

## Cultural Critique of Fictive Ethnicity and Human Rights Exclusion in Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building*

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### ABSTRACT

The current study postulates cultural critique of fictive ethnicity, politics of representation and violation of human rights propounded by Balibar, Hall and Nayar in Egyptian national literature. The rationale to select Hall's notion of Cultural Studies and Nayar's Human Rights discourse is that both the theoretical standpoints complement each other as they have shared perspective on the notion of identity, being fluid not fixed, representation of the others, and cultural mobility. Moreover, cultural studies and human rights discourse share perception regarding politics of representation by the ruling elites which maneuvers the status of the others, mitigate their significance for the society and exclude them from their rightful positions under the notion of fictive ethnicity or univocal and homogenous ethnicity. Etienne Balibar's notion of fictive ethnicity generates imaginary univocal identity of a nation-state through national narratives based on particular historical events, heroes and purported collective linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious markers. Therefore, the present study demolishes the myth of monolithic fictive ethnicity as the researchers find its counterpart in Stuart Hall's standpoint on identity of individuals which is not univocal but is based on the difference with the other. The aftermath of the myth of monolithic ethnicity is the supremacy of the elite at the cost of exclusion and sufferings of the others on which Pramod K. Nayar's study of human rights is utilised to arise collective consciousness to the ethical dimension of the rights of people. Keeping in view the mechanism of rights, the emotions of empathy, denial and resentment lead to activism to regain dignity, identity and selfhood. With the help of Balibar, Hall and Nayar's points of reference, an Egyptian author's Alaa Al Aswany's fictional work titled *The Yacoubian Building* is analysed and discussed. The selected text challenges the notion of univocal and monolithic national unity in their nation state and expose cracks in national narrative by highlighting gender-based discrimination, class based economic inequality, exploitation of religious minorities and suppression of regional voices and identities.

**KEY WORDS:** fictive ethnicity, cultural studies, human rights violation, abuse, politics of representation

### 1- INTRODUCTION

The current research investigates how do sociocultural representations by the hegemonic order under the plea of fictive ethnicity exclude the marginalised sections of the society from the mainstream social structures resulting in violation of human rights in nation-state of Egypt. In ancient empires as well as modern nation-states, fictive ethnicity has been used to unite people, arise patriotism among them, glorify nation, obliterate historical differences and create a mirage of equality in every field of life. Ethnicity is produced in a way that it does not look fictive. Ideological and repressive state apparatuses are used to manipulate socio-cultural representation by excluding the less privileged sections of society from main power structures. Under the influence of intellectual and cultural hegemony so created, working class and subalterns are misled into believing the ideology of the ruling elites. This intellectual and cultural hegemony of the nation-state regime hides true relationship between the rulers and the ruled, the oppressor and the oppressed. According to George Ritzer (2012), "Gramsci argued that cultural hegemony described how the dominant class, specifically the bourgeoisie, dominates cultural discourses and symbols, ... maintains psychological control, and consequently its dominant position in society" (p. 1) and counterhegemony challenges bourgeois' "hegemonic position" (p. 1).

Egyptian literature examines the ontologies and epistemologies of Egyptian national narrative interwoven with power relations of bourgeois, despotic or democratic rule, complex human identity, cultural belongingness and historical past. It has undergone a wide range of shifts over different eras. The prolific Egyptian writers have made Egyptian literature a complete documentation of Egyptian history with its religious writings, biographies,

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autobiographies, letters, wisdom literature, essays, court records, philosophical works etc. The main writers of Egyptian literature include Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfalouti, Taha Hussein, Naguib Mahfouz, Nawal El Saadawi, Alaa Al Aswany and Yaqub Sannu etc.

