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Egyptian Drama and Social Change: A Study of Thematic and Artistic Development in Yūsuf Idrīs's Plays

by

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Egyptian drama and social change: Yūsuf Idrīs's plays

Abstract

This study examines the drama of Yūsuf Idrīs (1927-1991), a well-known Egyptian playwright who has made very important contributions to the search for Arab roots, Arab identity, and a new face for Egyptian (Arab) drama.

The analysis of Idrīs's eight plays (written over a quarter of a century) in the light of Egyptian (Arab) post-1952 social, political, and cultural realities has enabled us to clarify the playwright's ideas and understand why his literary works have occasioned so much discussion and so many polemics.

This study shows that Idrīs's plays mirror and document the post-Revolutionary Egyptian (Arab) era. They also appeal to the reader's conscience, calling for change and reform. Furthermore, Idrīs's plays reflect the artistic search for an original Egyptian (Arab) dramatic form, a search the playwright himself provoked. Finally, Idrīs's plays reveal the author's faith in the true human qualities of the Egyptian (Arab) man and his tremendous potential, which is yet to be awakened and explored.

Résumé

Cette étude porte sur les oeuvres de Yūsuf Idrīs (1927-1991), un dramaturge égyptien bien connu qui apportera une importante contribution dans la recherche des racines et de l'identité arabe ainsi qu'un nouveau visage au théâtre égyptien (arabe).

L'analyse de huit pièces d'Idrīs (qui ont été écrites durant une période d'un quart de siècle), à la lumière du contexte socio-politico-culturel du monde égypto-arabe d'après 1952, nous ont permis de clarifier et de comprendre pourquoi ses ouvres littéraires ont suscité tant de discussions et de polémiques.

Cette recherche démontre que les pièces d'Idrīs sont le reflet de la période post-révolutionnaire égyptienne (arabe), qu'elle documente aussi. Elles interpellent la conscience du lecteur, plaidant pour le changement et les réformes. De plus, les pièces d'Idrīs reflètent la recherche d'un style dramatique égyptien (arabe) original, une quête que le dramaturge aura lui-même provoqué. Enfin, les pièces d'Idrīs révèlent la foi de l'auteur dans les véritables qualités humaines de l'homme égyptien (arabe) ainsi que dans son potentiel extraordinaire qui reste encore à être redécouvert et exploré.

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To my mother

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Introduction

Modern Arabic drama does not have a long tradition. This particular kind of literature developed in Arab countries in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. From the beginning, Egyptian authors significantly contributed to the process of forming original Arabic drama and theatre. Egyptian stage activity and the works of the best Egyptian playwrights influenced the development of drama in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and the Maghrib.

During the post-revolutionary years and especially in the 1960s, theatre activity in Egypt increased greatly. ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir's Revolution of 1952, which brought about fundamental political and social changes in the country, also created significant progress in the world of culture, including drama and theatre. During ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir's regime, the growing creative activities surrounding the theatre were given government encouragement, although they were also subject to censorship. In this new atmosphere playwrights, actors, producers and critics (a special magazine entitled *al-Masraḥ* was published) began to form the new face of Egyptian drama. The post-revolutionary period is marked by a large number of interesting plays and the appearance of a new generation of playwrights. Egyptian drama, previously dominated by realism, entered an era of change, with new trends such as neorealism, surrealism, symbolism, expressionism, theatre of the absurd and science fiction. Under the influence of all these new Western forms and trends, Egyptian authors did not forget their own tradition and folklore. Instead, tradition and folklore became an important source of inspiration.

In the 1950s, the old generation of playwrights like Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, ᶜAzīz Abāẓa, Maḥmūd Taymūr and ᶜAlī Aḥmad Bākathīr were joined by young authors like Nuᶜmān ᶜĀshūr, Yūsuf Idrīs, Alfred Faraj, Rashād Rushdī, Saᶜd al-Dīn Wahba, Mikhāʾīl Rūmān, ᶜAlī Sālim and Luṭfī al-Khūlī.

Arab and Western critics consider Yusuf Idrīs (1927-1991) as an author who made very important contributions to the search for Arab roots, Arab identity and a new face in

Egyptian drama. His original and creative plays with elements of strong social and political criticism illustrate the evolution and change which occurred in Egyptian drama during the period 1952-1982. These plays are also a dramatic response to the crucial political events and important social and cultural issues of Egyptian society. They serve as an artistic documentation of the Egyptian post-Nāṣir realities which, according to Idrīs, could be called "truly theatre from the first act"[1]. Idrīs's plays not only document the "twentieth century Egyptian story", they also appeal to the reader's conscience, calling for changes and reforms. Furthermore, these plays reveal the playwright's deep faith in the true human qualities of Egyptian (Arab) man and his tremendous potential yet to be awakened and explored.

Many articles have been written by Arab and Western scholars in journals such as *al-Ādāb, al-Kātib, al-Majalla, al-Masraḥ* and *Journal of Arabic Literature* about Yūsuf Idrīs, his fiction and drama. However, up until the present time only two studies containing a discussion of Idrīs's drama have appeared. W.N. Kirpičenko,[2] in her book *Yūsuf Idrīs*, studies his fiction and discusses two of Idrīs's plays,namely, *al-Fārāfīr* and *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*. Nādiya Faraj[3] in the second part of her study *Yūsuf Idrīs wa-l-Masraḥ al-Miṣrī al-Ḥadīth* presents Idrīs's world of theatre. The seventy-page analysis elaborates on several aspects of Idrīs's plays, for example, the social and the political issues in Egyptian society, ways to understand the playwright's creativity, form and language. However, Nādiya Faraj's analysis is brief. She points out the importance of Idrīs's plays for the development of modern Egyptian drama and emphasizes the main features of his creativity. The critic does not analyze the evolution of Idrīs's style and the changes of his portrayal of Egyptian society which correspond to this evolution.

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1 Y. Idrīs, *Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr*, Cairo: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-ᶜArabī, 198ɔ, p.119.

2 W.N. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, Moscow: Nauka, 1980.

3 N.R. Faraj, *Yūsuf Idrīs wa-l-Masraḥ al-Miṣrī al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo: Dār al-Maᶜārif, 1976.

The plays of Idrīs, especially those from the 1960s, together with his article[4] "Naḥwa Masraḥ Miṣrī" (Towards an Egyptian Theatre) caused a lot of controversy. Many critics dealt with the issue of various influences which built Idrīs's theatre and argued that his creativity was overloaded with Western features. Seeing the plays through the prism of Idrīs's study "Towards an Egyptian Theatre", some scholars did not look closely into the matter, that is, did not analyze the true content of the plays. Therefore, they were unable to grasp and point out how Idrīs's theatre grew up with Egyptian (Arab) society and how it responded to social, political and cultural developments. In other words, they failed to see Idrīs as a "truly Egyptian and Arab" playwright.

This study is an attempt to present a thematic and artistic analysis of Idrīs's drama within the context of Egyptian and Arab post-revolutionary social and political realities. Our aim is to demonstrate how the playwright's creativity was nourished by the most important Egyptian and Arab concerns. Our thematic analysis focuses first on Idrīs's portrayal of the changing situation of an Egyptian (Arab) man and his society and then on the author's concern with the human condition in general and the future of man. This analysis is complemented by the discussion of several related problems (e.g., the issue of a leader, the problem of modern women, etc.) touched upon by the author.

Our literary analysis of the plays concentrates on the evolution of Idrīs's dramatic form. Our analysis shows how this form evolved from a simple one-act transformation of the short story through various experiments into a mature and expressive full dramatic structure. The artistic analysis of Idrīs's plays presented in this study points out the originality of Idrīs's form and depicts its Egyptian (Arab) features. Furthermore, it also demonstrates how the formal developments are related to the themes, ideas and issues presented by the author.

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4 Y. Idrīs, "Naḥwa Masraḥ Miṣrī", *al-Farāfīr*, Cairo: Maktabat Gharīb, 1977, pp.7-48. The article was also published in *al-Kātib*, January, February, March 1964.

While discussing the plays, we will evaluate the critical views produced by Idrīs's drama and present our own view concerning some positions presented by the critics. Idrīs's themes will be illustrated by quotations (translated) in the text.

The first chapter of this study briefly discusses the life and literary career of Idrīs. The sketch of the author's life is supplemented by : a discussion of major (Eastern and Western) influences which helped shape his personality as a man of letters, a presentation of Idrīs's views concerning the role and function of an author in society, and a review of Idrīs's fiction. The first chapter establishes a base, a starting point for the journey into the imaginative world of Idrīs's drama.

