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## ASSIMILIATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS IN ALA AL ASWANY'S *CHICAGO*

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I would like to examine the issue of immigration, cultural assimilation and its discontents, religious discrimination in America and political oppression in Egypt in Ala Al Aswany's *Chicago*. The researcher argues that Al Aswany's *Chicago* can be seen as an awakening call to address the problems such as demonization and marginalization faced by immigrant groups to avoid any backlash or any acts of violence seen all over the world today. The paper concludes that by creating a diverse pluralistic society and seriously getting engaged based on a universal notion of justice in which no single community's righteousness, prosperity and dignity comes at the expense of another, we may see that immigrants keep their own identities, embrace successfully the values of their new society and become easily integrated.

**KEYWORDS:** Multiculturalism, Assimilation, Immigration, Persecution

### INTRODUCTION

Alaa al Aswany's novel, *Chicago*<sup>1</sup> sheds light on many important issues like immigration, the question of cultural assimilation, religious discrimination in America and political oppression in Egypt. For Al Aswany, he sees literature "as an expanse of freedom that should examine the areas that people don't talk about, to show us things we could be feeling but not seeing"<sup>2</sup> In *Chicago*, we find that the majority of its characters are Egyptian students and faculty members of the University of Illinois Medical Centre in Chicago. By selecting America as the setting of his characters, Alaa al Aswany raises very urgent questions which need an answer especially in the post-9/11 America<sup>3</sup> like, to what extent the immigrant should be loyal to his old country and can people ever adjust their identities and values sufficiently to become fully assimilated members of the new society.

In *Chicago*<sup>4</sup> Alaa al Aswany's tackles Egyptian migrants' predicament, their hopes, expectations, frustrations, cultural conflict, struggles to adapt and keep one's cultural and religious identity and their stories of success in fulfilling their dreams. For example, when people from different communities migrate abroad, they try to keep their culture, language, values and identity. For that reason, you find each community living together, preserving their own educational institutions, schools, mosques, churches and temples. They cling together out of fear of assimilation to the new culture which may create cultural interference. For instance, conflict may emerge between the older generation which represents the values of their former home and the younger generation which assimilates itself more easily through systemization and

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<sup>1</sup> Alaa Al Aswany. *Chicago*. (U.K: Harper Perennial,2009).

<sup>2</sup> Zuzana Kratka, "An Expanse of Freedom," *Banipal* ,March 23, 2009. Accessed June 6,2013.[http://www.banipal.co.uk/book\\_reviews/49/chicago-by-alaal-aswany/](http://www.banipal.co.uk/book_reviews/49/chicago-by-alaal-aswany/)

<sup>3</sup> For more details on September attacks on the United States, see Joseph B. Lambert, *9-11 America under Attack* (Bloomington: Author House, 2002); Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside al-Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Alaa Al Aswany's *Chicago* is the second significant Arab novel that introduces us to the world of Arab expatriates living in the West after Hannah al-Shaykh's *Only in London*.

schooling. One may contend this conflict raises serious questions as to whether migration is a worthy endeavor or there is a price one should pay in return for success. This leads us to question whether multiculturalism<sup>5</sup> is a success or a failure.

## MULTICULTURALISM AND ITS DICOENTENTS

One may argue that the topic Alaa Al Aswany tackles is very timely taking into account the growing debate over the benefits to society that multiculturalism can bring. Multiculturalism can be defined as a society which is “at ease with the rich tapestry of human life and the desire amongst people to express their own identity in the manner they see fit.”<sup>6</sup> It is related to communities having multiple cultures. It is closely associated with the politics of identity, difference and recognition.

One may say that cultural isolation can preserve the uniqueness of the local culture of a nation, contribute to global cultural diversity and avoid singling out any cultural community values as central<sup>7</sup>. For supporters of multiculturalism like Anne-Marie Mooney Cotter, C. James Trotman, Tariq Modood and Bhikhu Parekh, it is just a valuable experience since diversity and difference can be a creative experience. To elaborate further, for Anne-Marie Mooney, multiculturalism is a just system that grants an opportunity for people to truly express who they are within a society<sup>8</sup>. For C. James Trotman, multiculturalism is valuable because it “uses several disciplines to highlight neglected aspects of our social history, particularly the histories of women and minorities [...and] promotes respect for the dignity of the lives and voices of the forgotten.”<sup>9</sup> While for Tariq Modood, it is, “most timely and necessary, and [...] we need more not less”, since it is, “the form of integration” that best fits the ideal of egalitarianism, it has “the best chance of succeeding” in the “post-9/11, post 7/7” world, and has remained “moderate and pragmatic.”<sup>10</sup> Put differently, they base their argument on the fact that culture is not a fixed thing based on the ethnicity or religion but it is evolving as result of several factors that change as the world changes.

