

On TV, peaceful seagulls are wheeling

in a blue sky over the Alexandria shoreline. Beautiful apartment blocks cluster on the bay, the wind sweeps across the corniche, boats bob lazily on gentle swells. Then comes a crash, as loud as a cannon shot; but it is only a harmless wave pounding the corniche... Anxiety ebbs and then rises, as shots of a cannon exploding, buildings falling, and planes bombing helpless cities flash among and finally replace the waves. Then the cannons in turn give way to a large steel blade which almost swallows up the screen before becoming recognisable as a bulldozer.

"Excuse me. This isn't a new world war. It's Fadda."

The bulldozer freezes. The businesslike female voice belongs to a heavily made-up woman, about sixty years old, wearing a garish rhinestone-encrusted head scarf. She yells: "*Walah Hammooo! Al-timsaha, yalla!* (Hammo, boy! The crocodile, let's go!)," the "crocodile" being her new Mercedes.

The theme song of *The White Flag* – traditional lute music backed by a synthesiser – echoes through the city streets of Alexandria. A man is taking a photograph of a villa on the corniche as the narrator recites:

"For the love of beautiful Alexandria, and for everything that is beautiful and authentic, Usama Anwar Ukasha and Muhammad Fadil present their new story *The White Flag*, a

battle mapped out by Usama Anwar Ukasha. The events of this serial are realistic; they have happened and continue to happen. But the names, places and persons are not real, and any resemblance or correspondence between these events and reality is coincidental, or the result of artistic necessity. Still, we confirm that the resemblance to real events is intentional, because these things have happened, and continue to happen."

The music rises. The bulldozer blade moves forward in square "windows," flashing across the screen behind the image of the villa framed in an oval, while the credits roll. This cacophony of images dissolves into the shore, and a gong sounds: "Round one."

So began a fifteen-part Egyptian serial set in Alexandria. The line about the crocodile soon became famous. "Crocodile" is slang for a Mercedes Benz 300 – a long, low model costing, if one were to buy it legally with taxes paid, around a quarter of a million Egyptian pounds at the time the serial was broadcast. (An older model, boxier and less expensive, is called *khanzira*, pig, and the newer aerodynamically rounded model with low front and raised trunk is *zalamukka*, a "parson's nose" – the backside of a chicken.) The story is about a fishmonger by the name of Fadda al-Madawi. Fadda is a *muallima* (a small independent merchant) who has become a millionaire real-estate developer through dirty dealings. Although Fadda was presented as an ignorant, venal clod, she was not a character people hated, but rather one people loved to hate – an Egyptian J.R. Ewing. And like J.R., Fadda preys on others more worthy than she. In *White Flag* she tries, by means mostly foul, to acquire a villa built by a European in the nineteenth century and then used by Egyptian nationalist heroes. The villa is owned by Dr. Mufid Abu al-Ghar, a retired diploma recently returned to Egypt after a thirty-year absence, a refined man who preserves what is best in his culture, and takes from other cultures what is beneficial. All the other characters in *White Flag* are on one or the other of the two "teams" clustered around Dr. Mufid and Fadda al-Madawi.

On Dr. Mufid's team is the lawyer Anis, a humble widower who has raised his son, Hisham, on his own. Hisham, an aspiring artist and an employee in one of Alexandria's "Palaces of Culture," is in love with Amal, a talented woman journalist who suffers from a crisis of confidence. Hisham also suffers from a

crisis of confidence in his professional life, which impinges on his personal life. Another of Dr. Mufid's team is Arabi, who is actually a turncoat from the other side – he is the educated son of one of Fadda's associates, the fishmonger Hanafi. Arabi is an ex-teacher who lost his job for protesting inaccuracies in government history textbooks. Arabi is in love with Fatima, Fadda's niece, who also somehow managed to get an education. Fatima has a serious approach to culture and learning: she watches the videocassette of *Fahrenheit 451*, resisting one of Fadda's children who wants to put on something crass. Fatima prefers this eminently didactic, and foreign, film. Fatima's quality is also apparent through her modest clothing, which clashes with the gaudy apparel of the other members of Fadda's brood.

Fadda's team is led off by fishmonger Hanafi, father of the heroic Arabi. His youngest son, pudgy teenage Imad, reads the newspapers to the illiterate Fadda. Hanafi is a passive accomplice of Fadda's. More dastardly is Fadda's lawyer Abu Talib, an evil version of Dr. Mufid: an educated man who uses his learning to manipulate the system. Made from the same mold are Fikri and Khayri, Fadda's tank-like sons; through bribes, cheating and private lessons, one has become a doctor and the other an engineer. Fadda's bratty daughter, Simha, is a moral disaster. She is petulant, arrogant, and has been educated in *khawagati* (foreign) schools, which in Egyptian serials are invariably equated with cultural ruin. When she falls in love – with the tortured artist Hisham, the son of Dr. Mufid's lawyer – she behaves like a vulture claiming a piece of carrion. First she attempts to buy his affections. When that doesn't work, she phones him from her hilariously vulgar room, decorated with cartoon-animal wallpaper, and holds the phone to a stereo speaker blasting a pop song by a Samira Said (1988), who throatily croons "I won't give you up no matter what..."

