

Homosexuality and *The Yacoubian Building*

by Catherine J. Johnson

Author Alaa Al Aswany uses homosexuality as an integral theme in his novel *The Yacoubian Building*. The novel is largely about sexuality in general—the repression of it as a religious and cultural construct, the use of it to manipulate and punish, and as an expression of love. This paper will provide a brief analysis on how active and passive homosexual roles affect lives in this controversial novel.

The reader is told early on that homosexuals are “outside the laws and norms of society” (36). With the introduction of Chez Nous, a pub and meeting place for homosexuals, we learn of prevailing attitudes in modern day Cairo. The proprietor of the pub “is a victim of that same condition [homosexuality]” (35) and does not allow “indecent behaviour” (36) among his patrons because of the plainclothes officers who visit. If these authorities witnessed “any scandalous act” (37) they would blackmail the pub owner into paying even higher bribes. We are informed that “kudyana” (36) is the term used for a passive homosexual and that these men are given girl’s names. The term “barghal” (36) denotes an active homosexual.

The Islamic view of homosexuality as deviant and sinful is deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the people. The character Hatim Rasheed, a gay man in his sixties, blames his “condition” on his parents. He feels their neglect of him during his boyhood led him to submit to their gay servant Idris—that he would not normally have “sunk this low” (182) as to have had an intimate relationship with the man. Hatim was nine years old so it was, from a Western standpoint, rape. He did not blame Idris though, only loved him. The relationship lasted for years until some of the servants were let go, including Idris. Hatim’s grief was such that he did poorly at school and thereafter “plunged into his tumultuous homosexual life” (76).

Hatim was a kudyana from the outset—but as a renowned editor-in-chief of a Cairo newspaper, and “an aristocrat of ancient lineage” (37) he commanded respect. Even with a staff of over seventy, there is only one incidence of Hatim being a target of harassment and he smoothly stops it with his acid manner. Hatim was a “conservative homosexual...he [did] not sacrifice his dignity, put powder on his face, or stoop to using provocative ways” (37). He dressed in an acceptable manner, somewhere between elegance and femininity. “He is serious and stern... without the slightest movement or glance that might hint at his tendencies (179),” and so staff, friends and family respect his “forceful, compelling and professional image” (), though it is tinged with revulsion and contempt.

Hatim, as a passive partner with power, faces difficulties in his relationship with young Abd Rabbuhl, the active partner who is both poor and powerless. The relationship began one night as Abd was leaving work downtown. Hatim wandering the streets drunk and lusting, seduced him, gave him money and took him home. After that first encounter Abd “made many violent attempts” (77) to end the relationship but Hatim persisted. The older man knew from experience that young homosexuals just starting out felt full of sin and began to resent and finally hate the passive partner who seduced them. The relationship between these characters illustrates well the problems encountered within a homosexual relationship in present day Cairo.

It could be argued that passive and active roles are equally problematic in heterosexual couples. Generally speaking, this is true. Within the context of *The Yacoubian Building*, the difference lies in faith. Not only is sodomy against the law in Arab culture, it is an entrenched belief that homosexual behaviour is against *the law of God* and will be punished. Abd strives to be a devout Muslim and so lives an ongoing struggle with his physical desire for Hatim, his sin in the eyes of God, his need of the money that Hatim gives him, and his shame before his wife. Abd sexually assaults her “to punish her for knowing about his homosexuality” (155). His keeping up the pretence of being “Hatim Rasheed’s cook” (154) in front of friends and neighbours who know otherwise seems morally exhausting.

The rape of the character Taha, a devout young Muslim student, illustrates again how active and passive homosexual roles affect lives in *The Yacoubian Building*. That his captors chose sodomy as their method of torture and forced Taha, a heterosexual, to behave like a woman, went deeper than humiliation. Sheikh Shakir informed Taha that “the regime’s true objective in torturing Islamists isn’t just to hurt them physically...they want to destroy them psychologically...” (169). When Taha began telling the sheikh that his captors violated his honour, the sheikh twice told him to stop. The reader assumes he could not bear to hear it.

Even as a devout Muslim, Taha is not able to forgive his torturers. Such was the depth of the trauma. Because he was forced into a passive role he may have been unable to allow God to help him, feeling instead that he had betrayed God. In Taha’s training under the sheikh he learns that “our feelings toward [men] should be determined by the degree to which they observe God’s Law” (115). As sodomy goes directly against God’s law, this likely contributed to Taha’s inability to forgive his torturers and his subsequent act of vengeance.

The homosexual roles in *The Yacoubian Building* involve a considerable amount of blame. Hatim blames his parents for his homosexuality, Abd blames his homosexual weakness on Hatim, Abd’s wife blames Hatim for coercing her husband, Taha blames his torturers for his

vengeance. The characters do not accept responsibility for themselves. The ultimate blame is when Abd's child dies and, as a father, he focuses all of his rage and grief on Hatim, killing him.

Although *The Yacoubian Building* is not an uplifting novel, Al Aswany gives voice to the homosexual community in Cairo through strong characterization. The reader is privy to just such things as how passive and active roles affect people's lives, and how strongly Islam's hold can be on believers. The book is a symbol of freedom for homosexuals and is a tribute to emotion as a universal condition.