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the concept of multiculturalism, please see, e.g. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994); Ali Rattansi. *Multiculturalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Alvin J. Schmidt. *The Menace of Multiculturalism: Trojan Horse in America* (Connecticut: Praeger, 1997); Jens-Martin Eriksen and Frederik Stjernfelt, *The Democratic Contradictions of Multiculturalism* (USA: Telos Press Publishing, 2012); David Theo Goldberg, *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995); Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002); Ernesto Caravantes, *From melting pot to witch's cauldron: how multiculturalism failed America* (Government Institute, 2010); Anne-Marie Fortier, *Multicultural Horizons: Diversity and the Limits of the Civil Nation* (U.K: Taylor & Francis, 2008); Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield, *Mapping Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Paul Gottfried, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt: Toward a Secular Theocracy* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2004); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011); Barnor Hesse, *Unsettled Multiculturalism: Diasporas, Entanglements, Transruptions* (London: ZedBook, 2000); Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Tariq Modood and Pnina Werbner, *The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe: Racism, Identity, and Community* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997); Sailer, Steve, "Fragmented Future: Multiculturalism doesn't make vibrant communities but defensive ones," *American Conservative*, Jan. 15, 2007. Slavoj Žižek (1997). "Multiculturalism or, the cultural logic of multicultural capital" *New Left Review* (225): 28-51.

<sup>6</sup> Roi Simyon, "Has multiculturalism failed?", *Israel News*, May 26, 2013. Accessed June 6, 2013. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4384455,00.html/1>

<sup>7</sup> Anne-Marie Mooney Cotter. *Culture clash: an international legal perspective on ethnic discrimination*. (U.K: Ash gate Publishing, Ltd, 2011)

<sup>8</sup> Antony Lerman, "In defiance of multiculturalism." *Guardian*, March 22, 2010. Accessed June 1, 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/mar/22/multiculturalism-blame-culture-segregation>

<sup>9</sup> C. James Trotman, ed. *Multiculturalism: roots and realities* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2002)

<sup>10</sup> Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism: a civic idea* (UK: Polity, 2007), 14.

Historically speaking, the importance of multiculturalism stems from the “human rights revolution”<sup>11</sup> after the changes that followed the end of WWII where crimes against humanity can no longer be taken for granted like the Holocaust<sup>12</sup>, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine<sup>13</sup>, the end of the era of colonization in Africa and Asia<sup>14</sup>. In the United States, we have witnessed the rise of the Civil Rights Movement<sup>15</sup> which “criticized ideals of assimilation that often led to prejudices against those who did not act according to Anglo-American standards and which led to the development of academic ethnic studies programs as a way to counteract the neglect of contributions by racial minorities in classrooms.

However, critics of multiculturalism voice their concerns that “nation states, which are synonymous with a cultural identity of their own, lose out to enforced multiculturalism which leads ultimately to erode the host nations' distinct culture. For example, Robert D. Putnam has come to conclude after conducting a survey in American communities that “multiculturalism affects social trust.”<sup>16</sup> One of his findings is that people in diverse communities “don't trust the local mayor, they don't trust the local paper, they don't trust other people and they don't trust institutions”<sup>17</sup>. Putnam concludes his study that in the presence of ethnic diversity, “[W]e hunker down. We act like turtles. The effect of diversity is worse than had been imagined.”<sup>18</sup>

To elaborate further, Roi Simyoniin in his article, “Has multiculturalism failed?”<sup>19</sup> argues that Western Europe's immigration policy has backfired citing incidents which have occurred in Boston<sup>20</sup>, London<sup>21</sup>, France<sup>22</sup> and Sweden<sup>23</sup>. He goes on to elaborate that in spite of all benefits Muslim immigrants receive in Sweden<sup>24</sup>, they still prefer to entrench themselves in their own culture and refuse to be assimilated.

The Swedish immigration policy has completely collapsed. The Swedes thought they were assisting persecuted

<sup>11</sup> Steven Vertovec and Susanne Wessendorf, eds. *The multiculturalism backlash: European discourses, policies and practices* (London : Routledge,2010)

<sup>12</sup> For more information on the Holocaust, please see, e.g. Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War* ( New York: Holt Paperbacks,1987), Marilyn J. Harran and John Roth, *The Holocaust Chronicle* (New York: Publications International,2000)

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld,2006); Noam Chomsky, *The Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel and the Palestinians* (Boston: South End Press, 1983); Efraim Karsh, *Palestine Betrayed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Norman Finkelstein, *Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (New York: Verso, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> For more information on the colonization of Africa, please see, e.g. Dan Nardo, *The European Colonization of Africa* (New York:Morgan Reynolds Pub,2010); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press,2005);Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press,1994); Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* ( London:James Currey Ltd / Heinemann,2011)

<sup>15</sup> For more information on the Civil Rights Movement in USA, please see e.g., Bruce J. Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement* ( U.K: Pearson, 2008); Aldon D. Morris. *Origins of the Civil Rights Movements* ( New York: Free Press,1986)

<sup>16</sup> Putnam, Robert D., "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century" *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30:2 (June, 2007):15

<sup>17</sup> Putnam, Robert D., "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century"