Fadda's team also includes Hammo, the thug who drives her "crocodile," and Nunu, a barrel-chested ruffian from the docks who has fallen in with a bad crowd. Nunu's heart is in the right place, as can be seen in his awkward but honourable attempt to wed the lewdly luscious but morally deformed Simha, Fadda's daughter. Fadda scornfully rejects Nunu as a potential son-in-law, and when next he turns to her, asking for help in making a cassette tape of his own compositions, Fadda tells him in no

uncertain terms that he is a servant, not an equal. Nunu then sings this pitiful little song:

The crocodile, the crocodile.

The chick is in it, on easy street.

I said, "Hey babe, let me in!"

She said, "Ain't no room for you."

In American pop culture, the good guys wear white and bad guys wear black; Egyptian teledrama has its own way of making the distinction between good and evil. Aside from the occasional depraved thug, identified by his leather jacket, facial scar, or simple filth, moral distinction tends to be made in terms of taste. Nunu is at his most ridiculous when he attempts to dress up to propose. He can't get his tie right, he can't even get his hair right; despite his earnest attempts to flatten it down with grease or water, it sticks out all over. Curvaceous Simha, like her obese brothers, is fond of mismatched colours, and is also not shy about displaying her body in tight or revealing clothes. Fadda, being an older woman, uses a different strategy. Rather than flout modesty, she embraces it in grotesque forms, bedecking herself in a jewel-encrusted headscarf – something between the neo-Islamic hijab and the conservative dress of uneducated traditional women. The wall of her office sports a gaudily decorated Qur'anic verse juxtaposed to a gold-framed portrait of herself in rhinestone hijab, smoking a water pipe.

The good guys, on the other hand, show impeccable taste. The men dress in well-tailored suits of muted colour. While Fadda watches belly dancers on television, grunting hearty approval, Dr. Mufid relaxes by reading his evening paper while listening to Stravinsky. When Fadda's hooligans destroy his priceless antique Chinese vase, he sheds a tear. Hisham, the young artist, lives in his studio, surrounded by soulful art works. Where Simha listens to disco music, Amal, the journalist and would-be lover of Hisham, deals with her depression by reading Salah Jahin – the "poet of Abdel Nasser" who wrote sage and sensitive colloquial quatrains in addition to his widely respected nationalistic poetry. Fadda's "crocodile," (which first appears on screen to the tune of "Yankee Doodle," played grandiosely on a synthesiser), makes a stark contrast to Dr. Mufid's well-worn Fiat compact, which Fadda's hooligans burn in the guerrilla war to obtain the villa. The "good" lawyer, Anis, appears at the

breakfast table wearing a traditional gallabiya, peeling an orange or a banana while he dispenses fatherly wisdom to his son Hisham; the "evil" lawyer Abu Talib, by contrast, makes pathetic attempts to impress Dr. Mufid by offering to show him karate films and Rambo.

Dr. Mufid and his allies seek to enlist the aid of the common people, *awlad al-balad*. *Ibn al-balad* (the singular of *awlad al-balad*), literally "son of the town," or "son of the place/region," means a real Egyptian, a regular guy; the salt of the earth, or, alternately, a diamond in the rough. Nunu, for example, with his broken education (suggested by his broken Arabic), remains unpolished, coarse and misdirected, though decent at heart if only he would accept the guidance of his cultural betters. Arabi, son of Fadda's henchman Hanafi, is an *ibn al-balad* smoothed and polished by high culture.

When Arabi is presented to Dr. Mufid, the older man is impressed, and tells Arabi how surprised he is to find that a person from a lower-class background could become truly educated. Their ensuing conversation is a straightforward appeal to the masses:

Arabi: You would have thought that [people from the popular quarters are vulgar] if not for me?

Dr. Mufid: Of course. Because you are the son of the muallim Hanafi, and of this popular environment. And this means that [Fadda's attempt to take over the villa] has no relation to class or to social position; it is connected only with circumstances – circumstances which concentrate the power of money in the hands of the ignorant and encourage them to scorn beauty, to destroy authenticity and to leave no value sacred.