The selected Egyptian fiction Alaa Al Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building* offers a critique of national literature of Egypt by vocalizing the muted and ignored narratives and voices. The work under study highlights and projects socio-economic, gender, ethnic and religious discrimination under the garb of fictive unity. Egyptian society is dominantly muslim and patriarchal where political and religious groups are among the major power centers. The society is compartmentalised into the privileged and poverty-ridden classes, male chauvinism and female objectification, devotees and heathens, political administrators and masses, humanised and dehumanised. Egyptian national narrative seeks to define country's history by documentation of its temples, tombs, legends, myths and cultural rites. Abolition of monarchy in 1952 military revolution is also depicted through literary texts. According to Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon, Cultural studies is a locus of link between "literary text and social context" (in Waugh, 2007, p. 248). Stuart Hall signifies more the role of text in encompassing multiple forms and practices of culture which are related to ethnicity, religion, politics, marxism and power etc. Hence, literature and cultural studies are interconnected since ages because various dimensions and stages of culture are well-represented in literary discourse.

Alaa Al Aswany is a writer, critic and political activist of Egypt. Born in 1957 in a family of writers and intellectuals in Cairo, Aswany's fiction deals with the activism to change individual lives through the change in socio-political scenario. Therefore, he exudes a "nexus between the intimate and the public to underline the subversive character of the personal within the political" (Elmarsafy, 2012, p. 15). His major works include *The Yacoubian Building* (2006), *Chicago* (2007), *The Automobile Club of Egypt* (2015) and *The Republic of False Truths* (2021). His works inform the readers about the complex Egyptian society and the tough life of its citizens which indicate towards Aswany's keen observation of socio-political issues.

Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building* (2006) presents the critique of fictive unity of nation state and exploitation of the marginalised section of Egyptian society from social, cultural, economic and political dimensions etc. The corruption of the professionals, deceitful and dishonest relationships, exploitation of poor and abuse of power are the prevalent themes in this novel. In patriarchal Egyptian society, men and women do not enjoy equal social status. Men are womanisers and females are exploited and subdued by men.

The theoretical postulates of Balibar's fictive ethnicity, Stuart Hall's Cultural Studies and Pramod K Nayar's Human Rights are dovetailed to analyse the cultural norms, identity disintegration, power politics, gender imparity, cultural flux and perennial violence through the politics of exclusion, victimization, social wrongs, and resistance in the work under study. When people live together in a community, there is a high chance of clash of interests. This conflict is sometimes called the de-centring of the subject from its socio-cultural position and personal self. This crisis of identity and double displacement – both on socio-cultural and personal planes – leads to the politics of exclusion and violation of human rights in a society where individuals are forced to be the outcasts in some specific phenomena of life.

## 2- Literature Review

The review of relevant works of critics and theorists on literary work, cultural studies and human rights help the researchers to find gap for our research and its contemporary relevance.

The role of culture and cultural studies is pivotal in raising social consciousness among masses as culture is not created by individuals but by the whole society and community. Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1975) in "Problems of National Art and Culture" defines culture as a system of living life with certain ideologies which can be considered as thoughts, values and practices to perform in a society. Rasul Bakhsh Rais (2017) in "Culture and Cultural Politics" discusses the significance of social values, belief system, festivities, celebrities, heroes, language, thought processes, dresses, arts, literature and music etc which evolve over the period of time to fabricate a distinct culture. For him, a culture continuously changes and grows gradually through the material progression, urbanization, industrialization and social connectivity in a globalized world. The identity and culture of a nation is different from others as to promote its individual identity, a nation promotes its culture, struggles, heritage and nationalist characteristics etc. National cultural narratives highlight national superiority, promote national ideology and expand the canvas of political horizon to excel from the rival states and cultures.

Cultural studies underscores a broad ambit of topics which makes it "a potentially agile practice of inquiry, able to engage itself with new phenomena as they emerge on the world landscape" (Ang, 2020, p. 287). Professor John Nguyet Erni (2015) in "Convergence or Collision – Human Rights with or without Cultural Studies" articulates the problematics of corresponding link between cultural studies and human rights. He analyses cultural studies as a study of persistently changing and mobilising contemporary socio-political arena which needs to open

space for human rights paradigm. Human rights is a discursive construct of those who seek justice against surveillance, state brutality and discrimination with minority, homosexuals and disabled people etc.