The second chapter deals with the playwright's early experiments with drama, i.e., with his plays from the 1950s, such as *Malik al-Quṭn* (The Cotton King, 1957), *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* (Faraḥāt's Republic, 1957) and *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija* (The Critical Moment, 1958). The thematic analysis of these plays reveals a gradual evolution of Idrīs's themes. His portrayal of Egyptian society from the 1950s begins with the new image of the peasant who learned effectively from the "revolutionary lesson" (*Malik al-Quṭn).* Subsequently, we pass through a brutal confrontation with unrealized hopes and vanished dreams into a beautiful vision of an ideal republic (*Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*). Then, we explore Idrīs's attempt to uncover the nature of human fear (*al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*). Finally, in the last section of the chapter we focus on Idrīs's experiments with the formal structure of his plays, which remains in close relation with the gradual evolution and refinement of his themes.

The third chapter of this study examines the 1960s, the most interesting period in the development of Idrīs's plays. Here we follow the playwright's search for an Egyptian (Arab) identity for his drama. The plays analyzed here illustrate well the changes, inspirations and creative transformations which have occurred in Egyptian drama during the most fertile phase of its development. Idrīs's portrayal of the Egyptian realities of the 1960s begins with a tragic image of the life of an Egyptian man depicted in *al-Fārāfīr* (The Farfūrs, 1964). Subsequently, our discussion moves on to the "grotesque" *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* (The

Terrestial Comedy, 1966) which presents an ironic and bitter picture of Egyptian society in the deep crisis of the 1960s: ruined economically, and split by ideological problems and contradictions. Then, we analyze Idrīs's political satire *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn* (The Striped Ones, 1969) and look closely into his quest for a new type of hero-leader. The last section of this chapter brings an examination of the artistic features of the above-mentioned plays. Our analysis here focuses on Farfūr, a unique character invented by Idrīs for his theatre. Furthermore, we elaborate on various Eastern and Western influences which possibly inspired the playwright in the successful search for an Egyptian and Arab identity for his drama.

The last chapter of this study is devoted to the two plays written in the 1970s and 1980s, that is, during the period when Egyptian drama was passing through a time of artistic crisis. The aim of our discussion here is to demonstrate that despite the artistic stagnation in the Egyptian theatre, Idrīs's plays written in the 1970s and 1980s remained creative and original and were still closely attached to the Egyptian realities. The thematic analysis of *al-Jins al-Thālith* (The Third Sex, 1970) emphasizes the playwright's optimism and hopes for a better future for his nation. The discussion on *al-Bahlawān* (The Clown, 1982) reveals Idrīs's strong and bitter criticism of the Egyptian social and political realities of the 1980s and points out his persistent, clear call for necessary changes. The artistic analysis of the above-mentioned plays brings back the personality of Farfūr and once again reveals his role in Idrīs's dramatic world. Subsequently, we elaborate on the interesting structure and the science-fiction features of *al-Jins al-Thālith*. Finally, we present Idrīs's search for a concise and expressive dramatic structure manifested in the simple and original form of his last play, that is, in *al-Bahlawān*.

Our final look at Idrīs's plays from *Malik al-Quṭn* to *al-Bahlawān* allows us to point out once again the enormous creativity and originality of Idrīs as an Egyptian and Arab playwright and his tremendously underestimated and neglected potential as self-appointed spokesman for Egypt, the Egyptian people, and the entire Arab world.

Chapter I
Yūsuf Idrīs: His Life and Work

Biography

Yūsuf Idrīs was born on May 19, 1927 in a small village called al-Bayrūm in the governorate of al-Sharqiyya, in the Delta area of Egypt.[1] His father, Idrīs ᶜAlī, who belonged to the provincial middle class, studied for three years in Cairo at the al-Azhar University and then tried his hand at numerous jobs, such as a constructor digging canals by order of the Ministry of Irrigation, an administrator of large estates, and finally as an independent expert on land reclamation. Since his career entailed continuous travel, he entrusted his eldest son Yūsuf, who was then five years old, to his wife's grandmother living in al-Bayrūm. The boy's childhood there was not a happy one. The family lived in difficult circumstances. Furthermore, Yūsuf was the only child among the adults who expected him to behave as one of them and punished him if he did otherwise. In his early youth, as Idrīs recalls, he felt very lonely and experienced a sense of bereavement. These feelings were intensified by a particularly strong attachment to his loving father.[2] Being away from his parents hurt him

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1 The study of W.N. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, Moscow: Nauka, 1980, is an excellent, detailed source on Idrīs's life, creative influences and selected fictional and dramatic works. The author worked for several years in the Russian Cultural Institute in Cairo. Her study is based on interviews and discussions with Idrīs in Cairo (1956-1960), in Tunis (1963), in Cairo (recorded interview, May 1967), in Moscow (September-October 1968) and further studies and research in Cairo (1971-1974). Much interesting information concerning the author's life and work during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s may also be found in the collections of his articles: *Ahammiyyat an Natathaqqaf.. yā Nās*, Cairo: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-ᶜArabī, 1985; *ᶜAzf Munfarid*, Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1987; *Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr*, Cairo: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-ᶜArabī, 1985; *Inṭibāᶜāt Mustafizza*, Cairo: Markaz al-Ahrām li-l-Tarjama wa-al-Nashr, 1986; *Islām bilā Ḍifāf*, Cairo: Al-Hayᵓa al-Miṣriyya al-ᶜĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 1989; *"Jabartī" al-Sittīnāt*, Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1983; *Khulūw al-Bāl*, Dār al-Maᶜārif, 1986; *Madīnat al-Malāᵓika*, Cairo: Al-Hayᵓa al-Miṣriyya al-ᶜĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 1989.

2 Idrīs recalls these years in his interview: Nabīl Faraj, "Yūsuf Idrīs", *al-Majalla*, January 1971, p. 100.

deeply. He describes his childhood as "that of an orphan whose parents were still alive".[3] Feeling lonely and isolated, Yūsuf had a hard time making close friends with other pupils in the school.

The first memories from Yūsuf's childhood are those of Arab stories and tales preserved in oral tradition, and narrated during evenings by his father, a very talented story-teller. These stories left quite an impression on Yūsuf's imagination, as they vividly described events of everyday life of villagers from al-Bayrūm. It might be quite possible that one can detect in these well-remembered narrations the source for the stories, novels, novellas, sketches and images which later on brought fame and popularity to the young author. This remark is suggested by Shukrī Ayyād, an Egyptian critic who, commenting on Idrīs's writings, said:

> His stories amaze the reader not only because of the deep meaning and the way of thinking conveyed by the author but also by the fact that they appear to us as if they were written without any effort, as the author was simply born in a family of story-tellers and learned this art while learning how to talk.[4]

As for Yūsuf's mother, she was a woman with an unbending, domineering character who failed to bestow motherly affection upon her son. There was no warm attachment between Yūsuf and his mother. Her cool and reserved attitude toward him and her methods of punishment had quite a negative influence on shaping the character of the future author. As he recalls, this resulted in the development of feelings of guilt and a lack of confidence in himself.[5] These feelings remained imbedded in Idrīs's heart and stayed with him throughout his life.

Yūsuf's relationship with his grandmother who brought him up in al-Bayrūm was also devoid of any affection. However, her coolness, harsh treatment and reserved attitude toward

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3 W.N. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 28.

4 Ibid., p. 26.

5 N.R. Faraj, *Yūsuf Idrīs wa-l-Masraḥ al-Miṣrī al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo: Dār al-Maᶜārif, 1976, p. 93.

him was compensated to a certain degree by her gift for telling stories. Once again the boy could fill his imaginative and creative mind with numerous, wonderful stories and fairy-tales stored in her memory. According to Idrīs, this was the experience that fired his interest in fiction. The imagination of Yūsuf, still a child, was stimulated also by observing the festivities and the fairs accompanying the anniversaries of the local saints.

Idrīs remembers very well his great grandmother. She was the only woman in the family who used to give him the love, warmth and affection he really needed. The author recalls their relationship as follows:

> My grandmother was very firm with her (my great grandmother) and me but we both were fooling her. I used to steal milk, coffee and sugar for her (for medical reasons she was forbidden to drink coffee) and I used to borrow some chewing tobacco for her from my grandfather... My great grandmother always rewarded me for all this with the most beautiful and fabulous reward. She used to narrate to me stories about our family history, her wedding and about old customs that we inherited from our predecessors. The family of my mother is from the Arabian Peninsula.[6]

Upon the completion of elementary school in al-Bayrūm, Yūsuf travelled with his family and he had to move from one secondary school to another starting from Dumyāṭ and moving on from there to Zaqāzīq, Manṣūra and Ṭanṭā.

