

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

Yacoubian Building written by *Alaa Al Aswany* captures some issues concerning with the illness of Egypt. Those issues are religious extremism, prostitution and drug use among the upper classes, political corruption, sexual repression and homosexuality (“*Yacoubian Building’s* novel review”). The book has been the best seller novel for four years running since the novel was published in 2002. The novel has been the controversial issue in contemporary Egyptian society. Many of Egyptian readers say that this success is because of the homosexual issues that are involved in the novel. But some readers say that the novel becomes best selling because it briefly uncovers the bad sides of Egypt that so far those topics never been used by other authors all together in one work (Marwan Hamid). It is emphasized in an article entitled “The Yacoubian Building - A Window on an Unseen Egypt” that “As well as eliciting plaudits The Yacoubian Building received its fair share of criticism, especially from within Egypt itself, particularly for its portrayal of some of the more hidden problems within this complex nation.”(Danny Bernardi).

Yacoubian Building serves complete pictures of degenerated Egypt under President Nasser. The novel becomes the new reading to Egypt people, after the last best trilogy novel by Mahfouds in 1988 ago (Susannah Tarbush). This novel uncovers the bad sides of Egypt societies. The purpose is to be an inspiration to develop and improve Egypt to be better in the future. It also becomes critics to

Egypt's government and powerful people to treat human as human. Though the novel is the first literary work for the author but it has been adapted for the screen by Marwan Hamid and inspired impassioned cultural debate. According to the Egyptian parliaments, film "The Yacoubian Building" damages Egypt's image because the film shows only the bad sides of Egypt, without serving the good sides of Egypt except the free-pay of education. About 112 members of the Egyptian parliament worry that this film would uncover the bad images of Egypt in the world's eyes and they ask to cut some scenes in the film (Nelly Youssef). Though actually those pictures are something that are familiar with Egyptians daily life.

Concerning with that, the residents of the Yacoubian Building are threatening legal proceedings because they feel offended by the film (Wahid Hameed). Although those all phenomena do not really happen in that building, but the author chooses to put the setting in the building. He portrays the phenomenon happened several years ago while president Nasser lead Egypt. Actually, if people want to be honest, Egyptian has been familiar with those bad sides in their life, even some of them could be a victim of those bad sides.

Another factor that are interesting in the novel is that the Yacoubian building actually exists in Egypt, though the characters are fictions. "Yacoubian building is one of fashionable apartments blocks in downtown, Cairo" (Laila Lalami). Yacoubian is derived from the name *Hagob Yacoubian* as in the novel told,

In 1934, Hagop Yacoubian, the millionaire and then doyen of the Armenian community in Egypt, decided to construct an apartment

block that would bear his name. He chose for it the best site on Suleiman Basha and engaged a well-known Italian engineering firm to build it, and the firm came up with a beautiful design—ten lofty stories in the high classical European style, the balconies decorated with Greek faces carved in stone, the columns, steps, and corridors all of natural marble, and the latest model of elevator by Schindler. The construction continued for two whole years, at the end of which there emerged an architectural gem that was so exceeded expectations that its owner requested of the Italian architect that he inscribed his name, Yacoubian, on the inside of the doorway in large Latin characters that were lit up at night in neon, as though to immortalize his name and emphasize his ownership of the gorgeous building (11).

The author, *Alaa Al Aswany* is a dentist. Besides, his pleasure in writing a monthly opposition newspaper columns in Egyptian newspaper on literature, politics, and social issues (“African Success 2007”). He graduates from Illinois University in Chicago. Though he is an Egypt person but he almost spends his time to study in the West and then goes back to Cairo to be a dentist. Since 1985, he spent three years starting studying, traveling and exploring American culture and society. Educated at a French school, Al Aswany had been exposed to the West at a young age. As Aswany said, “A part of me is essentially liberal. My father was a great writer and artist, and our house was very liberal. I had a liberal upbringing. Whoever wanted to pray, prayed; whoever wanted to drink, drank; whoever wanted to fast, fasted.” (Abdallah). During his study in Chicago, he has got knowledge of Western cultures that also inspired him to write the literary

work as close in Western. For him, literary is a way to express feeling and the freedom of expression.

According to Wall Street journal, another factor that inspires him to write the novel is the leader, Gamal Abd Nasser as a president from 1954 to 1970. Aswany stresses that Nasser is "a great leader" who changes society in a very positive way, gives many poor Egyptians opportunities for education and decent lives. But at the same time "he did not apply the real democracy." The writer says that Nasser leaves a "dictatorship machine" on, ready for the next person to get in the driver's seat (Emily Parker).