Social changes in any society affect its literature. Similarly, Egyptian writing has undergone substantial social transformation after World War II. Linda Istanbuli (2010) in "The margin and the center: a study in selected works from contemporary Egyptian novels" discusses the transformation of the fictional interests of Egyptian writers in the distinct lifestyle of people belonging to margin and center in terms of geographical strains. In the late eighties and nineties, Egyptian authors started to reject the bourgeois frame that had surrounded the portrayal of contemporary Egyptians. To demonstrate the focus of the study, Istanbuli analyzes three Egyptian novels: Hamdi Abu Golayyel's *Thieves in Retirement* (2002), Alaa Al Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building* (2006), and Mohammed El-Fakharani's *Fasil Lil Dahsha (The Shocking Line, 2007)*. The center's powerful forces exploit the marginalized with their fear of isolation and victimization. Al Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building* narrates money and authority as two leading motives affecting the lives of all characters in different ways. By El-Hagg Mohammed Azzam and Kamal El Fouli, money and authority are portrayed metaphorically. Moreover, urbanization has led to societal issues like unemployment, poverty, traffic jams, squatters, pollution, slums, criminal organizations and shortage of electricity. This study reveals that the marginalized and powerless carry disgust within their hearts and souls, but vengeance is wreaked only by few.

The interplay and intersection of politics, freedom, religion and spirituality in *The Yacoubian Building* by Alaa Al Aswany is quite noticeable. Desiree Lewis (2013) states that the novel highlights the contradictions and complexities of Egyptian society, which are not only characterized by a rich cultural heritage, but also by poverty, censorship, and state violence. She argues that the novel critiques the limited political freedom in Egypt and foregrounds the struggles of political activists and intellectuals who are fighting for democracy and human rights in a repressive political climate. Lewis notes that the novel portrays religion as both a source of comfort and a tool of oppression. The characters, grappling with questions of purpose and identity, often turn to spiritual practices, morality and belief system.

The selected review of literature establishes that there is a gap of study from our dimension of research upon Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building*. In the next heading, we have explained the research paradigm of fictive ethnicity, cultural studies and human rights to study the chosen Egyptian text.

### 3- Research Paradigm

This qualitative enquiry is descriptive, analytical and interpretive. The method of textual analysis is used to analyse and interpret the selected texts. Theoretical framework consists of the notion of fictive ethnicity, cultural studies, and study of human rights.

Etienne Balibar projects the concept of fictive ethnicity to create imaginary equality and unity among the plural political and social groups. This unity is false as all the social groups are not treated equally but discriminately which questions the identity of various ethnic groups on the basis of gender, patriarchy, religion and class. According to Balibar (1991), the propounder of the notion of fictive ethnicity, fictive ethnicity is inevitable to consolidate and sustain modern nation-state. It is mainly based on the assumptions of "possessing of itself an identity of origins, culture and interests which transcends individuals and social conditions" (p. 96). Furthermore, fictive ethnicity is inevitable to project patriotism; "for, without it, the nation would appear precisely only as an idea or an arbitrary abstraction; patriotism's appeal would be addressed to no one" (p. 96). Unity is evolved through manipulated socio-cultural representations highlighting commonalities and suppressing/excluding gender, class, religious and ethnic divisions. The study is a critique of this notion as all the social groups are not treated equally and similar treatment is not given to the deprived and others.

The researchers have taken into consideration Stuart Hall's notions of culture, culturalism, structuralism, identity, ideology and ideological struggle, hegemony, dominance and resistance in the transdisciplinary field of cultural studies to criticise Balibar's fictive ethnicity. In a multicultural society, we find different cultures e.g. popular culture, minority cultures and sub-cultures which represent ongoing change in identities and social reconfigurations. Stuart Hall (2016), in "Culture, Resistance, and Struggle", talks about cultural and ideological forms of resistance, ideological formations and their relationship with classes. Cultural resistance emerges when one group or culture has to confront hegemonic culture for its survival. Groups can survive without being in the leading positions but if a group has to enter into cultural negotiations with the hegemonic formations, then it must have strength and a degree of organization. This moment of negotiation is the field of cultural resistance or contestation. Moreover, as ideology is propagated by language so language with its connotative meanings becomes a representation of a specific ideology of a certain epoch. Hence, ideological articulation is connected with the language of rights having new connotations.