In Dumyāṭ, Yūsuf then twelve years old, stayed again with an elderly person, namely, his uncle ʿAbd al-Salām who was approximately sixty years old and forced to a sedentary existence by rheumatism. The relationship between Yūsuf and his uncle seemed to be a friendly one and, to his delight, ʿAbd al-Salām also proved to be an inexhaustible source of beautiful tales from *The Thousand and One Nights* and popular legends. The association with ʿAbd al-Salām became a very important factor in the process of crystallizing Yūsuf's personality and left a long-lasting impression on the future author:

> Not only had this budding talent for story-telling received fresh encouragement, but the period in Dumyāṭ with the man who had surmounted

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6 Y. Idrīs, *Islām bilā Ḍifāf*, p. 130, v. 12-23.

formidable physical handicaps also convinced him of the infinite resources of the human mind.[7]

During the years preceding his university studies Idrīs was reading with enthusiasm whatever was within reach.[8] His reading list from that period includes works of European literature from those containing high artistic values to adventure novels and crime stories. As for his knowledge of Arabic literature, it was quite limited to the obligatory reading list. As Idrīs recalls, Arabic literature did not attract him with the exception of Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's *ᶜAwdat al-Rūḥ*,[9] and the novellas of Tāhir Lāshīn and Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī, which were able to harmoniously combine European form and style with Egyptian native tradition and popular humour.

In the year 1945 Idrīs completed his secondary school with excellent results and his marks placed him in the twenty-third position among all the high school graduates of Egypt in that year. Furthermore, he was exempted from tuition fees when he chose to enroll in the medical faculty at Cairo University.[10] Then began a new and turbulent phase of Idrīs's life.

In the history of Egypt, the 1940s, especially the latter half of the decade, were marked by a growing protest against the presence of the British in the country. Since 1922 the country was formally an independent state, but large numbers of British troops were still present everywhere. With growing disappointment and embarrassment resulting from King

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7 P.M. Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981, p. 22.

8 The reading list of Idrīs is discussed extensively by: W.N. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, pp. 29-31, 39-40; Ghālī Shukrī, "Yūsuf Idrīs", *Ḥiwār*, November-December 1965, pp. 43-44, and P.M. Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, pp. 44-46. In his articles Idrīs frequently presents his reflections on both Arabic and Western literatures, classical and modern. For example, his fascination with the novel *Bidāya wa Nihāya* by Najīb Maḥfūẓ (*"Jabartī" al-Sittīnāt*, p. 76), the poetry of Ṣalāḥ ᶜAbd al-Ṣabūr (*"Jabartī" al-Sittīnāt*, p. 100), the ideas of Dostoyevsky (*Ahammiyyat an Natathaqqaf..yā Nās*, p. 82) and the art of Sartre (*"Jabartī" al-Sittīnāt*, pp. 63-67); he recalls his artistic polemics with Yūsuf al-Sibāᶜī (*"Jabartī" al-Sittīnāt*, p. 76) and records his disappointment with the novel *Doctor Zhivago* (*"Jabartī" al-Sittīnāt*, p. 116).

9 T. al-Ḥakīm, *ᶜAwdat al-Rūḥ*, Cairo, 1933.

10 N.R. Faraj, *Yūsuf Idrīs wa-l-Masraḥ al-Miṣrī al-Ḥadīth*, p. 94.

Fārūq's policy and private life and from the old parties which were discredited, the agitation of new movements such as the Muslim Brothers and the growing left-wing groups, appealed strongly to the nationalist-minded young intellectuals and students who marched in demonstrations, clashed with the police and engaged in conspiracy. Their agitation aimed at achieving Egypt's real independence and overthrowing the old political system.

From the beginning of his university studies, Idrīs joined this nationalist progressive movement. He actively participated in the plotting, clandestine operations and militant actions against the British and rose quickly to become one of the principal agitators in the medical faculty on whom the secret police kept a constant eye. In January 1946 Idrīs became a member of The Students' and Workers' Committee.

In February 1946 the students and the workers took part in demonstrations against the British, the King and the Government clashing with police forces on ʿAbbās Bridge (now Giza Bridge). This event left a lasting impression on the author. He says:

> Since the problem that happpened to us... on the ʿAbbās Bridge, I became closely attached to the nationalist movement. I suffered personally from whatever happened to Egypt all these times. I was imprisoned, fired, ill and assaulted. I am still suffering.[11]

In 1951 he was elected the secretary of the faculty's student union and admitted to a secret organization called The Executive Committee for Armed Struggle (*al-Lajna al-Tanfīdhiyya li-l-Kifāḥ al-Musallaḥ*). However, Idrīs's activities in this Committee were rather limited and did not extend beyond assisting in the organization of training camps for guerrilla fighters in 1951 in the Canal Zone and collecting money for weapons and equipment.[12] In spite of the fact that he was not directly involved in violent action, his political activity at the university led Idrīs twice to jail, namely, in 1949 when he was

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11 Y. Idrīs, *Islām bilā Ḍifāf*, p. 10, v. 3-8.

12 Idrīs recalls his experiences in "*Jabartī*" *al-Sittīnāt*, pp. 90-91.

detained for two months and again in 1952 when after Black Saturday[13] he spent three months behind bars.

Idrīs's interest in journalism grew during his university years, when in 1950 he began to print and distribute a political periodical *Majallat al-Jamīʿ* (Everyman's Magazine). Unfortunately, the first issue was immediately confiscated and the brave editor arrested, led before a disciplinary council and suspended from the university for one year. Later on, Idris began his contributions to the magazine *al-Kātib*, a leaflet of the Egyptian Peace Partisans edited by Yūsuf Ḥilmī in 1951 and perhaps also to *al-Malāyīn*. At the same time he also attempted to pursue his literary interests and passions, which resulted in the publication on April 4, 1950 in the magazine *Rūz al-Yūsuf*, of the author's first story entitled: *Laʿnat Jabal* (A Mountain's Curse).[14] Soon the critics began to receive Idrīs's stories with growing interest and enthusiasm and regarded them as "testimony to a rising talent".[15] Eventually, even before his first collection of short stories was published, the author was considered by Egyptian literary critics as "the founder of the new school of short stories in Egypt".[16]

The Revolution of 1952 was a crucial event in the history of modern Egypt as it began a new era in the sphere of politics, economics and culture.[17] For Idrīs personally, the year of

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13 Black Saturday: The burning and the looting of European buildings in central Cairo on 26 January 1952, widely cited as a precursor of the revolution of 23 July. No one has ever proved who started Black Saturday. Some suspected the society of Muslim Brothers, others Young Egypt, or even the agents of Fārūq. A. Goldschmidt states in his book: "Black Saturday was the collective expression of many Egyptians' hostility to Western wealth, power and cultural influence. It also expressed the bankruptcy of the old regime" (see: A. Goldschmidt, *Modern Egypt*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988, p. 8).

14 W.N. Kirpičenko states, based on her interview with Y. Idrīs in May 1967, that his first story *Laʿnat Jabal* was published in *Rūz al-Yūsuf* (4 April 1950) and later in *al-Ḥilāl* (March 1977); W.N. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, pp. 33-34.

15 J. Bielawski, K. Skarzynska-Bochenska, J. Jasinska, *Nowa i wspolczesna literatura arabska 19 i 20 w*, Warsaw: Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1978, p. 442.

16 Ibid., p. 443.

17 The events of the 1952 Revolution had a great impact on Idrīs and influenced his political, social and cultural ideas. In his writings he frequently returns to the days of

1952 was a landmark in more than one respect. Upon passing the final examinations in December 1951-January 1952, he pursued his medical training as an intern in the Qaṣr al-ᶜAynī Hospital. However, his interest in literature did not stop. With time, Idrīs started to apply himself more seriously to the art of writing, namely, to journalism, fiction and later on to drama. In September 1952, the author joined the staff of the left-wing magazine *al-Taḥrīr*, then in 1953 he was appointed to the influential and widely-read daily magazine *al-Miṣrī*. In the same year, a few months later he was in charge of the literary section in the weekly *Rūz al-Yūsuf*.[18] This post enabled Idrīs to publish and popularize stories of many young and yet unknown authors.

From 1950 onwards Idrīs actively participated in the Peace Defenders Movement and in 1953 he was the head of the Egyptian delegation to the Peace Congress in Vienna.

Upon his return to Cairo, Idrīs had to resign from his work in Qaṣr al-ᶜAynī Hospital. During the subsequent years he was appointed to various medical posts, such as medical adviser to the municipal department in charge of issuing licences to those who wished to open a new business, a medical officer in the Governorate of Cairo, and a medical officer in the Ministry of Public Works. Then, Idrīs worked also as a sanitary inspector in various districts of Greater Cairo, that is, in the old Islamic part of Cairo, in Heliopolis, a northern suburb, and in Ḥulwān, an industrial area south of the city. In 1957 he decided to leave medicine. However, it was not an easy decision and later on, i.e., in 1960 and 1964, Idrīs even attempted to come back to regular medical practice by opening a private clinic in Giza.[19] In 1964, in his interview with the newspaper *al-Kawākib* the author said:

July 1952 and points out their significance. See Y. Idrīs, *Ahammiyyat an Natathaqqaf*, pp. 11, 72-73 and 80; *"Jabartī" al-Sittīnāt*, pp. 127-132, *Khulūw al-Bāl*, pp. 190-196.