<sup>18</sup> Sailer, Steve, "Fragmented Future," *American Conservative*, Jan. 15, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Bloor, *The Definitive Guide to Political Ideologies* (U.K: Author House, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> A pair of immigrant brothers set off two bombs at the Boston Marathon last week. For more information, please see, e.g. Mbaye Lo, *Muslims in America: Race, Politics, and Community Building* (USA: Amana Pubns ,2004); Siraj I Mufti ,*Muslims At The Crossroads* (USA:Create Space Independent Publishing Platform , 2011). Abdul Basit, *The Global Muslim Community at a Crossroads: Understanding Religious Beliefs, Practices, and Infighting to End the Conflict* (Connecticut: Praeger, 2012); Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America* ( New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Anouar Majid, *Islam and America: Building a Future without Prejudice* (M.D:Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011)

<sup>21</sup> A British soldier was hacked to death in London by a Muslim convert of Nigerian decent

<sup>22</sup> A French soldier was stabbed in the throat in a busy commercial district outside Paris..

<sup>23</sup> In Sweden, riots continue to plague the capital, with cars being set ablaze and uprisings spreading out from mainly poor immigrant areas in Stockholm.

<sup>24</sup> For more information on Muslims in Sweden, see please, Goran Larsson and Ake Sander, *Islam and Muslims in Sweden: Integration or Fragmentation? A Contextual Study* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008)

people to come to one of the most wonderful countries in the world in terms of welfare, but quickly found out they had a growing minority of Muslims (between 700,000 to 800,000) that are unwilling to assimilate into Swedish society despite all the incentives and benefits they received.<sup>25</sup>

This does not mean that all Muslim immigrants have failed to integrate into Swedish society since there are many who have found jobs and integrated successfully but the majority prefer to stay entrenched in their own culture. Commenting on the large Muslim community living in France<sup>26</sup>, Nicolas Sarkozy<sup>27</sup> says that multiculturalism is a failure. “The truth is that, in all our democracies, we've been too concerned about the identity of the new arrivals and not enough about the identity of the country receiving them. This raises the issue of Islam and our Muslim compatriots.”<sup>28</sup> David Cameron<sup>29</sup> has also remarked on the same issue. “We won't defeat terrorism simply by the actions we take outside our borders. Europe needs to wake up to what is happening in our own countries. We have tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run counter to our values. We have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream.”<sup>30</sup> For David Cameron, a culture of tolerance has allowed radical elements, either Islamic or far-right extremists, to muster support for their radical agendas. However, the discussion of multiculturalism and its discontents leads us to explore the concept of assimilation and its manifestation in Al Aswany's *Chicago*.

### ASSIMILATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS IN ALA AL ASWANY'S *CHICAGO*

Assimilation<sup>31</sup> can be defined as the blending of minority groups into the dominant society or the process whereby a minority group gradually adapts to the customs of the prevailing culture. In *Chicago*, Al Aswany tries to tackle the issue of cultural assimilation. For instance, most of *Chicago's* action takes place in America, a nation which is founded by immigrants and on the belief that “old attachments can be transcended.”<sup>32</sup> All the different cultures are melted in one pot. Coined as the Melting Pot<sup>33</sup>, it was based on the idea that, “each individual immigrant, and each group of immigrants, assimilated into American society at their own pace.”<sup>34</sup>

The philosophy of the Melting Pot in America has potential for conflict, for instance, with Islamic communities which prefer to keep their religious values and identity even when they move to live in America. For example, we find that

Aswany's characters struggle with notions of nationality and identity to cope with the challenges in their new society, America. In other words, they must decide, “how much of their past they can bear to or are able to throw.”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Roi Simyoni, “Has multiculturalism failed?” “/1

<sup>26</sup> For more information on Muslims in France, please see, e.g. Jonathan Laurence. *Integrating Islam: Political and Religious Challenges In Contemporary France* (Washington, DC: New Brookings Institution Press, 2006); Elaine R. Thomas. *Immigration, Islam, and the Politics of Belonging in France: A Comparative Framework* (Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011)

<sup>27</sup> Nicolas Sarkozy is a French politician who served as the 23rd President of France from 16 May 2007 until 15 May 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Roi Simyoni, “Has multiculturalism failed?”

<sup>29</sup> David Cameron is the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

<sup>30</sup> Roi Simyoni, “Has multiculturalism failed?”

<sup>31</sup> For more information on assimilation, please see, Peter D. Salinas, *Assimilation, American Style* (New York: Basic Books, 1997)

<sup>32</sup> William Skidelsky. *Tales of the Windy City: The Observer*, Sunday 28 September 2008

<sup>33</sup> The melting pot is a metaphor for a heterogeneous society becoming more homogeneous and it is particularly used to describe the assimilation of immigrants to the USA.

<sup>34</sup> Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Carola Suárez-Orozco, *The new immigration: an interdisciplinary reader* (U.K: Routledge, 2005)

<sup>35</sup> Rachel Aspen, “Thinking about Cairo’ *NewStatesman*. October 30, 2008. Accessed June 11, 2013 <http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2008/10/aswany-chicago-cairo-american/1>

In *Chicago*, we find characters try to make a balance between their old ways of life in Egypt and their new life in America. For example, we find that Shaymaa Muhammadi suffers from identity crisis and cultural shock. She is a pious student who comes from the provincial town of Tanta, falls in love with an Egyptian student, Tariq Haseeb at Illinois University and abandons the strict conservative sexual codes of her Egyptian society.