Pramod K. Nayar's *Human Rights and Literature: Writing Rights* states that the cultural texts narrate and authenticate the best sources to define and study humans, their rights, violation of the rights and voices raised for them. According to the roles of the human beings in their societies and cultures, they are demarcated into the models of

“the human, the abhuman and the subhuman” (2016, p. xi): the abhuman can be defined as someone who has powers beyond human capacity as some vampire, monster or alien with supernatural powers whereas the subhuman is the stage lower than humans in which their abode, behavior and treatment from others is worse than normal people. In the selected text, we find various examples of people treated at subhuman level. The rights of humans, either granted/fulfilled or denied/unfulfilled, are best portrayed and debated in literary cultural texts especially in fiction as their center is the man with whom readers or the audience feel empathy, connection and mutual compassion. In the socio-political arena, it is essential to highlight the stories which project denial of human rights as a critique to fictive ethnicity so that the issues would be debated, empathized and resolved.

#### 4- Critique of Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building*

The current study analyses Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building* (2006) in the light of theoretical framework documented in the previous heading. The writer foregrounds the radical uprising in Egypt mobilised by the corruption and violence in 1990s. *The Yacoubian Building* exposes “the rabid corruption of government officials, the dire economic poverty of the lower classes, the rampant Islamic radicalization of disenfranchised Egyptian youths, and the sexual frustration that plague an entire society” (Karim Tartoussieh, 2012, p. 158). Human beings are not given equal rights; hence, human rights violations in Egyptian society, prisons, and sexual harassment of women are some of the novel's main preoccupations. Moreover, the selected text exposes religious hypocrisy of men, poverty, political corruption, human rights abuses, such as manipulated elections, forced abortions, state-sponsored torture, power abuse, gender discrimination and sexual exploitation etc. in Egyptian society and its culture. Overall, *The Yacoubian Building* encompasses socio-cultural and political scenario of the nation-state.

Textual analysis of *The Yacoubian Building* contains a critique of the markers of fictive unity consolidated through manipulated socio-cultural representation of the people, exclusion of the less privileged from mainstream power structures and the violation of their rights. The selected work also reflects upon characters, their ambition for struggle and survival in the face of monolithic unity. The setting of the novel is 1937-built Yacoubian building on Talaat Harb Street. Until the 1952 Revolution toppled Muhammad Ali's monarchy, Egypt's upper stratum resided in this grand building, a symbol of the era's glitz and optimism. The building's diverse occupants reflect the political and social divides that had developed since the revolution of 1952. Low-income families and new entrepreneurs took up residence in the building's former storage areas on the roof. “The roof community thus coming to resemble any other popular community in Egypt. The children run around all over the roof barefoot and half naked and the women spend the day cooking, holding gossip sessions ... and, frequently, quarreling” (Aswany, 2006, p. 14). Previously, the aristocrats, Jews and foreigners had occupied the opulent flats in the building and now the building's occupants are aristocrats and the emerging urban bourgeoisie. The building functions as a stage for much of the novel's events, providing a familiar backdrop that presents several issues endemic to the tightly packed urban society in which the characters live.

It is quite evident that Egyptian masses are not living in harmony with each other and they are not a unity but are split into various sections of society. As on political plane, Mubarak's military despotism has widened the gulf between feudal autocracy and bourgeois entrepreneurship which results in political unrest in the country. Egyptian cultural identity is bifurcated into elite culture and subaltern culture. Elites can never understand the plight of poor. This is hinted when Busayna tries to comfort Taha after he got rejected in his test for recruitment to police department due to his poor background, she tells him to face the reality that “this country doesn't belong to us, it belongs to people who have money ... but if you stay poor Taha, they'll walk all over you” (p. 59).

Culture is a manifestation of living style of an entire society that encompasses the people's conduct, manners, clothes, language, and religion. The society depicted in Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building* presents Egyptian nation-state which is culturally barren with bleak situation of promiscuity, politically fixed elections, dictatorship, extortions, privations and radical Islamisation. Resultantly, the middle class is near extinction, leaving no hook to connect both the rich and the poor; meanwhile the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The educated people are shorn of any impetus to work diligently as they do not find any advancement in their social and financial status. John R. Bradley (2012) states that Egyptian radical Islamists “prey on the vulnerable and the destitute abandoned by the system. The urbane and educated are trampled underfoot by mafia-like thugs...” (p. 2). The unique lives and challenges of the Yacoubian building's occupants, who reflect numerous social, economic, and cultural facets of Egyptian society, are shown through various characters in the novel. As Derek Attridge (2011) puts it, “every character is engaged in a struggle to achieve fulfilment, whether it be sexual, financial, political, or professional...” (p. 121).

