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Commentary 1: *War in the Land of Egypt*

Yusuf Al-Qa'id's novel *War in the Land of Egypt* is set in 1973, during the Yom Kippur War in which Egypt, alongside other Arab states, fought against Israel who had occupied territories such as the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights in 1967. When taken literally, the title seemingly refers to the Arab-Israeli War, in which the central character of the novel Masri dies fighting in. I believe however, that in his social critique, Al-Qa'id is referring to the class conflicts within Egyptian society.

The novel presents the readers with six narrators, all of whom offer a unique voice in the story. We hear from the power holders (the umda) and powerless (the night watchman), as well as outside witnesses (the friend). What is striking about the novel, however, is that its central character Masri has no narrative voice. For this reason, I believe that the true powerless party in the novel is Masri. The reader never gets to hear Masri's feelings or thoughts. It is as if Masri is but a puppet, with all the characters moving the strings and determining the course of his life. The plan to send Masri to the military in place of the umda's son was cooked up by the broker. The agreement to do so happened between the umda and the night watchman. Even after Masri's death, there are quarrels among bureaucratic officials about the possession of his body.

Al-Qa'id makes no attempt to obscure his message here. Masri means "Egyptian" in Arabic. Masri is the embodiment of all Egyptians. In his depiction of Masri as hardworking, patriotic and terribly exploited, Al-Qa'id makes a statement about the plight of ordinary Egyptians, who are slighted at the hands of Egyptian power holders. Throughout the novel, Al-Qa'id parodies the extreme levels of governmental greed and corruption and elite privilege. At

the beginning of the novel, the umda has just been granted land that was previously seized from him under Gamal Abdel Nasser's land reform initiatives. The reversal of land reform signifies the exploitation of the peasantry, who in the novel fear they will once again be left with nothing. Under the pretenses of guaranteed wages and land shares, the umda almost forces the night watchman to send Masri in his son's place. Although the night watchman does not want to send his only son into the army, he is at the mercy of the umda because of his poverty and lack of authority. At the end of the novel, the umda refuses to give up the compensation that was meant for the deceased soldier's family, an act further indicating the ruling classes' greed.

Sadat's regime banned *War in the Land of Egypt* and the novel wasn't available in Egypt until 1985. I believe Al-Qa'id's novel was banned because of its obvious critique of the ruling classes. When the friend is narrating, he asks, "Which Egypt do we really love? The Egypt of people dying of hunger or the Egypt of people dying of overeating?" (111: ch. 4). In this statement, Al-Qa'id presents a stark contrast between the lives of Egypt's different classes. Another powerful example of this is the night watchman's observation of the umda's fleshy hands. The umda's daily meals consist of exotic meats, luxuries not afforded by the lower classes.

Although *War in the Land of Egypt* is clearly a means of social criticism, the reader can infer that Al-Qa'id himself does exhibit Egyptian patriotism. In the character Masri, Al-Qa'id, a member of the intellectual elite who was born to a family of peasants, parallels himself in some ways. Al-Qa'id identifies himself as an ordinary Egyptian. What I found most striking was that although Masri is disgusted by elite corruption and disheartened at the unfortunate turn his life takes, ultimately he puts himself at the front lines of battle. With this in mind, I believe Al-Qa'id's criticism of Egypt is because of his love for his country, not in spite of it.