One of the interesting issues is religious extremism. The religious extremist in the novel is portrayed by Taha el Shazli. He is a religious young man who turns to religious extremism because of many inequalities that he faces. The conditions of his family and his father's profession as a doorkeeper's building make him failed to be police officer that has been his dream since childhood. He is rejected as a police because of his father's profession. Taha is a good son of poor family that live in the doorkeeper's quarters "up on the roof" of Yacoubian building.

After he fails to enter police academy, Taha enters a good university in Middle East, Cairo University, because of his grade. At the university, he knows Khalid who introduces Taha to Syech. After that, Taha dramatically changes, both his appearance and his attitude. He looks so calm and more confident. Taha becomes more religious and active in Islam organization in campus. Because of that, suddenly he is visited by three huge men. They bring him to the security office without any rational reasons. He suffers with his covered eyes. Taha gets

sexual harassment and humiliation from the officers. They ask about the organization he conducts. But Taha is confused about their questions. Taha does not know anything about the questions. Finally he is taken out from the security office after long torture by officers.

He feels angry and could not approve their inhuman treatment. He would make some revenge to kill them although he does not know them, but he is able to know their voice briefly. After that he follows the military exercise in Gamaa Islamiya to avenge his suffer. One year later, he conducts an action to defense Muslim enemies that have killed many of innocent Muslim without any reasons. Finally, Taha has known that the target is an officer who interrogates him in security office. He knows well from his voice. Then Taha shoots him with gunfire several times until he falls down. Taha needs to confirm his target's death, so he is late to escape from that place. Finally he dies by some shoots of gunfire.

Religious extremism appears as an effort to struggle rights as the resident of Egypt that should get the same rights as the powerful and rich people in the country. The rich residents like police officers and businessmen get the same rights in this country because they have power to control the law in this nation. The novel shows that anyone who has money and power in the country could easily loss from law's trick. Here, Taha as a poor people could not do anything with his humiliation. In Egypt at the time novel told, law belongs to rich and powerful people, so it is useless if poor people want to beat the superior. It can be seen in the novel that the discrimination and inequality that Taha faces are one of the reasons why he involves into religious extremism. The novel shows that the religion is the only way back from that unfairness. While the government is

supposed to give protection for its residents, the country tends to take side to anyone who has money and power. Instead of that, they choose the religion fanaticism to struggle their rights, as the safest way to solve their problems. It is emphasized by the author in the interview by National Geographic.

Current fanaticism was coming from poor areas, because the poor are desperate. The current regime here was dealing with them in an inhuman way, arresting and torturing them. Religion is being used as a cover for social unrest, a way to empower these people who are not empowered,” (Karen Kostyal).

The poor people have no right as they should be. Cruelty and powerful people in Egypt treat the poor people as they want. It happens in Nasser lead where religious radicals are less likely to flourish and less likely to embrace violence when there is strong competition in their non-core markets: including, education, health care, poverty programs, and political representation. Nasser applied this policy in Egypt in the 1950s, when the Muslim Brethren threatened his power. He took not only the conventional approach of locking up the leadership but also nationalized their entire social welfare provision network (Munson).

As mentioned above, the occurring of extremism is also caused by the privileged to superior people. The novel portrays the members of the Islamic organization which are the poor people, poor students, who have the same problems under the powerful Egypt nation, like social class discrimination in society. Besides that they are the religious people that believe the equality in God’s eyes. Their actions are the intuition reactions of the same Muslim brother

who are killed by non-religion people. They feel angry because their Muslim brother is killed without any reason.

This issue is interesting because it shows the powerful and powerless people in Islamist country where it is supposed to be equal for its residents. The powerful authorization here is people who have more money and authority like police officers. At another side, the powerless people are poor people who do not get the same opportunity as the powerful authorization. Taha is the victim of inequality treatment because of his poor family. Taha could not do anything except taking a revenge for the humiliation he has got. Compared with other issues in the novel, this issue is the most interesting thing because it shows a young man with his religious behavior turns into an extremist because of his powerless condition. The novel is worth to be analysed, since the theme is terrorism that occurs as the cause of inequality and violation to poor residents in Egypt. Egypt as a Muslim country does not apply Islamist law as same as other Arabic countries. In contrary, Egypt shows inequality to the powerful and powerless people. There are more abusive actions as well as oppression to poor people. Therefore, the study intends to present the portrayal of religious extremism in the novel. Through intrinsic study, it could help to identify the intrinsic elements within the novel itself. Intrinsic elements include the characterization of the main character who involve in religious extremism, the plot and conflicts, the settings and the effect of religious extremism in its society in the novel.