The power dynamics between male and female characters determine their lifestyles. Al Aswany investigates sexual assaults and economic inequalities in a male chauvinistic society for women through the character of Busayna. Taha's beloved is a young attractive lady who lives on the roof of Yacoubian building with her family. After her

father's death, she is responsible for taking care of her family's finances. She is struggling to find work without giving sexual favours, but reality is harsh. Busayna represents and depicts identity of all such Egyptian females who feel helpless when they are mistreated by male bosses. She has left many jobs to keep her honor safe and has been ridiculed for being a chaste woman. She has experienced the same humiliation during her employment as "secretary in a lawyer's office, assistant to a women's hairdresser, trainee nurse at a dentist's. Every job she left for the same reason and after going through the same rigmarole" (Aswany, 2006, p. 41). But her poor financial condition forces her to allow her boss to fondle and grope her body as her friend Fifi and mother coerced her into thinking that the boss can masturbate on her but he will not cross the limits. She gets frightened and shares with her mother her fears. "How can I look after myself when faced with a boss who opens his fly?" (p. 42). She feels compelled to humiliate and degrade herself. Poverty is a major theme in the novel since it follows sexual harassment and other problems for everyone. Talal, Busayna's Syrian boss, treats her scandalously: "Talal ... never raised his eyes from her chest and body while he spoke" (p. 44). Talal talks to her, but shows little respect for her space and disregards her personal limits. His predation on women demonstrates his propensity to see them as objects of desire instead of human beings deserving of respect and dignity. It focuses on the chronic problem of gender-based harassment and objectification that women frequently experience.

Men and women do not stand on the same pedestal in Egyptian society. A rich man can exploit any woman he wants that is the indication of male entitlement which is fueled by gender-based power dynamics as well. He has the views that these women are only there to bear children, raise them and serve their husbands. This is the limiting view that restrict women to household chores only while ousting them from public domain. Aswany, through his protagonist Zaki Bey, has objectified women as abhumans – deities or devils – both the ways, women are not considered as humans but as appeasers of his carnal desires. He is acquainted with the women of all classes: from royal blood to the beggars including king's relatives, University and school students, social butterflies, oriental dancers, housemaids, peasants, and wives of dignitaries. He claims that he can appease any women from ethereal softness to the one having unquenchable "satanic lust" (Aswany, 2006, p. 7). The author charts out his sixty-five years journey but there are no accomplishments to be prized owing to his immoral ways, "the feebleness of his ambition and his obsession with sensual pleasure" (p. 5) though he was a foreign qualified engineer and a son of a prime minister with large possessions with future prospects of becoming a politician.

Elite class enjoys political, ideological, and economic hegemony whereas the poor class perishes in adversity and privations which underscores critique of fictive ethnicity. This social class difference is also seen in *The Yacoubian Building* through Taha who comes from a poor family and was the doorkeeper's son. He outperformed the other kids in the building in terms of grades, but because of his brilliance, intellect, and academic excellence, the dwellers of the building got jealous of him. He now puts all his efforts to join the police academy. The rich grumbled over it that these high positions should be given to the children of superior class only and these should not even be aspired by the poor door keeper's son.

Jobs in the police, the judiciary, and sensitive positions in general should be given only to the children of people who were somebody because the children of doorkeepers, laundrymen, and such like, if they attained any authority, would use it to compensate for the inferiority complexes. (Aswany, 2006, p. 18)

This behaviour of the upper class shows that they do not endorse the equal opportunities for the economically unprivileged social groups.