18 In his book *Khulūw al-Bāl* (pp. 68-69) Idrīs says: "In *Rūz al-Yūsuf* I presented a complete generation of short story writers. (Later) in *al-Kātib* I presented the generation that came after and in *al-Ahrām* I introduced new writers, both men and women".

19 The author recalls these experiences in his book *Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr*, pp. 130-132.

> Despite the fact that I have decided to abandon medicine and I have found my work as a health inspector completely useless, now I understand how much I have lost. I feel as if I have been withdrawn from the real world. When the writer takes himself away from the source nourishing his creativity, he becomes a person disconnected from the society in which he lives. The pain and bitterness of this feeling is so great that I have decided to come back to medicine.[20]

However, Idrīs's return to medicine could not last long. His growing involvement in journalism and literature made it difficult to combine these with a medical practice. In 1967 Idrīs had to abandon medicine completely.

As for the author's interest and involvement in politics, it did not cease in the year 1952, it rather intensified during the post-revolutionary period. In his numerous articles on politics, culture and daily events occurring in Cairo, Idris always points out the problems and attempts to clarify them for the people proposing solutions.

The *coup d'état* of 1952 was partly possible due to support from the communist movement. However, soon after the Revolution, the relationships between the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) and the communists began to deteriorate. In August 1952 riots broke out at the textile works of Kafr al-Dawār, but the government cracked down on the demonstration immediately and severely punished some of the participants. The junta's harsh manner of dealing with the social unrest, the unfair trial and excessively heavy sentences caused considerable embarrassment to the Egyptian leftists who previously supported the revolutionary leaders assuming that they represented a progressive nationalist movement. Nevertheless, the members of Ḥaditū (al-Ḥaraka al-Dimuqrāṭiyya li-l-Taḥrīr al-Waṭanī) and among them Idrīs, were rather reluctant to come out openly against the new regime and attempted to minimize their differences with the RCC. However, in 1953 and 1954, as the Revolutionary Government cracked down on its real and presumed opponents and hundreds of people, among them communists, were arrested, this position proved untenable. The

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20 W.N. Kirpičenko mentions the interview with Y. Idrīs conducted by ʿAbd al-Nūr, "Yūsuf Idrīs lā Yaʿrif Nafsahu". *al-Kawākib* (21 January 1964).

weakening authority of President Neguib, ʿAbd al-Nāṣir's quick rise to power, and his decision to remove the opposition camp starting with the leftists, brought more arrests of the communists. On May 31, 252 communists were arrested, but Idrīs was not among them. His turn came in August 1954 and he was kept in prison until September 1955. These thirteen months in jail the author spent mostly on political discussions with communists[21] about the role and aim of literature in class struggle. Idrīs did not want his writing to be subordinated to the actual political events. According to him, "the mission of literature is wider than that".[22]

Upon his release, Idrīs severed his links with Ḥaditū and Maktab al-Kuttāb. When the differences between the author and the communists became deeper, and concerned not only the purpose of literature but also politics, Idrīs decided to resign from the organization. As the growing popularity of ʿAbd al-Nāṣir and the tremendous support the leader began to receive from the whole Arab world and his nationalist and socialist propaganda came closer to Idrīs's own views, the author gradually reconciled himself to the regime and eventually became one of its ardent defenders. At the same time he probably felt that his adherence to an opposition group entailed the risk of further detentions and might jeopardize his literary career.

A similar concern for his future as an author meant that for a long time Idrīs refrained from marriage, fearing that the role of husband would be incompatible with the restless character of the literary and journalistic work and that it might eventually hamper the creative process. Therefore, in 1957 Idrīs warned his fiancée that he would not hesitate to repudiate her if married life became an obstacle to his literary and journalistic career. She consented

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21 Idrīs recalls his arguments with communists while commenting on the autobiography of Mikis Theodorakis. He says that his misunderstandings with the communists remind him of the experiences and problems of Theodorakis (Y. Idrīs, *Ahammiyyat an Natathaqqaf.. yā Nās*, pp. 105-106).

22 Kirpičenko's interview with Y. Idrīs (May 1967) cited in her book *Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 58.

and their union stood the test of years very well.[23] From their marriage three children were born, two boys and a girl.[24]

During the post-revolutionary years Idris's literary career began to develop and flourish quite quickly. His first collection of short stories, namely, *Arkhaṣ Layālī* (Cheapest Nights), was published in 1954 and it was an immediate success. In subsequent years the author made his début as a novelist and playwright. In 1956 he published a short novel *Qiṣṣat Ḥubb* (Love Story) and in May 1957 two one-act plays, that is, *Malik al-Quṭn* (The Cotton King) and *Jumhūriyyat Farahāt* (Farḥat's Republic). These two plays were soon followed in 1958 by a three-act play inspired by the Suez War, i.e., *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija* (The CriticalMoment).

In 1957 upon his resignation from the post of health inspector, he became the cultural adviser to the Secretary General of the Islamic Congress, an international organization with headquarters in Cairo, an organization aiming to maintain and develop social and cultural links among the Muslim peoples all over the world. Idrīs's work with the Islamic Congress enabled him to come closer to the issues concerning the international policy of Egypt. He became fascinated by the role of the neutral countries in the peace process.

At the same time Idrīs began to contribute stories to the daily newspaper *al-Jumhūriyya* and became acquainted with its editor, Anwar Sādāt. Soon, the influential Sādāt arranged a secure post for Idrīs in the Ministry of National Guidance, and later in November 1957 in his new capacity as the Secretary-General of the National Union, Egypt's single political organization, he staged Idrīs's comeback to politics by appointing him as his *aide-de-camp*.

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23 N.R. Faraj, *Yūsuf Idrīs wa-l-Masraḥ al-Miṣrī al-Ḥadīth*, p. 95.

24 In his writings (collections of articles) Idris mentions his family's problems. For example, he portrays his son's eye operation (Y. Idrīs, *Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr*, p. 71). Also it seems that he encourages his family to share, with him, their views about the political, social and cultural problems of Egypt. The author recounts some discussions with his son and daughter (Y. Idrīs, *Inṭibāᶜāt Mustafizza*, pp. 70-71, *ᶜAzf Munfarid*, p. 11.

However, Idrīs's temporary influence on Sādāt's decisions proved to be unsuccessful.[25] At the time of the creation of the National Union, ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir had stipulated that persons who had been actively engaged in politics under the *ancien régime* were to be barred from membership in this new organization. In spite of this instruction, Sādāt decided, on the basis of Idrīs's recommendations to allow the participation of former Muslim Brothers, Communists and Wafdists in the Union. This plan was presented to the public in an interview, "Idrīs-Sādāt" published in the newspaper *al-Ahrām*. The plan was absolutely unacceptable to ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir and the whole affair resulted in Idrīs's simultaneous dismissal from the Ministry of National Guidance, the Ministry of Health and from *al-Ahrām*, to which he had been appointed only the day before.

Although this event put Idrīs in temporary difficulties with the regime, nevertheless, it did not alienate him completely from it. He continued his journalistic and literary work rather undisturbed because the authorities had come to view him as an inoffensive individualist.

In 1959 Idrīs wrote a number of columns for the newspaper *al-Shaᶜb* and in 1960 he began to publish in *al-Jumhūriyya* his famous *Yawmiyyāt* (Diaries). These *Diaries*, which for almost one decade, from 1960 until 1969, appeared weekly, with only a few interruptions, on the paper's back page, reflected the author's views on a wide range of topics from issues of everyday Egyptian life to the role of the superpowers.

In the 1960s Idrīs continued to publish volumes of short stories and took an active part in the remarkable revival of the Egyptian theatre.[26] In his fiction and drama, new themes and symbolic notations superseded the relatively simple and straightforward realism of the 1950s. The three plays from that period, namely, *al-Fārāfīr* (The Farfūrs, 1964), *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* (The Terrestrial Comedy, 1966) and *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn* (The Striped Ones, 1969) came to be a significant contribution of the author to the Egyptian theatre's search for its

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25 Idrīs discusses his relations with Sādāt in *Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr*, pp. 207-263.

26 His contribution will be discussed in the following chapters.

roots, identity and a new face. Both Idris's fiction and plays from the 1960s deal primarily with the inner crisis of man in an absurd world, where the plain truth has disappeared and where desperate people feel alienated and have lost faith in being able to find something that might calm their anguish and existential fears.