When it comes to Nagi Abdul Samad, we observe that he embraces the values of the sexual freedom in America but he does not forget to take every opportunity to protest against the corruption of the Egyptian government and muster support for its downfall. He is determined to change Egypt into a democratic country. "The regime in Egypt is despotic and corrupt and it persecutes all Egyptians, Muslims and Copts... All Egyptians are suffering from discrimination so long as they are not members of the ruling party."<sup>36</sup> Hence, he poses a threat to the Egyptian regime back home since he becomes involved with expatriate opposition groups in Chicago led by Karam Doss.

However, one may argue that none of characters in *Chicago* has achieved a satisfactory balance between their Egyptian and American identities. On the one hand, we find that those who try to abandon their roots pay a very heavy price as happened with Ra'fat Thabit's only daughter who lives with an American drug addict, Jeff. Shaymaa loses her virginity to a boyfriend and Tariq Haseeb has no intention of marrying her. "I am the son of General Abd al-Qadir Haseeb, assistant director of Cairo Security; I grew up in Roxy and went to the Heliopolis Club and turned down daughters of notables. Do you expect me to end up marrying a peasant? Let her get as mad as she wants to be! To hell with her!"<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, we notice that those who cling to their Egyptian identities do not fare well too. For instance, Danana's pretension that he is a diligent student is embarrassingly exposed and he is consequently dismissed when his professor discovers his plagiarism and cheating on a research project.

He looked at Danana as if he didn't understand then went over to the cabinet himself and took two other slides that he put through a similar examination, and then looked at Danana, who bowed his head slowly. For a few moments, a silence, charged with an unknown energy, prevailed so quietly that the soft hum made by the lab's fridge sounded like destiny. Suddenly Dr. Baker threw the slides on the floor and they broke into shiny shards. Then he roared with an angry resounding voice that no one had heard from him before. "What a scumbag! The results you submitted are fabricated. Where is your honor? I will revoke your dissertation and expel you from the department at once."<sup>38</sup>

In *Chicago*, Al Aswany sheds light on fact that immigration can be a painful experience. We find he isolates his characters in an alien culture where they experience cultural traumas variably. He also examines the difficulty of transcending cultural barriers and losing one's identity. This can be seen through the characters' various experiences that any Egyptian who tries to become an American and abandons his roots will be condemned to a miserable life like in the case of Ra'fat Thabit and Muhammad Salah whose lives end in tragedy.

For instance, Ra'fat Thabit, an Egyptian American professor who boasts of being an American and who despises his culture and yet continues to carry it within him, which makes matters worse. He cannot accept his daughter Sarah's independence when she decides to move out of the family home to live with her boyfriend, Jeff, an artist who introduces Sarah to drugs. This can be seen through his conversation with his longtime friend Dr. Muhammad Salah.

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<sup>36</sup> Alaa Al Aswany. *Chicago* (U.K: Harper Perennial,2009),119

<sup>37</sup> Ibid,128

<sup>38</sup> Ibid,119

“Don’t you find it strange, Salah? That you father a little girl and you grow attached to her and you love her more than any other person on the face of the earth and you do your utmost to provide her with a happy life. And as soon as your little girl grows up, she turns against you and leaves with her boyfriend at the earliest opportunity.”

“This is natural.”

“I don’t find it natural at all.”

“Sarah is an American girl, Ra’fat. Girls in America leave their family home to live independently with their boyfriends. You know that better than me. In this country you cannot control your children’s personal lives.”

“Even you say that? You are talking exactly like my wife. You both really irritate me. What can I do to convince you both that I accept the idea that my daughter has a boyfriend? Please believe, just once and forever, this fact: I am American. I have raised my daughter with American values. I have got rid of, for good, Eastern backwardness. I no longer make a connection between a person and their genitals.”<sup>39</sup>

Though Dr. Thabit maintains that he does not interfere in Sarah’s personal life, he is very concerned about the future of his daughter with Jeff, “but I don’t trust this creep with her, not for a single moment.”<sup>40</sup> For Salah, Sarah will discover herself one day if Jeff is a bad person or not since, “she’s entitled to have her own experiences, by herself.”<sup>41</sup>

Thabit’s concern about his daughter, Sarah, reveals a deep-seated struggle within him that he cannot get rid of his Eastern roots though he claims he is fully assimilated to American culture and values. Thabit’s inner torment is shared by Muhammad Salah who understands the psychology of the cultural struggle of his friend which represents generally the psychological torment of many Egyptians and other communities living in America, to maintain a balance between the two cultures:

Suddenly he felt pity for Ra’fat. He understood him well. Ra’fat couldn’t stand the idea that his daughter was in love with another man. He was in the grips of deathly jealousy toward Jeff.... Ra’fat’s problem, however, was much more complicated: he couldn’t bear the idea of his daughter having a relationship outside marriage, for despite his harangues in defense of Western culture, he still had the mentality of the Eastern man which he attacked and mocked.<sup>42</sup>

