Muslim M.D.'s in America

Novel about Egyptian immigrants is so awkwardly written as to obscure any message.

Chicago
A Novel

> By Alaa Al Aswany
> Harper. 342 pp. $25.95
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Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler
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Life in the United States is like genetically engineered fruit, heart surgeon Dr. Karam Doss tells Nagi Abd al-Samad, a student in histology at the University of Illinois Medical School. It's "shiny and appetizing on the outside, but tasteless."

> After 30 years in America, Doss remains convinced that "all success outside one's homeland is deficient." And so he has offered Egypt, the land he loves and curses, all he's got - and been rejected.

> In Chicago, his second novel, Alaa Al Aswany examines the experiences of more than half a dozen Egyptian immigrants who flee an undemocratic, despotic regime to be trained as doctors in "the land of opportunity." Arriving in Chicago "without preparation or preliminaries," they jump "into the sea fully dressed." With one or two exceptions, for better and worse, they make it. Nonetheless, Al Aswany suggests, they cannot and should not escape their past or their obligations to the land of their birth.

> Trained as a dentist, Al Aswany, alas, is not a gifted writer - and does not appear to have been well served by his translator, Farouk Abdel Wahab. Repetitive, slack, addicted to adverbs and series of rhetorical questions, the novel gives new meaning to the phrase "Windy City." Al Aswany
tells what he has just shown. After two pages of heated exchanges between Doss and Nagi, he feels the need to have the latter observe that the surgeon was "itching for a confrontation" and then add, "It seemed he didn't like what I said."

> Al Aswany's descriptions of lovemaking are right out of a Harlequin Romance. Dr. Graham received Carol with a "burning passionate desire," he writes. "He embraced her so hard that she felt his strong arms hurting her, so she moaned lightly, which heightened his desire, and he showered her with passionate kisses on her face and neck."

> Al Aswany isn't much more successful with the setting of the novel. After a brief survey of the history of Chicago, he abandons his city, which might just as readily have been Sheboygan or Charlotte. Equally important, his accounts of political realities, race relations, and international diplomacy do not ring true.

> It's a shame, because Al Aswany shows flashes of writerly inspiration throughout the novel. His portrait of the star-crossed lovers, Shaymaa Muhammadi and Tariq Haseeb, for example, is at once puckish and perceptive. An accomplished graduate of the Tanta College of Medicine in Egypt, Shaymaa comes to the States because she is over 30, unmarried, and lacking in opportunities to express her femininity. After two weeks in her dormitory apartment, she fights homesickness by dancing to Kadim al-Sahir's song "Do You Have Any Doubt?" while sliding bell peppers into a frying pan of boiling oil to make Alexander-style moussaka. Ecstatic when Kadim asks, "And how did you storm my heart?" she inadvertently sets the room on fire.

> Tariq, a doctoral student in histology at the University of Illinois, is highly disciplined, moving from lecture hall to lab to library. But, Al Aswany reveals, he is not without his little pleasures, taking pains to observe a recreational hour every night, even when exams are scheduled, which is divided into two parts: watching professional wrestling on TV and then a porn flick, where "the magical world of utmost beauty reveals itself to him." After listening to a "cacophony of orgiastic screams" for a few minutes, he races to the bathroom, takes a hot bath, calms down, and prays to the Prophet.

> Tariq refuses to marry Shaymaa because she's slept with him, and thus he appears to redeem himself at the end of *Chicago*. What is Al Aswany implying about Egyptian Americans and the mores of the Muslim world? Should they stand by them? Leave them behind? Perhaps we'll find out in a more successfully crafted sequel.

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