For Idrīs the 1960s were marked by extensive travelling. In 1961 he covered for *al-Jumhūriyya* the Algerian war of independence.[27] On his way back he spent two weeks in Spain the result of which was the publication of a book, *Rijāl wa Thirān* (Men and Bulls), i.e., his protest against everything which causes danger to human life. In the subsequent years he visited many countries of Western and Eastern Europe. In March 1966 Idrīs went to the United States to give a series of lectures on modern Egyptian drama. When, in 1965 the author was on a visit to Poland,[28] it became known in Cairo that the Lebanese cultural magazine *Ḥiwār* (Dialogue) intended to award him a literary prize. However, upon his return to Cairo, Idrīs learned that there was a press campaign aimed at dissuading him from accepting the award. The critics maintained that the journal was financed by suspect, probably CIA funds, and that the award would aim at weaning away Idrīs from the progressive camp. The campaign was strong and eventually the author had no choice but to follow the critics' advice. However, in 1966 the author was partly compensated for the loss of *Ḥiwār*'s prize when President ʿAbd al-Nāṣir awarded him the Order of the Republic of the Third Class. In 1967 Idrīs was appointed supervisor of the drama section of the Ministry

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27 Y. Idrīs, *"Jabartī" al-Sittīnāt*, pp. 170-204

28 In 1965 Idrīs travelled in Eastern Europe; he spent three weeks in Poland and became acquainted with its cultural heritage, modern achievements and developments. The author met with many Polish intellectuals, writers, journalists, playwrights, theatre critics and producers. As he pointed out in the article "Al-Balad alladhī Yaḥkumūhu al-Brūfīsīrāt" (*"Jabartī" al-Sittīnāt*, pp. 157-167), in spite of the communist regime there, the vitality of cultural life, and the high level of artistic productions in Poland at that time was astonishing. The author was very impressed by the Polish theatre especially by the plays of the famous author Mrozek. From his interview with the editor-in-chief of the theatrical magazine, *Dialogue*, he learnt about the international activities of the Polish theatre and also that the first works of Beckett (rejected by French editors) were published in Poland in *Dialogue*.

of Culture. Another honour came to the author in 1969 when *al-Ahrām*, Egypt's leading newspaper, paid a more substantial tribute to the quality of his creativity by announcing that Idrīs had joined its gallery of celebrities such as Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, Najīb Maḥfūẓ, Ḥusayn Fawzī, Luwīs ʿAwaḍ and Bint ash-Shāṭiʾ. Later on, in July 1970 he was elected director of the Egyptian Association of Drama Writers and in June 1971 Secretary of the Egyptian Syndicate of Journalists.

It should be pointed out that the 1960s and 1970s were times of tremendous successes for Idrīs in journalism and literature. However, the sensitive and delicate personality of the author could not always manage the pressure. The heavy work load, the frequent conflicts with censorship, attacks from critics and the lack of true friends caused severe artistic, mental and physical crises for Idrīs. To these personal tribulations should be added the shock caused by the failure of the Egyptian army in the Six-Day War against Israel, i.e., the "defeat of 1967" and growing dissatisfaction with ʿAbd al-Nāṣir's revolution, which, in Idrīs's opinion, had failed to achieve its objective.[29] In his numerous articles in *al-Jumhūriyya*, Idrīs attempted to discuss the causes of the defeat. According to him, the lack of unity among the Egyptian people was the main cause. Nevertheless, he also strongly pointed out the need to resolve the problem of individual freedom and he expressed his dissatisfaction with the central government.

After 1967 the author again was not in the government's favour. In 1969 his play *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn* was banned and later in the same year Idrīs was again dismissed (for one month) from *al-Ahrām* on account of one of his earlier short stories, namely, *al-Khudʿa* (The Deception) which he published in this paper. Subsequently in 1973, Idrīs was expelled from the Arab Socialist Union, the Syndicate of Journalists and yet again from *al-Ahrām* for signing two petitions, one drafted by journalists and the other by a number of authors, who

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29 W.N. Kirpičenko discusses at length the period of Idrīs's psychological crisis and his reaction to 1967: W.N. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, pp. 176-178. For the author's asessment of the "defeat of 1967" see for example: Y. Idrīs, *Ḥulūw al-Bāl*, pp. 16-17.

urged Sādāt to take decisive steps towards the liberation of Egypt's occupied territories. In spite of all these misfortunes, he regained the government's favour after the October War of 1973.[30]

In the 1970s, apart from his chronic depression, Idris began to suffer from heart problems. The author went to Moscow for treatment (1970) and later, that is, in 1971, 1975 and 1976 to London where in January 1976 he underwent a successful heart operation.[31]

In recent years, namely, the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, journalism and travelling became the foremost preoccupation of the author. In 1969 Idrīs published a collection of short stories *al-Naddāha* (The Siren). After this collection he published four volumes of short stories, that is, *Bayt min Laḥm* (A House of Flesh, 1972), *Anā Sulṭān Qānūn al-Wujūd* (I am the Sulṭān of the Law of Existence, 1975), *Uqtulhā* (Kill her, 1982), *al-ʿAtb ʿalā al-Naẓar* (The Blame is on Vision, 1987), one novel, namely, Nīyū Yūrk 80 (1980), two plays, i.e., *al-Jins al-Thālith* (The Third Sex, 1971) and *al-Bahlawān* (The Clown, 1982) and several collections of articles dealing with a wide scope of issues, from literary criticism and politics to the everyday struggles of an Egyptian man. Commenting on the reasons which induced him to relinquish literature for the present, Idrīs remarked in 1976 that it would be a waste of effort to write short stories so long as the Egyptian people continue to suffer from "spiritual malnutrition and cultural anemia".[32] Therefore, in recent years Idrīs considered the newspaper to be the most adequate place to discuss as yet unsolved human matters in general and Egyptian everyday problems in particular.

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30 According to Idrīs the war of October 1973 occupies a special place in Egyptian history. The author discusses its significance in his books *Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr*, p. 61 and *Ahammiyyat an Natathaqqaf.. yā Nās*, p. 97.

31 The author recalls his heart operation in *Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr*, p. 74.

32 "Anṣāf Rijāl!", *al-Qabas* (19 May 1976) cited by P.M. Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 42.

Yūsuf Idrīs died in August 1991. Shortly before his death he received a special literary award from the Government's Council of Culture in Egypt.[33]

Creative Influences and Artistic Personality

The personality of a modern Arab writer is shaped by a complex process: besides factors such as family atmosphere, esthetic experiences from his youth and his environment, a decisive role is played by the influence of literary trends and movements in the East and West, Western writers (old and contemporary), and the native literary tradition in its two manifestations, namely, in the classical Arabic language and in dialect. All these elements constitute the base, the starting point which an Arab writer creatively elaborates in his mind to shape his literary visions. Sometimes the author draws from this basic source in a chaotic and accidental way. However, in the case of Idrīs this is a conscious inspiration enriched by his close attachment to his first professional occupation, namely, medicine, and determined by his strong involvement in the real life of his country.

As for the atmosphere of Idrīs's family home, few elements had such a definitive influence on his future artistic personality. Being away from his loving father and the lack of warmth of his mother and grandmother led to the growth of feelings of loneliness, guilt, uncertainty and inability to form close relationships with people. Although the family of Idrīs did not provide him with a happy and joyful atmosphere, he received from his relatives another gift, i.e., the gift of story-telling and writing. His father, grandmother, great grandmother and uncle ᶜAbd al-Salām stimulated the boy's interest in fiction and introduced him to the colourful world of creative imagination and fantasy, a world which led him far away from everyday problems and fulfilled his dreams.

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33 *Al-Usbūᶜ al-ᶜArabī* (22 July 1991).

Idrīs's gift for story-telling and writing manifested itself at an early age.[34] As a child he was a dreamer, who, when walking to school, amused himself by inventing stories and at the age of ten he took a fancy to writing lines of verse. Subsequently, during his secondary school years, another passion took over Idris's personality, that is, a fascination with drama and the theatre.[35] The existence of a theatre group at school was one of its main assets. Fascinated by the performances of the group, Idris from his very first year in school, applied for a role. His attempt to get it was not successful because he was found to be too short. Therefore, the future playwright had to content himself with the auxiliary task of being a prop person. Finally, after six months, his dream came true and he was given the part of Usāma in a play in verse called *al-Murū'a al-Muqanna'a* (Veiled Chivalry). Unfortunately, the very first rehearsal proved his inability as an actor, so with a sense of relief as well as pain he accepted eviction from the group. Nevertheless, this unsuccessful "adventure in the world of the theatre" did not discourage him and did not diminish his fascination and obsession with it. On the contrary, he soon joined a group of his friends who were performing plays before an audience of pupils in the mosque.

After this quite successful experience with the theatre Idrīs was given a second chance in the school company. However, for the second time it became clear that his fascination with and enthusiasm for drama were not equalled by his acting skills. So, after a few rehearsals the producer amicably advised him to look for solace in another hobby. The second rejection from the theatre school group was a severe blow to Idrīs's dreams of a career as an actor. He wrote, later on, that the grief he felt on that day was worse than anything he was to experience in the years to come.[36] Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that this episode

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34 N.R. Faraj, *Yūsuf Idrīs wa-l-Masraḥ al-Miṣrī al-Hadīth*, p. 93.