The cultural struggle is also shared by Muhammad Salah who feels that he is lucky to have no children and wishes not to be in Thabit’s shoes now. “Maybe I’m lucky I didn’t have any children. To be barren is better than to be in Ra’fat’s shoes right now.”<sup>43</sup>

This does not condone Salah from having his own struggle himself. In spite of living in America for many years, marrying an American woman, having a successful career, Salah still yearns for the past, feels nostalgic towards Egypt and regrets his decision to immigrate to America. “This might sound ridiculous, but I now believe that my decision to emigrate was not the right thing to do.”<sup>44</sup> Salah feels that he has betrayed everyone back home, especially his beloved Egyptian woman, Zeinab Radwan who said to him on the day of his immigration to America “I regret to say that you’re a coward”<sup>45</sup>, leaving me and your friends who are fighting for democracy and justice in Egypt.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid,53

<sup>40</sup> Ibid,54

<sup>41</sup> Ibid,54

<sup>42</sup> Ibid,55

<sup>43</sup> Ibid,55

<sup>44</sup> Ibid,127

<sup>45</sup> Ibid,125

In America, new immigrants generally try to get married to American ladies in order to get American citizenships and the benefits associated with them. For example, we find Salah getting married to Chris, an American woman, to get an American citizenship, "Yes, indeed. He had used Chris sexually, got her addicted to him while he was implementing his plan of marrying her to get an American passport."<sup>47</sup> It has been a loveless marriage which ends in separation. "You know very well what you mean to me. But I'm going through a crisis that will not be over in the near future. I don't want to cause you any more pain. I suggest that we separate, if only temporarily. Sorry, Chris, but I think it's best for both of us."<sup>48</sup>

Separation has tormented Chris mentally and she starts wondering if Salah ever loved her, if he lost interest in her and if he used her all these years to get an American citizenship to enhance his career:

Did Arab men always need younger women and was that why they had more than one wife? Had Salah kept an Oriental man's mentality in spite of the years he'd spent in America? Or was the truth that he had never loved her? Had he deceived her all those years? Had he married her to get an American passport? To enhance his social status? To be the successful immigrant university professor married to an American woman? If that was true, why had he stayed with her all those years? Had he left her after getting his American citizenship, it would have been easier. She would've been able to forget, even forgive him. She was young then and could've started all over again. But now it was as if he had used her all those years then decided to throw her in the garbage. How could he bring himself to hurt her so much? Even if he didn't love her. They had lived together a whole lifetime and he couldn't undo that in just one moment. He had no right to do that. Those thoughts kept boring into her like bouts of chronic pain.<sup>49</sup>

But what Chris cannot fathom and grasp is the fact that Mumammad Salah is only physically living in America but his mind and thoughts are on his beloved Zeinab and Egypt. This can be evident in his behavior after separation with Chris where he chooses to live in the basement of his house which chronicles his feelings of nostalgia. "At midnight he would begin his trip: he would take a bath and wear cologne as if going on a date. Then he would go downstairs to the basement and put on his 1970s clothes."<sup>50</sup> In the basement, we find him open an old suitcase that is full of his clothes that he had brought to America from Egypt thirty years ago:

Before starting his nightly journey, he locked himself in, perhaps to feel completely isolated from the outside world or perhaps for fear that Chris might open the door; if she did, she would be certain that he had gone crazy. He wouldn't be able to explain what he was doing. He himself did not understand it. His overpowering desire was stronger than understanding or resistance. The clothes carried within their folds his history, the scent of his real days. Every piece of clothing brought back a different memory: those were the light cotton *Shurbagi* shirts that he used to buy from the *Swailam* store in downtown Cairo; the white sharkskin suit that he wore during summer evening special occasions; the blue suit for Thursday outings; and that was the striped black suit that he had bought especially to celebrate Zeinab's birthday. They had dinner at *Le Restaurant Union* in front of the High Court building then went to the *Cinema Rivoli*, where they watched the movie *My Father Is up the Tree*. In the inner jacket pocket he found a folded piece of paper that had been in the same place for thirty years: the stub of a ticket for an *Umm Kulthum* concert that he had attended in 1969. An idea occurred to him, so

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<sup>46</sup> For more information on the oppressive regime in Egypt, please see e.g, Tarek Osman, *Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to Mubarak* (Connecticut: Yale University Press,2011); Galal Amin, *Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press,2011)

<sup>47</sup> Ibid,123

<sup>48</sup> Ibid,127

<sup>49</sup> Ibid,253

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 254



he left the basement and came back carrying a tape recorder. He put on the song “*al-Atlal*” and sat listening to it wearing the same suit that he was wearing when he heard it for the first time.<sup>51</sup>