B. Statement of the Problems

The background of the study determines the topic that could be discussed. This study is established to find out:

1. How is religious extremism presented in the novel?
2. How is the main character's view toward religious extremism?

C. Objective of the Study

The objective of the study intends to answer the questions which have been mentioned in the statement of the problems. This study tries:

1. To portray the representation of religious extremism in the novel.
2. To identify the main character's view to religious extremism.

D. Significance of the Study

It is hoped that this study will contribute a significant meaning to both the writer and the readers. The analysis is supposed to present a deep understanding of the novel and literary works as the medium to make an academic research for intellectual purpose. The study provides knowledge about the inequality of human right in Egypt. The analysis is about the representation of Religious Extremism in the novel, and also the effect of the emergence of Religious Extremism. Hopefully, the study will open our mind and encourage us to be fair in treating other people without any discrimination, as fair as possible.

E. Scope and Limitation

In the novel *Yacoubian Building* written by Alaa Al Aswany, some problems emerge within the events and they can be analyzed through various perspectives. Therefore, the research is limited by several intrinsic elements in the novel, such as the characterization, settings, plot and conflicts. Briefly, the analysis would begin from the representation of religious extremism in the novel. The representations of religious extremist in the novel include the relation of the actor to their family and circumstances. The society here is referred to the treatment and respect of the inhabitants in the building. All matters in the study are viewed and analyzed by intrinsic approach within the novel itself. It is limited by such intrinsic elements, such as the characterization of the main characters; the plot and conflicts; the setting; and the effects of religious extremism to its society in the novel.

F. Theoretical Background

Yacoubian Building by Alaa Al Aswany is one of literary works which discuss about many unusual lifestyles among Egypt society. One of them is religious extremist as its object of the study. First, the thesis intends to show the representation of religious extremism in the novel by identifying the intrinsic elements. Second, it could be the analysis of Taha's view to religious extremism.

The aim of the analysis is to explore the intrinsic elements of the novel. Intrinsic approach is the way to identify the elements within the text itself. The use of intrinsic approach is based on solely of the context created by the text and the language used in the text. This approach use close reading method in

analyzing the *Yacoubian Building* novel. Close reading, the scrupulous examination of the complex relationship between a text's formal elements and its theme, is how the text organic unity is established by the new critic (Tyson 124). By this approach, it means that the work by itself is the most important source of analysis, without necessarily studying the life of its author, or the age in which it is written, or its possible effect on its reader. Intrinsic elements of the novel consist of plot, characters, setting, point of view, theme, symbolism and other elements inside of the novel. Yet, this thesis will limit only to the character, setting and plot of the novel.

G. Method of the Study

The research study needs reliable and accurate information, in order to obtain an accurate analysis on the work. Thus, in the process of writing this study, it uses the library research. This research is done by collecting data from various books, journals, critics, reviews, commentaries and other printed materials from both library and internet sources which are needed to support the analysis.

Furthermore, after collecting a complete data, then the writer arranges and makes a study on it, so that it could give a better understanding about the novel and the problems that are going to be analyzed. The next step, it uses descriptive explanation in analyzing the problems as its method of analysis. This method is considered suitable because it supports the description of the problem properly. Finally the next step after making analysis is drawing the conclusion, so that the study is completely based on the academic research requirements.

H. Definition of Key Terms

- Doyen* : a senior member of a group, an expert in a field
- Jihad* : Jihad in contextual meaning in religious extremism is to defend religious that violence and war.
- Gamaa Islamiya* : militant organization of Islamist's defend. They had no fear of death because for them it was the first way to go to heaven.
- Martyr* : a person who suffers from an illness
- Apocalypse* : the end of the world
- Eschatology* : the study of death, judgment, heaven and hell, and how humanity relates to them
- Extremism* : a person of extreme views, especially in political and religion.
- Religion* : belief in God or Gods; a system of worship and faith; a formalized expression of belief.
- Religious Extremism* : an extreme or fanatic views to such belief, that showed by attitudes, feeling, action or strategy of a person or individual toward such religion.