35 Idrīs describes his fascination with the world of the theatre in "Layla warā' al-Kawālīs", *al-Jumhūriyya* (5 December 1960) p. 10.

36 Ibid., p. 10.

gave Idrīs a long-lasting interest in the world of the theatre and foreshadowed his emergence as a playwright.

Another factor which left quite an impression on Idrīs and contributed to the stimulation of his mind and creative imagination during his school years in Bayrūm and Dumyāṭ was his interest in and passion for observing the festivities and fairs accompanying the anniversaries of the local saints. On those days the boy used to sneak out of the house in order to watch folk dances and he tried to retain in his memory a great deal of the stories and lines of verse which were recited in explanation of the dances.[37] It is possible that in those popular festivities and fairs we can find a source of inspiration which, later on, urged the young author to follow the Brechtian call to create a national theatre based on native folk tradition.

Although Idrīs on many occasions claimed to be independent of foreign influences, his statement should not be taken too literally.[38] Even the brief analysis of his fiction and drama shows inspiration from Western literature and its modern trends and experiments. However, it should be pointed out that Idrīs is fully aware of the differences between the two cultures, i.e., Eastern and Western, and in his writing one can notice creative inspiration, a search for his roots by exploring native literary tradition, "Egyptianizing" the short story and attempting to create a new and original Egyptian drama.

There is no doubt that in this effort to introduce to Egyptian literature these new and original forms such as the short story and the modern play, Idrīs's acquaintance with major works from Western literature, from the classical and popular Arabic heritage, and from new movements in modern Arabic literature was of great benefit.

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37 Idrīs describes his fascination with the fabulous world of Egyptian folklore in his book *ʿAzf Munfarid*, p. 61.

38 Nabīl Faraj, "Yūsuf Idrīs", *al-Majalla*, January 1971, pp. 102-103.

Idrīs began his acquaintance with the world of literature[39] in his grandfather's house where the library contained about four hundred Western pocketbooks and serials, among them the adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Tarzan and Arabic books such as *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā Ibn Hishām* and the The *Thousand and One Nights*. To these influences should be added the stories narrated or read to him by his grandmother, great grandmother and uncle ʿAbd al-Salām. Subsequently, during his secondary and university years, Idrīs continued his journey into the world of literature by reading the short stories published in the Egyptian magazines. The spirit of change in Arabic literature following the influence of Western trends urged Idrīs to expand his reading list and he set out on a grand tour of world literature.[40] He familiarized himself with the short stories of Chekhov, Gorky, Hemingway and Guy de Maupassant. He read works of Dostoyevsky, Sholokhov, Tolstoy, Edgar Allan Poe, Tennessee Williams, Graham Greene, Arthur Miller, Melville, Strindberg, Cervantes and Thomas Mann. He also paid attention to French writers such as Sartre,[41] Camus and his favourite author Saint-Exupéry. In the field of drama Idrīs studied the plays of Shakespeare, Shaw, Ibsen, Ionesco, Beckett, Dürrenmatt,[42] Molière, Racine and some of the Greek tragedies. In his journey through world literature Idrīs did not limit himself to Europe and America but also included Asiatic writers such as Tagore and some Chinese, Korean, and Japanese authors. He even acquired some knowledge of African literature. Idrīs also liked scientific books.[43] According to the author this kind of literature inspired him and helped him to relax.

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39 Ghāli Shukrī, "Yūsuf Idrīs", *Ḥiwār*, November-December 1965, p. 43.

40 Ibid., pp. 43-44.

41 Idrīs met Sartre in Vienna in the 1960s (the exact date is not mentioned). He describes his encounter with the famous existentialist in his book *"Jabartī" al-Sittīnāt*, pp. 63-67.

42 The author met Dürenmatt twice, i.e. in Switzerland and in Egypt. He recalls his artistic discussions and polemics with the Swiss playwright and assesses the reception of Dürenmatt's works in Cairo in his book *ʿAzf al-Munfarid*, pp. 15-50.

43 Idrīs was always fascinated by science and scientific discoveries. In his work *Ahammiyyat an Natathaqqaf.. yā Nās*, p. 92, he displays his interest in one of the latest studies in nuclear physics.

There are discussions about the influence of Russian writers on the creativity of Idrīs, namely his fascination with works of Chekhov and subsequently those of Dostoyevsky. The author was even called the Chekhov of Egypt. As Kurpershoek points out, probably most of these speculations are based on Idrīs's statement from 1965:

> With Chekhov in particular I went through quite an experience... When I tried to write after reading his work I felt that his vision imposed itself on me, but so subtly that I was the only one to notice this. Since originality is based on original visions, I had to struggle in order to free myself from the oppressive sway his vision and thoughts held over my work. It was a fierce and bitter fight which cost me a whole year (1955).[44]

When we take a look at the biographies and works of both writers we can find certain parallels between their careers and writings. First, both authors worked as medical practitioners before entering a literary career. Secondly, in their literary work they attained quite an achievement in the field of short stories and drama. Thirdly, both writers are highly esteemed for discussing ordinary everyday subjects presenting simple people and for beautiful and subtly evocative language.

The recent comparative study on Chekhov's and Idrīs's short stories[45] points out a similarity of outlooks, perception of the world and creative attitude of both authors. Chekhov never had difficulties in finding an easy plot for his stories and he used to say that he could even write a story about a simple ashtray. Similarly, Idrīs takes inspiration for his stories from everyday events; he portrays ordinary people and in one of his stories makes a thing, namely, the telephone, the main object of narration. The study also brings our attention to some other common features of the writing of both authors. Chekhov and Idrīs in many of their stories about the village, criticize the prevalence of the old, unnecessary customs, depict the clash of tradition with modernity, bring a lot of humor and present psychological studies

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44 Ghāli Shukrī, "Yūsuf Idrīs", *Ḥiwār*, November-December 1965, p. 44.

45 I. Kaczmarczyk, *Odbicie tworczosci Czechowa drugiej polowy lat 80-tych xix w. w nowelistyce Yūsufa Idrīsa z przelomu lat 50-tych i 60-tych*, Krakow: Universytet Jagiellonski, 1990.

of women. Both authors have mastered the art of creating an atmosphere for their stories, skillfully combining laughter with sadness, amusement with tragedy, in that "one does not know if he should laugh or cry".[46] They are in constant search for new means of expression and their simple and meaningful language is successfully modified to the needs of contemporary literature.

As Idrīs pointed out in an interview in 1971, the introduction of short stories into Arabic literature was like "a creation of something from nothing".[47] Although he was influenced to a certain degree by Chekhov and other foreign writers, it should be pointed out that this was a conscious inspiration, and Western culture played only the role of a catalyst in this creative process

Arab and Western critics say that in his readings in modern Arabic and world literature Idrīs displays an intellectual curiosity. However, it would be rather difficult to apply this kind of statement to his interest in classical Arabic literature. Idrīs developed a thorough dislike for classical Arabic literature as it was taught him at school and later his aversion toward the Arab and Islamic heritage did not decline. According to the author, the *turāth* lies too heavily on the shoulders of the Arab world:

> Our cultural heritage is crammed with nonsense... Nothing but futile, pointless arguments and questions without any bearing on (the reality of) human life. We even perverted the Islamic religion, turning it into Byzantine disputes on side-issues till it lost all meaning, while its torch, the (Arabic) language, degenerated into rigid, petrified rules of grammar... That is not what I call a cultural heritage, it is just a foolish conception of this heritage.[48]

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46 W.N. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 45.

47 Kurpershoek's interview with Idrīs (June 1978); the author said: "I Egyptianized the short story...it was an effort to create something from nothing", cited by Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, p .43; also see Nabīl Faraj: "Yūsuf Idrīs", *al-Majalla*, January 1971, p. 103.

48 S. Faraḥāt, "al-Turāth", *al-Qabas*, (16 February 1977), cited by P.M. Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 46.

And as he said in his interview in 1971, the *turāth* very often becomes an obstacle to real progress and modernization:

> (With the *turāth*) I felt as if I was looking at a very old museum. It is separated from my modern feelings by a psychological distance which is difficult to bridge.[49]

In spite of his dissatisfaction with classical Arabic literature, Idrīs did acquire the necessary knowledge of it and certain motifs from it have an impact on his writing. The author is always responsive to new events in the cultural life of Egypt and the Arab World; he observes with great interest the appearance of new literary works and the debuts of new writers. It should also be pointed out that in his numerous literary discussions, critiques and reflections, Idrīs never forgets to declare his own Arabism, i.e., his being not only an Egyptian but primarily an Arab writer. Furthermore, he emphasizes the need for a constant search for the unique Arab culture as well as its cultivation and preservation.

