lines encapsulate Taha's existential dilemma — the conflict between divine mercy and human pride. His rebellion is not against faith itself, but against a world that turned faith into fear.

As the novel approaches its conclusion, Taha's internal war reaches its peak. On the eve of his suicide mission, he spends the night in prayer, torn between repentance and rage. Al Aswany describes, "He prayed with tears that burned his face, asking God for strength and silence" (2002, p. 328). The next morning, he joins the group preparing for the attack. The scene unfolds with tragic inevitability — no heroic glorification, only the quiet, fatal resolve of a man deceived into believing that death could restore meaning to his life.

The film adaptation renders this sequence with haunting restraint. The camera focuses on Taha's trembling hands as he fastens the explosive belt, while a distant call to prayer echoes faintly in the background. This juxtaposition of faith and death captures the novel's central paradox: that when hope is denied, belief itself can become a weapon.

Through Taha's story, both Al Aswany and Marwan Hamed expose not only the social roots of extremism but also its spiritual emptiness — a tragedy born of a society that preaches virtue yet perpetuates injustice.

Taha's decision to detonate the bomb and end his life mirrors Abduh's act of killing Hatim Rasheed — both driven by humiliation, repression, and a misguided search for redemption. In both cases, violence becomes the tragic substitute for speech, and destruction replaces confession. As Al Aswany writes, "Each sought purity through blood, and each found only death" (2002, p. 334). Thus, both narratives — Hatim's and Taha's — converge in a shared symbolic conclusion. Their deaths are not isolated tragedies but reflections of a deeper social ailment: the collapse of communication between individuals and the world around them. As critic Hamed (2006) observes, "The true horror lies not in death, but in silence."

Conclusion

Throughout The Yacoubian Building, Al Aswany constructs a microcosm of Egyptian society — an intricate mosaic of characters, voices, and intersecting destinies. His novel unites the personal and the political, the sacred and the profane, revealing a world where moral and social hierarchies have fractured beyond repair.

The film adaptation, directed by Marwan Hamed, succeeds in translating this complex narrative into a visual symphony. Through powerful cinematography and nuanced performances, it captures the full emotional spectrum of Al Aswany's world — from the corruption of the elite to the resilience of the marginalized. Each scene resonates with symbolic weight, intertwining image and meaning in a way that transcends conventional realism.

Despite controversy surrounding its explicit content, the film remains a landmark in modern Arab cinema for its honesty and artistic courage. It forced Egyptian society to confront the realities it preferred to ignore — sexuality, class oppression, religious hypocrisy, and political decay. Both the novel and the film thus emerge as acts of resistance against silence. They transform the repressed voices of Cairo's alleys and rooftops into a chorus of collective testimony. In doing so, The Yacoubian Building becomes more than a story; it becomes a document of its time — a mirror reflecting the anxieties, contradictions, and aspirations of contemporary Egypt.

Alaa Al Aswany's achievement lies in his ability to blend literature's introspective depth with cinema's visual immediacy. His work bridges the gap between the spoken and the unspoken, between what society says and what it hides.

Ultimately, both Al Aswany and Hamed remind us that art's highest purpose is not to moralize but to reveal — to give voice to what is silenced and to transform pain into understanding. As Al Aswany concludes, "The wound may heal, but its scar remains a memory of truth" (2002, p. 328).

The controversies surrounding The Yacoubian Building were inevitable; as with any bold work, it divided readers and viewers alike. While some condemned its daring exposure of taboos, others praised its honesty and courage. Al Aswany himself faced a wave of criticism from conservative voices who accused him of undermining traditional values. Yet, as he argued, "Art's duty is not to comfort the public, but to awaken it."

Despite these tensions, both the novel and its cinematic adaptation achieved extraordinary success, reaching millions of readers and viewers across the Arab world. They opened the door for a new generation of Arab writers and filmmakers to explore the complex relationship between literature, cinema, and social change.

The Yacoubian Building remains one of the most significant cultural works in modern Arabic arts — a profound depiction of Egypt's political, moral, and social transformation at the turn of the century. Its resonance continues to shape Arab narrative imagination, bridging the gap between word and image, tradition and modernity, ethics and freedom.

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