Arabi: I understand, Doctor. This vulgarity isn't a characteristic of most people; on the contrary, there are many people from the Bahri quarter, and Kom Shaqaafa and Muharram Beh – a thousand neighbourhoods from all over Egypt which are downtrodden. And yet the people from these places sense beauty, understand it and believe in it. The attack on you from those who want to take the villa and destroy it isn't from them; those who attack you are a boil which is nurtured by defects which afflict society and upset its balance.

Here the TV serial is making its own appeal to *awlad al-balad*, reaching out not to those debased by vulgarity (like Fadda),

but to the salt of the earth, those who with a little enlightenment would be Egypt's backbone.

Eventually the struggle between the respective teams of Dr. Mufid and Fadda moves into the world of culture. Dr. Mufid attempts to enlist the support of artists and intellectuals to save his endangered villa. Fadda counters with large, well-publicised donations to the arts. The more spineless members of the art world give a celebration in honour of "Fadda al-Madawi, patroness of the arts." Banners are raised at the Palace of Culture on the Alexandria corniche, Hisham's workplace: "The Palace of Culture welcomes the honoured guest Fadda al-Madawi, number-one intellectual." Fadda's team has appealed to Hanafi's son Arabi – the only educated person they know – to write her speech. But Arabi, who is on the "Mufid team," writes a parody of a speech, which Fadda turns into an even more laughable debacle:

Fadda (*in ponderous grammatically incorrect classical Arabic*): Ladies and gentlemen, I face you with thanks and gratitude.

Hammo (*standing in the crowd of paid supporters*): Seven, seven (*the crowd yells "14"*), seven, seven (*crowd yells "moon of 14."*) [*They are comparing Fadda to the full moon, 14 days into the lunar month, saying that she is beautiful*].

Fadda (*slaughtering the classical Arabic language*): The truth is, what I did is an expression of a deep belief in art and in the serious role which it plays in the life of the people.

Hammo (*standing again in the crowd*): Life of the people! Life of the people! (*The crowd responds.*)

Fadda: Some people ask, "What is the relationship of culture to fish?" (*The bribed arts official sitting next to her starts to look nervous.*) The truth is that the connection was established a long time ago – since the time of Alexander of the two horns. [*Alexander the Great, who is sometimes called Iskandar dhua-l-qarnayn (Alexander of the horns) because he is depicted in the Qur'an (XVIII. 83-98) and in contemporary Egyptian iconography with ram's horns, as the son of Amon.*]

Hammo: Long live Alexander of the two horns! Two horns! Two horns! (*the crowd responds*).

Fadda: Alexander, father of Alexandria – is this sweet? ("sweet!" *the crowd replies*) – loved fish very much, and built

Alexandria on the coast just for the sake of fish.

Nunu (*standing behind her on the podium*): Wrong, ya hagga! [*literally someone who has gone on the pilgrimage to Mecca, but in Egypt also a term of respect given to elders. Nunu begins to panic as Fadda departs from the text.*]

Fadda (*pushes Nunu aside and continues without a text, now speaking in low colloquial*): And who was the teacher of that Alexander? He was a very very very famous *khoga* [*"teacher": she uses an obsolete, deeply colloquial and etymologically Persian word*].

Nunu: Aristotle, ya hagga, Aristotle.

Fadda: That's right, Aristotle. He knew that if he ate a bowl of stewed fish [*sayyadiyya, another vulgar reference that clashes with her allegedly high purpose*] his brain would open up and he would become cultured (*the crowd becomes restless, some in shock, others in support*).

Hanafi (*in the crowd, proudly to the person seated next to him*): My son professor Arabi wrote this speech.

Fadda (*to Nunu*): What's going on? Did I do something wrong?

Nunu: No, that's right. Aristotle.

The bribed official (*in a growing panic*): Finish up, finish up!

Dr. Mufid (*standing in the audience*): I want to say something.

Bribed official: Excuse me, sir, but you're not on the program.

Dr. Mufid: What program? This is a farce (*he rushes to the microphone before anyone can stop him*). I don't want to make a speech, or to say very much, I just want to bring to your attention the reality which appears before you. The "honourable" Madam Fadda al-Madawi who stands before you delivering this precious speech on the relation of fish to culture, wants to apply these words to the house of Abu al-Ghar: she wants to turn history and art into a bowl of fish stew!

At this point the meeting threatens to dissolve into chaos. Hammo tries to whip up the crowd in favour of Fadda, but many people – inhabitants of the popular quarters, the true *awlad al-balad* – rally spontaneously to Dr. Mufid. It looks like a fight will break out, but Hanafi gets Fadda's people under control, giving Abu Talib, Fadda's evil lawyer, a chance to launch a counterattack.