Our discussion shows clearly that various influences played a significant role in the process of crystallizing the writer's artistic personality. A more complete sketch of Idrīs as an author can be obtained by presenting his views concerning the aims and role of modern literature, the social function and duties of the writer, his thoughts about how he himself feels about literature, artistic inspirations, visions and their realizations, and what he thinks about the relation between art and scientific discoveries.

For Idrīs, writing is a dynamic and innovative process, a revolution and a sudden confrontation with a subject which "catches" him unexpectedly: "I do not choose the subject, it 'chooses' me".[50] As a writer Idrīs is quite different from those who isolate themselves in their ivory towers or sit and watch the people in the coffee-houses. He believes that the writer's mission is to move and travel to meet the people and to be and feel with them: "I

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49 Nabīl Faraj: "Yūsuf Idrīs", *al-Majalla*, January 1971, p. 102.

50 Ibid., p. 103.

jump about and run around, I explode, I think, I suffer from depressions, I make merry, I move and travel to meet the people. I am a living vein in the body of society".[51]

According to the author the aim of literature is not to record and describe but to attain results, that is, to transmit the truth, impress the readers and encourage them to think about presented problems and undertake actions toward necessary changes in their society. For Idrīs the art of writing is like a powerful, dangerous weapon:

> Art then and writing are not a game but a fearful weapon. I may say that they are more effective than the nuclear weapon because they do not destroy man but build and they build him strong, marvellous, "loaded" with rightful force, goodness and beauty. [52]

In 1971, in his article for *al-Ahrām* the author said: "The important question is: Did these millions of letters, words and pages succeed in changing the mentality of the people?... That is, to my mind, the only valid criterion for judging the significance of one's writing".[53] Furthermore in one of his recent collection of articles, i.e., *Ahammiyyat an Natathaqqaf.. yā Nās*, the writer has said:

> If one of the over one thousand Arabic poems that were published during the past twenty years had real effectiveness, the problem of the Middle East could have been solved long ago and all our political, social and intellectual issues could have been solved as well.[54]

Idrīs shares with many other writers the view that the effectiveness of literary work does not depend on its length and the beauty of stylistic figures and tricks but lies in the power of its message:

> The writers have discovered that beauty in writing is not measured by its size... The fabulous in the created beings is not (measured) by the size of their muscles but by their intelligence. The fabulous in writing is not (measured)

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51 Y. Idrīs, "Ilā-l-liqā' Najībīn", *al-Jumhūriyya* (4 December 1967), p. 12, cited by Kurpershoek, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 42.

52 Y. Idrīs, *Ahammiyyat an Natathaqqaf.. yā Nās*, p. 37.

53 Y. Idrīs, "Hal Ladaykum Jawāb?", *al-Jumhūriyya* (16 September 1963).

by the number of words or pages but may be contained in one phrase or a verse of poetry.[55]

In his concept of a writer, Idrīs is against the model of a skilled craftsman, who would spend hours revising his manuscript. What really matters to him is whether a writer has a vision or not. The real artist, the artist of the century to come, is the meditative visionary (*ṣāḥib ruʾyā*), the discoverer of truths which are revealed to him in the shape of visions. This true artist is, according to Idrīs, "like a candle in the darkness, illuminating what hitherto had been hidden from the common man".[56] In that sense this true writer might be called "the prophet of our time". He is like the eye of the society in which he lives. If this eye sees through true light, it will present the real picture of life and reflect the feelings of the society. Idrīs strongly believes that this kind of artistic truthfulness is a "gift" which cannot be mastered, it is only guaranteed by a genuine talent, and that the sincerity of the author does not depend on his will or morals; it is either there or not.

Furthermore, the literature created by this true writer is not and should not be an artistic medium. His creativity should give expression to his humanitarian mission and to issues such as the human being and his relation to the society, love, life and truth, and he should also warn society of dangers ahead, transmit dreams into understandable theories, become a source of willpower and revolutionary vigour. This form of literature has as its aims to search for the secret of art which, according to Idrīs, is like the search for the secret of life and has not been discovered yet: "Art is like a kind of biological existence of a human being. Its role has not yet been discovered and I think it will not be discovered until all the secrets of life are known".[57] As the author says, there is a close relation between scientific discoveries

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54 Y. Idrīs, *Ahammiyyat an Natathaqqaf.. yā Nās*, p. 37.

55 Ibid., p. 104.

56 Idrīs discusses the importance of artistic vision in his book *ʿAzf Munfarid*, p. 7. The author says: "The importance in all subjects is the vision (*al-ruʾyā*) and it does not matter whether the artistic form takes the shape of the short story, novel or drama".

57 Ibid. p. 8.

and artistic works: "Each artistic work which does not accord with science will disappear and each scientific discovery which does not accord with the feelings of human beings and conscious vision will cease to exist".[58]

The question why Idrīs finally gave up his medical career and devoted himself completely to literature and journalism puzzles the critics, and they offer various reasons for it,[59] such as the author's political and social convictions which induced him to write, or his desire to create a truly Egyptian literature, and the fact that he could not see interesting prospects for himself as a medical doctor. According to Idrīs, the impulse to write was rather spontaneous. For a period of time the author attempted to combine his work as a writer and journalist with medical practice. However, with his growing engagement in the world of literature this "divided life" became difficult and a decision had to be made. It was Doctor Najī, a poet, journalist, and medical doctor himself who probably helped Idrīs to take this important step in his career. Idrīs never regretted this decision. In his book *Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr* the author says:

> Truly I am a lucky man. It is enough luck for me that my road to literature was through medicine and, thank God, not the reverse.[60]

Idrīs never wanted to declare his allegiance to a particular literary current.[61] However, at one stage of his literary career he felt an intellectual affinity with the partisans of literary engagement (*al-adab al-multazim*) and the school of socialist realism (*al-wāqiʿiyya al-ishtirākiyya*.) In the 1960s the author realized that socialist realism could not cope with the complexity and the dimensions of the problems facing the post-revolutionary society of Egypt and therefore he disassociated himself from it.

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58 Nabīl Faraj: "Yūsuf Idrīs", *al-Majalla*, January 1971, p. 105.

59 Ghālī Shukrī, "Yūsuf Idrīs", *Ḥiwār*, November-December 1965, p. 43.

60 Y. Idrīs, *Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr*, p. 134.

61 Nabīl Faraj, "Yūsuf Idrīs", *al-Majalla*, January 1971, pp. 102-103.

In his writings and personal statements the author presented himself as a very dynamic, creative, sensitive yet restless personality. He liked to learn, to look for new events, to experiment and search, and he always had the courage to be critical of his own sayings and ideas. In an interview in 1971 the author said:

> Although I am forty-two I cannot say that I am wise in life. I still do not know, I am searching... Up until now I do not know what really is a short story (*qiṣṣa qasīra*). Maybe, the reason I am writing it is that I always want to try to find out what really is a short story.[62]

Idrīs was in constant search of the secret of true art. In the past he was looking forward to the future issues of contemporary society and in recent years he was looking ahead trying to revive previous experiences. He did not have any definite system of ideas or literary program and in his search for true art, very often he turned to his subconscious mind and illusionary visions. He felt that his best stories were written in a state of ecstasy. As the author said,[63] his literary method was very simple: if he had a vision in a dramatic form, this led to a theatrical form, namely, a play; and if his vision appeared as a narration, he wrote a short story or novel. One thing remained always of the highest importance, and that is, whatever form he created the content thereof had to resemble real life and be attuned to the pulse of society.

Fiction

Idrīs's fiction demonstrates two different approaches and his works may be divided into two different groups.[64] The first one, that is the stories and novels written in the 1950s, belong to the realistic approach. These works are easy to read and analyze, they present a

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62 Ibid., pp. 102-103.

63 Ibid., p. 105.

64 These two approaches are discussed by C.F. Barresi, "Lo scrittore egiziano Yūsuf Idrīs", *Oriente Moderno* 57 (1977), pp. 287-294.

simple depiction of life "as it is" in the lower strata of rural society and poor districts of Cairo. In the early 1960s his approach to fiction underwent a gradual but radical change. The picture of life has become more difficult to grasp and understand; the setting and characters appear to be more indistinct and universal, an atmosphere of existential pessimism prevails and the symbolic representation of moral and political themes supersedes the former outward description and brisk action. This second group of stories and novels, and especially works written during the late 1960s and the early 1970s, presents us with a surrealistic sketch of Egyptian life; Idrīs portrays the events from many different perspectives and it appears as if he adds a fourth dimension to the scenes. Furthermore, the new means of expression, such as the stream of consciousness, symbols, surrealistic visions and extensive use of monologues makes it easier for the author to explain things which are sometimes beyond the grasp of our common understanding.