Salah starts listening to *Umm Kulthum* every night and when it gets close to nine a.m. Cairo time, he begins calling his old friends and relatives in Cairo. He has to lie about the reason of his sudden calls after thirty years of absence by inventing fictional stories like, “talking of a fictitious reunion of the Class of 1970 of the College of Medicine at Cairo University, or claim that there was a cooperative project between doctors in Illinois and Egypt.”<sup>52</sup> He does not want them to find out that he yearns madly for Egypt and, “that nostalgia had crushed him, that he had discovered, after turning sixty, that he had made a mistake leaving his country, that he regretted emigration to death. He should not show them his weakness and sorrows. All that he wanted was for them to talk to him a little about the past, to remember with them his real life.”<sup>53</sup>

Salah has been haunted all these years by the thought that he betrayed his people who are fighting for dignity and equality against the oppressive regime in Egypt. He remembers Zeinab and her beautiful revolutionary spirit and he can no longer keep memories from flooding:

The old pictures were appearing in his mind with amazing clarity. The floodgates of memory opened, came over and swept him away, as if the past were a gigantic genie let out of the bottle. There she was, standing before him, with her petite figure, her beautiful face, and her long black hair that she gathered in a ponytail. Her eyes were gleaming with enthusiasm as she talked to him in that dreamy voice of hers, as if she were reciting a love poem, “Our country is great, Salah, but it has been oppressed for a long time. Our people have tremendous abilities. If we have democracy, Egypt will become a strong, advanced country in less than ten years.”<sup>54</sup>

Salah recalls the farewell scene with Zeinab several times when he decides to immigrate to America leaving her and his people behind. For Zeinab, his decision of immigration is an escape from reality and a cowardly one he should not have taken.

But the dreams would soon come to an end. He would recall that final scene a thousand times, pausing and dwelling on every word, every glance, and every moment of silence. They were at their favorite spot in the garden when he told her of his decision to emigrate. He tried to be calm, to have a logical discussion, but she told him right away, “You are running away.”<sup>55</sup>

When we come to Shaymaa Muhammadi, we find her also struggle with the issue of assimilation and integration in USA especially after 9/11. She comments on the difficulties she faces in terms of language, adjustment to the new culture and she also observes how Muslims are treated miserably which makes her homesick. This can be noticed in her conversation with her colleague and lover, Tariq Haseeb:

She spoke in a soft voice, as if talking to herself, “I am completely alone here, Dr. Tariq. I have no friends or acquaintances. I don’t know how to deal with the Americans. I don’t understand them. All my life I had a perfect score in my English language classes, but here they speak another kind of English. They speak so fast and they swallow some of the letters so I don’t understand what they say.”

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 254-5

<sup>52</sup> Ibid,257

<sup>53</sup> Ibid,257

<sup>54</sup> Ibid,83

<sup>55</sup> Ibid,204

Tariq interrupted her, "You're feeling homesick, and being out of place here is quite natural. As for the language problem, we've all faced it at the beginning. I advise you to watch television a lot so you'll get used to the American accent."

"Even if my language improves, that won't change anything. I feel I am an outcast in this country. Americans shy away from me because I am Arab and because I am veiled. At the airport they interrogated me as if I were a criminal. At school the students make fun of me when they see me. Did you see how that policeman treated me?"

"That's not your problem alone. We all face unpleasant situations. The image of Muslims here suffered a lot after 9/11."

"What have I done wrong?"<sup>56</sup>

Her statement reflects how Arabs are treated with suspicion after the tragic incident of 9/11 and how Muslims are interrogated at the airports and how they are linked with violence and terrorism. Taking Shaymaa's case as a veiled Muslim woman, we can see how Americans avoid talking to her besides the prevalent stereotypes which link the veil<sup>57</sup> with the image of the oppressed Muslim woman.

For Tariq, he shares similar feelings with Shaymaa explaining that it is hard to adjust to a new culture in the beginning, the time it takes for integration and he attributes the mistreatment of Americans to Muslims due to their lack of knowledge of Islam<sup>58</sup> which calls for tolerance, peace, diversity and justice<sup>59</sup>. "Put yourself in their place. Ordinary Americans know almost nothing about Islam. In their minds, Islam is associated with terrorism and killing."<sup>60</sup>

In *Chicago*, Al Aswany continues to portray the struggle of creating a balance between being loyal to home and to the new society you live in. For example, if we examine the case of Dr. Karam Doss. He is an Egyptian Copt and a very popular surgeon. He is persecuted in Egypt due to his ethnicity. He is not allowed to work in the field of medicine back home. Escaping from persecution he immigrated to USA where he leads a very successful professional life. Yet we find him surprisingly still connected to Egypt and very concerned about the issue of the persecution of Copts<sup>61</sup> in particular and

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid,56-7

<sup>57</sup> For the debates on the veil, see Mernissi, *The Veil and The Male Elite*; Ali Mohammad Syed, *The Position of Women in Islam: A Progressive View* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*; Leila Ahmed, *Women, Gender and Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Anwar Hekmat, *Women and the Koran: The Status of Women in Islam* (Amherst: Prometheus, 1997); and Elizabeth Fernea, *In Search of Islamic Feminism: One Woman's Global Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

<sup>58</sup> For extensive information on Islam, see Mahajabeen Islam-Husain, "The Qur'an does not discriminate on the basis of gender," in *Islam: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. Jennifer A. Hurely (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2001), 76–83; John Esposito (ed.), *The Oxford History of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Karen Armstrong, *Islam* (London: Modern Library, 2000); John Esposito and Azzam Tamimi (eds.), *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007); Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Wilfred Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

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<sup>60</sup> Alaa Al Aswany, *Chicago* (U.K :Harper Perennial,2009),56-7.

