

The dentist and the story that shook Egypt

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Dr Alaa Al Aswany's first published novel, The Yacoubian Building, provoked fury from the Egyptian regime, but has captured the imagination of the Egyptian public. Gehan Shabaan asks the bestselling author about his work and the film adaptation coming to Britain this month.

Any novel portraying Egyptian society as highly class divided and deeply corrupted by dictatorship was always likely to be controversial. But what special problems have you encountered, because The Yacoubian Building was both very popular and controversial?

I had written many literary works before The Yacoubian Building, but was always refused publishing. I have been trying to publish three of my works since 1998 but the General Egyptian Authority for Books [the state's publishing house] always turned them down. Although there is no official censorship on literature in Egypt, there is always a discrete informal censorship that publishers fear.

When I wrote The Yacoubian Building, I didn't even bother taking it to the government. I started out by going to Lebanon, but some friends advised me to reconsider. The fear was that if the book was published outside Egypt, any controversy would completely prevent it from getting back in.

So I went straight to Merit publishing house, who are also personal friends. Merit got very excited about it, and except for a few consultants who were worried, the rest quickly took the book on. It was a strong and admirable stance for them to take. The book was finally published in 2002.

It made great sales - in two or three weeks the first edition was completely sold out. It made the highest sales of any Arabic novel in the Arab world, and it was the book's popularity that actually protected it. Those people who enjoyed reading it are the very same who prevented it from being kept away from the market.

The situation regarding freedom of expression is very particular in Egypt. We are allowed to talk so long as we take ideas no farther than that. People outside don't seem to understand this. They either perceive us as a true "democracy" or they perceive us as a model of a 1960s Latin American dictatorship - we are neither.

We have a disguised dictatorship that gives us a limited scope where we can "talk among ourselves" about anything we want to. In this light there is little danger of a book being completely prohibited, prevented or even stopped. Cinema, on the other hand, is another story.

Why did you change your publisher the second time around?

I told my publishers I wanted a cheaper "popular edition" of the book. I felt it should be accessible

and affordable to all classes and strata of society. However, the publisher felt the proceeds were necessary for the running of the publishing house, and thus we agreed that I should accept another offer from Madbouly publishing house.

We are still on very good terms. Although Madbouly lowered the price, I couldn't seem to get it to be as affordable as I would have wished. Merit's stance at taking both this book and my second one, Neeran Sadeeqa (Friendly Fires), and publishing it at the very beginning is one that should never be forgotten.

How did you feel when you first saw the film adaptation of your novel?

I liked it. I didn't attend any of the shooting sessions, and I didn't read the script. I just chose to step aside and let them do their work.

To be fair, those who produced the film must have had greater censorship concerns than I had. So, to portray scenes of torture carried out by agents of the regime is quite a milestone in terms of the boldness of Egyptian cinema. Also technically and artistically I felt it was pretty well done.

However, there were a number of things changed that I would have had ideological differences with, but once again this might have been an effort to avoid censorship or merely a difference in the producer's opinion or perspective on things.

One example is the scene where the militant Islamist youth shoots the state security official who had tortured him in prison. In the movie, when the youth was shot on killing the official, the blood of both flowed and mixed together. The implication here is that both are victims. I would have disagreed with this. I don't believe that a torturer can ever be a victim. In fact I know a number of people who refused posts with the police or state security in particular so as not to be put in a position where they would witness or participate in such atrocities. Thus I would differ with the producers on this particular scene. However, this could have been their attempt to avoid censorship, or merely a different take on the matter.

Another scene was the murder of the homosexual. In my book he was killed by his original partner, and not by a new random partner whose intention was to rob him.

But had it not been for the big names of the script writer, the producer and the actors in the film, it might never have seen the light of day to start with. The government, on the other hand, was quite unhappy with the results.

You can trace the government's reaction through a number of regime-sympathetic magazines and newspapers. In some of these cases the reaction was actually positive when the film was first released and then suddenly turned very harshly against it. I don't believe the government expected people's reactions to be as favourable to the film as they were. The film made phenomenal revenues, and actually had its run extended in the cinemas. As it was released at a time when most films were very commercial and trite, 70 percent of viewers attended the film more than once.

The government reaction can be traced through Rose al-Yousef (a state weekly magazine) which was very unhappy with the movie. As leading opposition writer Abdel Halim Kandil put it, "The book was an exceptional phenomenon in Arabic literature; the movie, however, became Egypt's most powerful opposition party."

Pages and pages in government-sympathetic magazines and newspapers were written against me. Although the main theme which turned the government against me was corruption, they disguised their opposition as one against the theme of homosexuality. The claims were that we are a

conservative society, a Muslim society, and portraying such ideas was against the set of morals and values we adhere to.

It was when I was first personally attacked for the book that people became aware of my existence. "Isn't this the guy who went to a French school, and then continued his education in the States? What would he know about Egypt?" they would rant. MPs from the ruling National Democratic Party actually wanted to stop the movie under claims of the moral harm that portraying homosexuality as such might cause, and also under the claims that I was ruining the country's reputation.

What I find most interesting is that the very same publications which praised the movie at first shamelessly wrote against it once the MPs turned against it. There was a stark contrast in their commentaries. All this, however, came as a reaction to the movie. The book itself didn't receive as much negative criticism.

The book deals sensitively with the motivations of Islamic militants. What was your thinking when you created these characters?