The demonstrators have the right in every society to protest for their rights but those who are harmed while in custody, tend to crave retribution. The torture and confinement in prison cells affect the psychology of the prisoners. In *The Yacoubian Building*, the torture and sexual abuse on the protestors, who were protesting against government policies, is reported in order to enquire about their leaders' hiding places. Taha goes through a distressing experience and torture when he is forcibly subjected to acts of effeminization, dehumanisation and repeated anal penetration by state security personnel due to his association with Sheikh Shakir. "Debasement might follow betrayal and sense of shame induced through the process of torture. Debasement as a constitutive component of torture marks the erosion of corporeal integrity and sense of self" (Nayar, 2016, p. 59). The severe abusive behaviour towards Taha's autonomous and independent persona acts as a sobering commentary on how human rights are being lost and the grave injustices characterized by inequality and political tyranny prevail in Egyptian country. He describes his humiliation in front of Sheikh Shakir: "They humiliated me. Master. They humiliated me till I felt the dogs in the street had more self-respect than me. I was subjected to things I never imagined a Muslim could do" (Aswany, 2006, p. 168). During the torture, he was given the name of a woman and was made to reiterate that he is a woman. In this way, his self was unmade. All the policemen laughed and made fun of him. Taha's decision to wear different clothing than his usual modest clothes points out drastic change in his personality following his rape in jail. He now has a distinct appearance of a bitter individual seeking retribution. Time spent in jail alters him from a quiet man who led a moral life to a terrorist who participates in a terrorist attack on a police station.

Religious hypocrisy and misinterpretation of religious injunctions have a great impact on the lives and experiences of the characters in *The Yacoubian Building*. The notion and practice of Jihad is pivotal to Islamic history since the rise of Islam to the formation and spread of the Muslim community in the world. Jihad stands for "struggle" or "effort" on two planes: one is an internal struggle for self-discipline and an exterior struggle to protect or promote Islamic ideals. "Jihad is a pillar of Islam, exactly like prayer and fasting" (Aswany, 2006, p. 94) but it has frequently been misconstrued or misunderstood by the bigots. The negative implication of Jihadist activities is used to seek revenge upon others by the deprived youth. "*The Yacoubian Building* analyses the experiences of many angered Egyptians, especially students, whose social and personal frustrations propelled their dedication to militant Islamist politics" (Lewis, 2013, p. 107). To seek vengeance of his humiliation by police, Taha is introduced to a terrorist organization by Sheikh Shakir, where he meets Sheikh Bilal and begins training in the desert. Later, he is assigned a task to assassinate the officer. It is very clear that people like Sheikh Shakir exploits personal grudges of people and utilize them for their personal gains without thinking that the persons would lose their lives which is basic right of mankind. Islam's theological philosophy is misused for radicalism. Similarly, in Nasser's rule with the aid of the military, many people from Muslim Brotherhood were imprisoned and killed.

Many people exploit others through unfair means of extorting money such as stealth. Abaskharon, a faithful Christian and servant of Zaki, indulges ironically in fraudulent activity and resells a few things to his boss with a new invoice which another pious muslim shopkeeper arranges for him. Before going to sleep, he chants "the prayer of thanks to the Lord... with genuine piety before the figure of the crucified Christ" (Aswany, 2006, p. 27). Another stealth occurs in the novel when Zaki's infatuation Rabab stole his money, gold wristwatch, pens, sunglasses and diamond ring of his sister Dawlat under the pretext of love-making. The decadence in ethics of people is quite obvious in the abovementioned instances which deprive people of their human rights.

The corruption of lawyers is represented through Maitre Fikri Abd el Shaheed who is lawyer of heirs of Hagop Yacoubian who invested and erected the Yacoubian building. The heirs live in Switzerland who do not know about fair or foul dealings of Fikri. His avarice has made him corrupt to the extent that he would prepare any legal documents for a handsome amount of money. Malak, with his brother, approached him to buy a tin roof room against a large amount of money about which the owner of the building did not know and the documents were signed in a bar. This is an act of sheer violation of rights of the heir whose property bargains were kept hidden from the heirs.