<sup>61</sup> For more information on persecution of Copts, please see, Ramy Tadros ,*The War of the Words: Oppression, Egypt's Copts, and the State* (Australia: Proton Writing Consultants Pty, 2013)

the miserable record of human rights violations in Egypt in general. Karam shares his story with Nagi Abd al-Samad, an Egyptian student studying in Chicago.

“Did you learn medicine in America?”

“I am a graduate of Ayn Shams Medical School. But I fled to America to escape persecution.”

“Persecution?”

“Yes. In my day the chairman of the general surgery department,

Dr. Abd al-Fatah Balbaa, was a fanatic Muslim who didn't make a secret of his hatred for Copts. He believed that teaching surgery to Copts was not permissible in Islam because it enabled infidels to control the lives of Muslims.”<sup>62</sup>

Karam Doss continues to dwell on how Copts are persecuted and marginalized in Egypt. “Copts are passed over in all key posts in the state. Copts are persecuted and they also get killed. Have you heard of what happened in the village of *al-Kushh*? Twenty Copts were slaughtered right before the eyes of the police and no one lifted a finger to save them.”<sup>63</sup> But for Nagi, it is not only the issue of Copts being persecuted since they are part of the Egyptian people but the problem is between the people and the regime: “The problem, in my opinion, is not between Muslims and Copts; rather it is between the regime and the Egyptians. “Do you deny that there is a Coptic problem? There is an Egyptian problem, and the suffering of the Copts is part of it.”<sup>64</sup>

In a reply to a question posed by Karam Doss, “Weren't Copts massacred to convert to Islam?”<sup>65</sup> For Nagi, this is not accurate since the real reason behind the persecution of Copts is political rather than religious since Islam advocates diversity, tolerance and respect for all religions. “That's not true. If Arabs had wanted to exterminate the Copts, no one could've prevented them. But Islam commands its followers to respect the faiths of others. You cannot be a Muslim unless you recognize the other religions.”<sup>66</sup> Nagi goes on diagnosing the political situation in Egypt and its impact on the people:

All Egyptians are persecuted. The regime in Egypt is despotic and corrupt and it persecutes all Egyptians, Muslims and Copts. Of course, there are incidents of fanaticism here and there, but they don't constitute a phenomenon in my opinion. Religious persecution is a direct result of political repression. All Egyptians are suffering from discrimination so long as they are not members of the ruling party. I, for instance, am a Muslim, but they refused to appoint me to Cairo University because of my political activity.<sup>67</sup>

However, one may argue that both Karam and Nagi are seriously involved in thinking of the political situation at home and we find them emotionally connected to their roots in spite of living physically in USA. This is clearly shown when Nagi taunts him that he escaped from Egypt rather than staying to serve his own people who need him more than the Americans do.

You left your poor, miserable country for your comfortable life in America. Remember, you got a free education at the expense of those Egyptians you now despise. Egypt gave you this education so that one day you'd be useful to it. But you turned your back on the Egyptian patients who needed you. You left them to die over there and came here to work for

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid,118.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid,120.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid,119

<sup>65</sup> Ibid,119

<sup>66</sup> Ibid,119

<sup>67</sup> Ibid,120

the Americans, who don't need you.<sup>68</sup>

In turn, we find out how Karam retorts angrily, "I've never heard anything more stupid in my whole life!" and after he calms down, he starts explaining to Nagi how loyal he is to Egypt though he is living in USA and he never forgets it for one minute, only for Egypt to reject him:

I just want you to know me as I really am. For the last thirty years that I've lived in America, I haven't forgotten Egypt for a single day."

"Aren't you happy with your life here?"

He looked at me as if trying to find the right words, and then he smiled and said, "Have you had any American fruits?"

"Not yet."

"Here they use genetic engineering to make the fruit much larger and yet it doesn't taste so good. Life in America, Nagi, is like American fruit: shiny and appetizing on the outside, but tasteless."

"You're saying that after all you've achieved?"

"All success outside one's homeland is deficient." Why don't you go back to Egypt?"

"It's difficult to erase thirty years of your life. It's a difficult decision, but I've thought about it. The proposal I submitted was my first step toward going back, but they turned it down."

He said the last few words bitterly, and I said, "It's really sad for Egypt to lose people like you."