Abu Talib (*grabbing the microphone*): In answer to the doubters and the rumour-mongers, I am compelled to announce a huge new project – the big surprise of the night: a gift from Madam Fadda al-Madawi to all of Alexandria! (*He pulls out an architectural drawing.*) The “Simha City for the Arts”! A complete city of 30 thousand square feet. Including the following: two movie studios which will return the centre for film production to Alexandria, which long ago had the first studio in Egypt (*Dr. Mufid looks disgusted*); two studios for television production, a lab for printing and developing film, a centre for recording with computerised equipment (*Nunu’s eyes light up*), a high-rise apartment for the administration of the city for the arts (*the bribed official looks pleased with himself and straightens his tie*), a supermarket with “restaurant” [*he appeals to class snobbery, inserting a foreign word*], three hamburger restaurants, three video outlets, three shoe stores – all together, four outlets selling elegant and modest clothes (*the camera turns to Fadda in her gaudy Islamic parody*). And I want to use this occasion to reply to Dr. Mufid Abu al-Ghar that Fadda al-Madawi wasn’t going to buy his villa just to destroy it, but to make it a part of the city for the arts to which she has given the dearest name she could – that of her daughter, that mistress of chastity and virtue, Simha Shatir (*he slurs the name in his excitement, spraying spittle on the crowd*).

Fadda’s speech and the ensuing imbroglio set the stage for the final confrontation. Although she has silenced officialdom with her bribes to the artistic community, Fadda cannot stop Amal from publishing revelations on the sleazy way she built her empire. Outraged, she has Amal and Hisham kidnapped, drugged, and then picked up in a police raid in one of Alexandria’s seamy quarters. Dr. Mufid capitulates; it is the villa in exchange for Amal and Hisham, whom Fadda can free through her influence with the authorities. We see a stony-faced Dr. Mufid boarding a taxi, a rough stick beside him in the car. The taxi proceeds down the corniche – figuratively down because he descends into progressively rougher neighbourhoods. He disembarks in a very rough area indeed, and proceeds down an alley festooned, ironically, with a banner reading “Alexandria is beautiful – keep it clean.” He passes Hanafi and Hammo, who stare in astonishment. Even they seem to feel the tragedy of the moment.

Upon the stick hangs a white shirt, which precedes Dr. Mufid into Fadda's office, the door held open by an amazed Hammo. A deal is struck: the villa at the market price, plus an extra LE 100,000 thrown in by Fadda in a grotesque parody of generosity, in exchange for the release of Amal and Hisham from prison. Fadda and Dr. Mufid then proceed to a realtor's office to sign the documents. Fadda stands, her arms raised, smile on her face, screaming for her "crocodile," her fancy Mercedes: "*Hammo! At-timsaha yalla!*" Her moment of triumph, the victory of barbarism over civilisation, was encoded in the very first scene of the series.

The members of Dr. Mufid's team gather to console the dejected man. They insist on a last-ditch defence of the villa and the heritage it represents. Dr. Mufid, weary, defeated, tries to tell them the game is over, but his loyal followers refuse to surrender. The final confrontation begins, just as in the first episode: the villa, the approaching bulldozer... But from the villa now come three lines of people: first the intellectuals, led by Hisham, then the *awlad al-balad*, with Arabi at their head, and finally a group of students led by Fadda's niece Fatima. On the other side a much smaller group of people arrives to support the bulldozer: first Fadda in the "crocodile," driven by her lackey Hammo, then Abu Talib. On the villa side Dr. Mufid pushes his way to the front of the intellectuals. Nunu comes to the front of the *awlad al-balad*; he has finally understood the depth of his former boss's corruption, and formed a new alliance with the upholders of Egypt's authentic heritage. Fadda rants at the defenders of the villa to no avail. "Let her bulldoze us," says Hisham. "We're no better than the people you bulldoze every day," screams Amal. "You've bulldozed me for a long time," says Nunu, "but not today." Beside herself with rage, Fadda screams that the bulldozer will advance whether or not people are in its way. Dr. Mufid, heartened by his followers' defiance, finally recovers his nerve. He meets Fadda's threat in Gandhian style by sitting on the pavement. His followers sit beside him. They link hands, raising them above their heads in an unmistakable show of unity. The bulldozer advances...

Just before it makes contact with the first line of people the image freezes. The sound of a teletype machine, audible as the scene built to its climax, becomes louder, then the voice of the

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The White Flag

narrator intones, "An appeal: those sitting on the pavement around the villa of Abu al-Ghar in Alexandria call upon you to sit with them so that Dr. Mufid and company are not forced to raise the white flag..."

*This text is adapted from a chapter in **Walter Armbrust's** *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Mr Armbrust is a visiting scholar at Princeton University.*