The rights of various characters are neglected in the selected novel which is a critique of fictive ethnicity in nation state of Egypt. In *The Yacoubian Building*, Souad is portrayed as a lower-class working woman whose first husband went abroad for their better living standard but never contacted her afterwards. She lives alone with a son and works to earn her living. On the other hand, Hagg Azzam is a senior-aged upper-class rich man who marries her to fulfil his carnal desires. Her exploitative marital bond deprived her of her individual rights which represents how elite class of Egyptian society mishandle working class for their own gains and disowns them when their services are not required.

She had gone hungry, begged, and tasted humiliation, and a hundred times refused to go astray, and in the end, she had given her body to a man as old as her father... just for him to come to her and go away again in secret, as though she were a mistress. (Aswany, 2006, p. 176)

Souad remarries only to provide better life style to her son whom she could not meet because he lives with his maternal family. She resides in a flat alone provided by Hagg Azzam and gets frightened sometimes due to loneliness as Azzam visits her only for a few hours. Moreover, she wasn't allowed to expose her marital relationship to anyone because the only purpose of the marriage was to fulfill Azzam's sexual needs. Besides, she was not allowed to conceive and when she got pregnant Hagg Azzam told her to abort the fetus just because he did not want any child and to spoil first marriage and his political career. When she refused to agree with him, he plotted the criminal abortion which "is forbidden by religion" (Aswany, 2006, p. 171) and then divorced her. Thus, she has been subjected to grave violations of her basic human rights after being abused. Initially she fought for her unborn baby but after its murder she does not utter a word and fell silent on her huge loss. Zeidanin and Al Zuraigat (2016) put this behaviour as "pessimistic attitude" (p. 245). As she belonged to a poor family so she could not claim any rights due to her low status. Hence, it is a critique on fictive unity of various groups of a society.

Another character named Abduh, too, gives up his nobility and dignity to support his family which is at low socioeconomic level. According to Egyptian social structure, master-slave relationship is drawn between Hatim Rasheed and Abduh. The socially strong Hatim enslaves the lowly Abduh. Hatim is willing to provide Abduh with whatever he requires as long as Abduh remains his sweetheart. Despite his morality awakens against homosexuality, Abduh maintains the relationship in order to escape poverty but he wants to end it after his son's death which he thinks is a divine punishment for his misdeeds. Hatim does not let him leave the house and

exploits him with a cheque: “you dog of a servant? I swear by your mother’s life, no job and no money! First thing, I’ll call the bank and stop the check. You can boil it and drink the water” (Aswany, 2006, p. 236). Abduh ends this exploitation by murdering Hatim and gets rid of this conflicting relationship.

Corporeal punishment and physical abuse of both the genders and children represent violation of human rights in Al Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building*. The novel also emphasizes upon the value of preserving fundamental rights such as the right to free speech, the right to peaceful assembly, the right to be safe from violence, the right to get education, and the right to suitable housing etc.

## 5- Conclusion

The selected work portrays an engrossing portrait of Egyptian society by examining the complex interplay of culture, class, religion, and gender which runs counter to the national narratives’ claims of ethnic, religious, economic, and gender harmony in single ethnicity. The work under study depicts class-based socio-economic inequalities, religious hypocrisy and persecution on the basis of religious discrimination, gender oppression, physical violence and child abuse within the contemporary Egyptian culture. However, some characters question conventional gender roles and resist male oppression and fight for basic rights. Moreover, characters’ dissatisfaction and frustration with injustice, inequity, exploitation and rights abuse and their will to change corroborates with the notion of cultural mobility and repudiates Egyptian nation-state’s narrative of univocal and monolithic unity. The inhabitants of rooftop of the Yacoubian building also live like animals in the tiny rooms with less economic resources. Some future prospects and dreams of the subalterns are not materialized due to poor economic condition. Taha in *The Yacoubian Building* cannot fulfill his dream of marrying Busayna and securing job in the police. The marginalised people sometimes also manifest resistance against their exploitation as Abduh ends his sexual exploitation by murdering Hatim and gets rid of conflicting master-salve relationship in *The Yacoubian Building*.

To sum up, contextualised in our age of globalisation, multiculturalism and transnationalism, this critique of selected Egyptian nationalist narrative of static unity, cultural fixity and human rights abuse is highly relevant in mounting a critique of repressive regimes of nation-states particularly in third world countries.

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