I never think or deal with my writing or characters on a theoretical level. A novel is something very vivid. It shouldn't be limited or contained to the theoretical realm, but draw very much upon our own personal experiences, sensations or emotions.

I belong to a generation which witnessed the dwindling of the socialist left in universities and the growth and expansion of Islamism in its place. By my second year of university I was witnessing the clashes of both political groups.

I wrote for months for publications that were shared between the leftists and Islamists, until with time the latter's ideas became more popular and I no longer found a place for myself in those institutions.

One of the things I also learnt at the time is that people are not born extremists or terrorists - they are pushed to become such. Another important lesson I learnt through my political experience at university, but more importantly as a doctor, is that you cannot treat symptoms - you can only treat a disease. You cannot treat a fever without understanding if the fever is a result of brain damage or a common cold. You must at first diagnose and treat the reasons behind it.

The same applies to politics - and particularly politics in the Arab world - unless tyranny is confronted and dealt with, poverty, corruption and injustice, and extremism will always prevail. People must feel secure in a society where their rights are protected and justice prevails, otherwise they will always resort to such means to protect themselves.

Drama in Egypt, however, has been restricted to reflecting and portraying these "symptoms" as the problems we have as a society. Terrorists have been portrayed as psychopaths who want to hurt others, void of any social context, analysis or reason behind such behaviour. This was particularly true in the 1990s, a time when the government exercised an aggressive clampdown on Islamism, and terrorism prevailed quite widely. This is all for political reasons, for unless terrorism was traced to psychopathic behaviour, or poverty, it would mean it might have been their responsibility, which, of course, was unheard of.

The sympathetic portrayal of gays in the book provoked a storm of criticism in some quarters. How do you evaluate the debate which the book provoked on these issues?

Once again it was not really the book that gave rise to this controversy. It was the film. Novel readers are a particularly elitist audience. They are not in general a public mass as cinema viewers

are. Thus as long as this type of reader remains inside their little elite triangle they may talk and write about all they please; the government does not feel they are within its mandate.

The book actually taught us this - as long as we write about controversial issues, the government does not really approach us. It also proved good provocative literature can move beyond the page and affect wider audiences. The theme of homosexuality is, however, a very popular one in Arabic literature. Al-Jahiz, an Iraqi writer and a pillar of Arabic literature in the 8th century, dealt with homosexuality in depth in his writings.

In literature, we don't initiate any traditions. I didn't start looking at homosexuality sympathetically, nor did I approach it in any way that was foreign or new to popular Arabic literature. When you think of it, the theme wasn't even completely new to Egyptian cinema. It was portrayed before by directors like Youssef Chahine and Inas El Degheidy and never really raised as much havoc as it did this time. In that light I believe the regime used this particular theme as an excuse to attack the film.

After all, you are dealing with a regime which seems to have failed at everything except misleading the populace through false propaganda which they call the media, and oppression, which they have named security. These are the two main fields where their experiences seem to have accumulated. Thus where the film sheds light on torture and corruption - realities under which we are living now - the regime has attempted to divert attention to homosexuality as an immoral theme.

Literature is an art, a humanity. It's about understanding people and expressing realities, and not at all about making moral judgements. Thus, when I present homosexuality with a sympathetic or humane perspective, I present how a particular group of people suffer as part of an intolerant society.

In some areas of the literary world political engagement by authors is disparaged. What is your view of this issue?

I view this as fleeing from one's responsibility as a citizen. Art is all about loyalty and belonging - art changes humanity as it is part of it. It defends minorities and speaks on behalf of those whose voices are muted.

Before you are a writer you are a citizen, and your loyalty and responsibility should be to your nation and your people. For the last 15 years I have written on a voluntary basis for almost all of the oppositional papers in Egypt. If I wasn't a novelist I would have still written for these papers.

My role or duty as a citizen of this country is to do all that I can, all that is within my power or capacity to contribute to a change for the better, to make the regime accountable if possible. Just because I'm a writer I am not freed from this responsibility. On the contrary, I have an extra privilege and should use it as such. I cannot only think of myself, but should also think of others, and how I can use this privilege to contribute to the world around me.

You can't say that, just because one is a writer or an author, one should refrain from political engagement or from having political stances. In my opinion those who attempt to disengage themselves politically actually do so out of fear, and not on account of a higher ground they have achieved as writers or artists.

Anyone can be an activist, but a writer or an artist has a more refined mission. I'm not saying singers should sing about their political ideas. On the contrary, art is about affecting a deeper, more humane, change than politics. As an artist, a citizen, a human being, you belong to this country - you are of these people.

You are either against injustice, or, if you choose to stay quiet, you are for it. There are no neutral grounds. I know a number of artists, some big names, who feel comfortable making strong critiques of the regime. But once they are on television or featured in public spaces, they renounce these opinions.

Literature is not about chemistry and equations - it is about existence and feeling. If I feel strongly and passionately, if I am sensitive to the world around me, then this will show through my art. I feel liberated. When we don't hold true to those stances and fight for them we are ruined. We are corrupted and polluted. This pollution prevails on a personal level, but it prevails on the level of our art as well.

P.S.

*Thanks to Alia Mosallam for translating. The new paperback edition of The Yacoubian Building is published by Harper Perennial at £7.99. The film adaptation directed by Marwan Hamed will be released on 14 September.

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