"Perhaps you find this hard to understand because you're still young. It's like when a man loves a woman and gets very attached to her and then discovers that she is cheating on him: do you understand this kind of agony? To curse the woman and at the same time to love her and never be able to forget her—that's how I feel toward Egypt. I love her and I wish to offer her all I've got, but she rejects me." I saw that his eyes were welling up with tears, so I leaned over and put my arm around him and bent over to kiss his head, but he gently pushed me away, saying as he tried to smile, "How about ending this melodrama?"<sup>69</sup>

Finally, we find both Karam and Nagi on the same page uniting all efforts to change the regime in Egypt if Egyptians want to live in freedom and dignity. They start planning and organizing events to create awareness among students and Egyptians living in Chicago, of the despotic nature of the regime back in Egypt and the urgency for the democratic transition of power that had taken place in democratic countries.<sup>70</sup>

One may notice that both Nagi and Karam are more concerned about the problems faced by their people in Egypt rather than what they face in USA though they are given an opportunity to succeed in USA economically, though such opportunity is denied at home due to nepotism and corruption. They are also able to express their views freely and build their life in USA far away from persecution and political detention. For example, we see how they organize a protest against the visit of the president of the Egyptian regime to *Chicago*. The protest is led "by Nagi Abd al-Samad and Karam

<sup>68</sup> Ibid,121

<sup>69</sup> Ibid,157

<sup>70</sup> See please, Alaa Al Aswany, "United by an injustice and anger that won't be tamed," In *The Arab Spring: Rebellion, Revolution and a new world order*, edited by Toby Manhire (London: Guardian Books, 2012); Galal Amin, *Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak, 1981-2011* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2011).

Doss together .... who kept shouting slogans and waving signs in English and Arabic: free the detainees, stop the torture, stop persecuting the Copts, down with the tyrant, and democracy for Egyptians.”<sup>71</sup>

Finally, there are many claims that USA has served as a platform for many dissident voices to express their ideas freely and enlist support for their causes back home.<sup>72</sup> In fact, dissidents see the bitter reality of oppression in their home countries and refuse to live longer in hypocrisy, degradation and humiliation. There are also voices which see that immigrants have failed America and used the American values of freedom and the right to choose, resources available to them and privileges granted to them by the American society to harm American interests at home and abroad. There has been a bitter sense of betrayal felt by Americans, especially after the tragic incidents of 9/11 which unfortunately had disastrous impact on Muslim communities living in USA. Consequently, Muslims have become subject to racial profiling, strict monitoring, humiliating interrogation at airports, phone tapping, suspicious persons are detained or deported and the image of Islam has been tarnished and circulated as a religion of violence and intolerance which fosters terrorism.<sup>73</sup>

But what Americans fail to understand is the fact that their foreign policy which is usually biased and their blind support for Israel in their occupation of Palestine and oppressing Palestinian people is responsible for acts of vengeance and violence perpetrated by their fellow Muslim brothers and sympathizers within USA or abroad. Biased American foreign policy which is based on domination and exploitation may skew why we see immigrants connected to their homes and concerned about problems faced by their own people though they live in USA. Sometimes, they are too engaged in a way that they might commit defensive acts to protect their own people from colonial invasion and exploitation of resources by foreign powers.

One may argue that the solution lies in defusing the tension by creating a diverse and pluralistic society without demonization and nullification of the “Other.” In fact, we must work hard towards “a universal notion of justice in which no single community’s prosperity, righteousness and dignity comes at the expense of another.”<sup>74</sup> It is not enough that different communities live together but they must engage with one another. Once it is achieved, we may see that immigrants keep their own identities, embrace successfully the values of their new society and integrate easily.

## CONCLUSIONS

One may conclude that Alaa Al Aswany’s *Chicago* has tackled vital issues like immigration abroad, the question of cultural assimilation and its discontents. Light has also been shed on the question of religious discrimination and political oppression in Egypt. In an answer to the timely question posed in *Chicago* of the extent to which the immigrant should be loyal to his old country and whether people can become fully assimilated members of the new society, we find that characters struggle to make a balance between their old ways of life in Egypt and their new life in America. The paper concludes that in order to defuse the tension lurking among expatriate groups, we must strive towards creating a diverse

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<sup>71</sup> Alaa Al Aswany, *Chicago*, 315

<sup>72</sup> Please see, Claus-Dieter Krohn, *Intellectuals in Exile: Refugee Scholars and the New School for Social Research* (Massachusetts :Univ of Massachusetts Pr, 1993); Joshua Muravchik, *Exporting Democracy* (USA: Aei Press, 1992)

<sup>73</sup> For more information on tarnishing the image of Islam, e.g, please see, Floyd C. McElveen, *Islam Exposed: Islam 101 and what it means to America. Are we in Danger? Are Muslims a threat to our freedom?* (Tennessee: Big Mac Publishers, 2011); Jonathan Lyons, *Islam Through Western Eyes: From the Crusades to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Brigitte Gabriel, *Because They Hate: A Survivor of Islamic Terror Warns America* (New York: Martin's Griffin, 2008); Jonathan Lyons *Islam Through Western Eyes: From the Crusades to the War on Terrorism* ( New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon , *The Age of Sacred Terror: Radical Islam's War Against America* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2003)

<sup>74</sup> Safi Omid (ed.), *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 4

and pluralistic society without demonization and nullification of the "Other." In fact, we must work hard towards, "a universal notion of justice in which no single community's prosperity, righteousness and dignity comes at the expense of another."<sup>75</sup>

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