"The Yacoubian Building" by Alaa Al Aswany, Part 1
Reading in Retirement by Dr. Charles S. Grippi
This is the first of a three part series.

Aswany's "The Yacoubian Building" (Arabic version 2002 and the English translation by Humphrey Davies, New York: Harper Perennial Ed., 2006) is a quite cogent novel in a number of ways. Centered in Cairo, Egypt, the cultural capital of the Muslim world, in the early 1990's, the novel reveals an expansively liberating spirit on subjects that were strictly taboo for publication in a Muslim country and certainly are still anathema in fundamentalist countries of the Muslim world. The novel took Egypt by storm by becoming a best seller in 2002 and 2003 and then being proclaimed the best novel in 2003. To date, the novel has been translated into 23 languages. Made into an "Adults Only" film in 2006, it broke a box office attendance record by earning 6,000,000 Egyptian Pounds the first week and 20,000,000 E.Ps. during its initial theatrical run. In 2006, the film was submitted as Egypt's entry to the 79th Academy Awards "Best Foreign Film Category." In 2006, a television series bearing the same name began: however, frank sexual scenes were omitted.

The novel created political controversy by its attacks on the corrupt, undemocratic one party system that has ruled since the country gained its independence with the overthrow of the puppet government of King Farouk that was supported by the British. The revolution allowed Egyptians to rule their own country for the first time in almost 2,500 years harking back to the invasions of the Persians and by the Greek Alexander the Great in the 4th century B.C. Aswany's novel treats the economic stagnation of the post 1952 revolution, a stagnation that has contributed to the wretched lives of an increasing number of the poor whose very survival many times leads them to moral degradation.

The work also graphically depicts the inhumane brutality of those imprisoned for demonstrating for economic and political change for the lot of the poor. This brutal prison treatment led to underground subversive movements led by radical Imams subverting passages in the Koran to advocate terrorist, jihad martyrdom. In the novel, one such Imam is Sheikh Muhammad Shakir, who declaims,"The supposedly democratic state is based on the rigging of elections and the detention and torture of innocent people so that the ruling clique can remain on their thrones forever. They lie and lie and lie and they want us to believe their revolting lies; we say to them loud and clear, “We do not want our Islamic Nation to be either socialist or democratic. We want it Islamic, and we will struggle and give up our lives and all we hold dear till Egypt is Islamic once more.” (pp. 95-96). Within this speech we see the core of fundamentalist terrorist jihad to make Egypt a theocracy ruled by the Imams. When Colonel Gamal Abd Nasser led the 1952 revolution of independence, he faced radicals who tried to assassinate him because he instituted a socialistic government led by the military, and fought off Egypt becoming a theocracy.

Aswany uses an actual building in Cairo named the Yacoubian Building as the title of his novel obviously to set a scene of reality for his novel. He had his first office there practicing dentistry, the same building that his father, Abbas Al Aswany, a noted author, located his office. The younger Aswany studied dentistry at Cairo University, and then he traveled to the States until 1988 studying, traveling, and exploring our culture. In 2007, he published "Chicago," a novel that has yet to be translated into English.

At the beginning of "The Yacoubian Building," Aswany gives the reader a "Cast of Characters" - twelve in all, obviously to indicate that they are major figures in the novel, but also to explain whom they are, and perhaps to aid the western readers to names that at first are unfamiliar. When the reader gets into the novel, that list becomes of great aid because the novel is divided into a number of scenes which jump from the situations and conflicts of one of these characters to those immediately of another character, the scene shift being indicated by a curlicue. If one scene involves "Zaki Bey el Dessouski" and another shifts to "Taha el Shazli" or "Abaskharon" or "Abd Rubbuh" - take this reader's word for it - the list is indispensable. The novel is divided into two parts. Part one contains approximately thirty scene shifts. A scene may be a third of the printed page or as long as seven or eight pages. If this structure appears at first to be complicated, it soon becomes apparent that Aswany uses a dramatic Dickensian technique. Charles
Dickens wrote some of his stories for periodic magazines. He would place at the end some unresolved dramatic situation so that the reader would buy the next month's issue to discover the dramatic solution. It was the same technique used in the movie serials of the 1930s-40s; “cliff hangers” they were called. Part two contains approximately forty-eight scene shifts, by which time the reader is engrossed in conflicts of the characters, guessing of what might be in store in the desperate situations. As a further aid at the end of the novel is a six page "Glossary" containing the names of historical figures, of political parties, religious terms, names and locations of mosques, names of prisons, political figures, foods, etc.

Of the cast of twelve characters listed at the beginning of the novel, Aswany focuses on eight major individuals who propel his primary themes. Taha el Skalzi is the intellectually bright son of the doorkeeper of the Yacoubian Building who lives in one of the shacks on the roof of the building, a location inhabited by the poorer class. Although intellectually much brighter than the sons and daughters who inhabit the large apartments, his opportunities and social acceptance are restricted by his poor family. The very name Taha and the detailed theme of his embitterment brought on not only by his station in life but by the brutality of the police forces is Aswany's paying homage to Naguib Mahfouz, the Nobel Prize winner, whose seminal character named Ali Taha appeared in Mahfouz's 1945 novel "Cairo Modern." Both Tahas are fated to jihad martyrdom. For Taha el Skatzi, it is the radical Imam, Sheikh Muhammad Skakir, mentioned above, who guides the path to this youth's martyrdom. (To be continued.)