The first, i.e., the realistic phase of Idrīs's fictional creativity, began with the collection of short stories entitled *Arkhaṣ Layālī*[65] (*The Cheapest Nights*, 1954). This collection contains twenty-one short stories which are mostly representative of short scenes, lively observations, and uncomplicated events. These stories reflect the author's experiences from his childhood and youth and portray life in Egyptian villages and small towns. The collection *Arkhaṣ Layālī* shows Idrīs's concern with portraying the poorer classes of Egyptian society as accurately as possible. The author presents these poor people as he finds them and allows facts and their implications to speak for themselves. There is no moral at the end; it is just a crying, plain truth. Many of the stories from this collection are very short and even this limited space enables Idrīs to create a vivid, moving picture.

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65 Yūsuf Idrīs, *Arkhaṣ Layālī*, Cairo: Dār Rūz al-Yūsuf, 1954; the title story is translated by Nūr Sherīf in the collection: M. Manzalaoui, ed., *Arabic Writing Today: the Short Story*, Cairo: Dār al-Maᶜārif, 1968, p. 227; another translation is by Wadida Wassef in Y. Idrīs, *The Cheapest Nights, and Other Stories*, London: Heinemann; Washington D.C.: Three Continents, 1978.

One of these pictures is presented in the story "Naẓra"[66] ("A Stare"). A narrator describes a little girl anxiously carrying a tray full of food on her head. The tray is about to slip and she asks him to adjust it on her head. He watches her when she crosses the street. She stops and he imagines that the tray is about to fall off once again. So, the narrator rushes to help her and he almost knocks himself down. As it turns out, she has stopped because she wants to watch some other children playing ball. She then continues until she disappears from his view "swallowed up by the busy street".[67]

The collection *Arkhaṣ Layālī* is full of portraits of poor Egyptians like this little girl. Some of them are pictured at their work places in the provinces, others confront features of modern life during their visits to Cairo, still others live in the slums of the big city itself.

Idrīs's second collection of stories appeared under the title *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*[68] (*Faraḥat's Republic*, 1956) and contains three short stories and the novel *Qiṣṣat Ḥubb* (*Love Story*). The stories from the second collection are longer, they give a broader picture of Egyptian society and their structure is a little more complicated.

The title story, "Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt" consists of two separate plots. The first one presents us with the chaotic goings-on in one of the Cairene police stations. The place is full of clients, policemen and convicts. This crowd is controlled by Sergeant Faraḥāt on duty. Into this scene the author introduces another plot: here comes the narrator, who appears to be from a higher level of society than most of the station's clients and convicts, but he too has been arrested on some charge or other. It is by mistake that Faraḥāt engages himself in

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66 The story translated by Trevor Le Gassick in: R. Allen, ed., *In the Eye of the Beholder: Tales of Egyptian Life from the Writings of Yūsuf Idrīs*, Minneapolis & Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1978, pp. 3-5.

67 Ibid., p. 5.

68 Y. Idrīs, *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, Cairo: Dār Rūz al-Yūsuf, 1956; the story translated into English by D. Johnson-Davies in: D. Johnson-Davies, trans., *Modern Arabic Short Stories*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, pp. 1-19.

conversation with the narrator and reveals to him his "dreamy scenario" of an ideal society he created himself in his imagination.

This "dreamy picture" becomes the second plot of the story. The society, described by Faraḥāt, consists of happy, well-dressed people who are all employed and live in brick houses provided with electricity and water. In this society everything appears to be in order. People walk and work in an ordered way and they dress in the same uniforms, that is, khaki clothes and white hats. This fascinating narration is interrupted by some clients. Faraḥāt insults and curses them but continues with his story. The author shows us that within the gruff and callous exterior of the man who is indifferent and unjust, there resides the heart of a dreamer who wants to "repair" the world. However, his vision is unrealistic and created only by his imagination. When at the end of the story Faraḥāt discovers that the man with whom he has been sharing his dreams is under arrest too, his whole mood changes and his hopes for a better future vanish.

In the novel *Qiṣṣat Ḥubb* Idrīs describes the fight of the Egyptians against the British occupation. The author strongly believes in the right cause and the eventual triumph of justice. This optimism is brought further by the love story between two patriots and war companions, that is, between Ḥamza and Fawziyya.

In comparison with *Arkhaṣ Layālī*, the collection *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* presents us with a wider scope of themes and a richer picture of Egyptian society, its attitudes, and problems. Idrīs introduces here some philosophical reflections and sociological remarks. The author also changes the style, i.e., introduces a more developed dialogue and gives a greater importance to monologues. Lyrics and symbols become quite visible.

The subsequent collection, that is, *al-Baṭal*[69] (*The Hero*, 1957), is fully devoted to patriotic and political themes. The view of the last ship carrying English soldiers who leave Egypt makes the author extremely happy. However, at the same time, he feels hatred toward

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69 Y. Idrīs, *al-Baṭal*, Cairo: Dār al Fikr, 1957.

them: "I would not like our enemy to leave this way but I would rather see bullets showing them the way out. Our enemies are leaving, let defeat accompany them everywhere they go".[70]

Idrīs receives with great joy the news of the nationalization of the Suez Canal (the story "Ṣaḥḥ" ["Right"]), he is proud of Egyptians fighting for their fatherland (the stories "al-Baṭal" and "al-Jurḥ" ["The Wound"]). The psychological truth of the characters constitutes the main feature of all these stories. According to Idrīs, the psychology of a man is determined by social conditions. The stories within the collection *al-Baṭal* point out clearly the author's ability to portray human character, even the deepest layers of his complicated psychology.

The next collection of short stories, namely *A Laysa Kaḏhālik?*[71] (*Isn't That So?*, 1957), which reappeared in 1970 named after the novella "Qāᶜ al-Madīna"[72] ("The City Dregs"), has a broad discussion of Egyptian social and moral problems. Our attention here is focused on the novella "Qāᶜ al-Madīna", which critics consider one of Idrīs's most successful longer works of fiction.

"Qāᶜ al-Madīna" is the story of Judge ᶜAbd Allāh who loses his watch, suspects his maid and mistress Shuhrat of having stolen it and makes a journey to "the bottom of the city" to catch Shuhrat red-handed with the watch and accuses her face to face. The plot itself is ironic: the judge, who sits in court every day and passes judgment on all kinds of people from rich and poor districts of Cairo, rarely leaves the green riverside quarter of the city

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70 Y. Idrīs, *al-Washm al-Akhīr* in: *al-Baṭal*, cited by W.N. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 76.

71 Y. Idrīs, *A Laysa Kadhālik?*, Cairo: Markaz Kutub al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ, 1957; published later under the title *Qāᶜ al-Madīna*, Cairo: Markaz Kutub al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ, 1970.

72 The novella translated into English by P. Cachia in: R. Allen, ed., *In the Eye of the Beholder: Tales of Egyptian Life from the Writings of Yūsuf Idrīs*, pp. 17-77; the content and form is discussed extensively by C. Cobham in her article: C. Cobham, "Sex and Society in Yūsuf Idrīs's *Qāᶜ al-Madīna*", *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. VI (1975), pp. 78-88, and by R. Allen in his introduction to *In the Eye of the Beholder*, pp. xv-xx.

where he lives to see the "reality" of committed crimes. However, when a crime is committed against him he is preoccupied by the idea of confronting the criminal in her own house in the poorest area of the city. The judge together with his friend set out for the poorest parts of the city. The description of their journey is considered, by Roger Allen,[73] to be one of Idrīs's finest literary creations. While describing the quarters of Cairo, the author makes use not only of his intimate knowledge of the places and their inhabitants, but also his ability to use a succession of images to create tremendous tension.

The journey begins in the airy, modern, and rich quarter where the judge lives. When they pass through poorer districts the atmosphere becomes more and more stifling, physically and psychologically, as the car is hemmed in by more and more people and eventually abandoned in favour of walking. The streets become narrower and narrower and the people who live there are poorer and poorer. Shops and houses are smaller and dirtier and the pungence appears to be stronger. As they reach the City Dregs, the place where Shuhrat lives, the houses and people lean against each other for support, children play in heaps of garbage, women sit chatting on thresholds, and flies are everywhere, particularly in the children's eyes. At last comes the confrontation, at first Shuhrat plays innocent but under pressure her resistance crumbles and the judge easily recovers his watch. The end of the novella is very pessimistic. Idrīs shows that with the existing social injustice, indifference, moral deprivation and hypocrisy, Shuhrat, a woman from "Qāʿ al-Madīna" and thousands like her have absolutely no chance of a better and just future:

> They (the judge and Shuhrat) had no further contact, though he did spot her one day. He saw Shuhrat in Queen Street as he was driving, so he slowed down. She was standing at the bus stop, but it was obvious that she was not waiting for the bus. She had her lips stained with real lipstick, she was wearing a grey shirt in which she used to come to him. Most important was that, above the shirt, she was wearing...a new blouse.[74]

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73 R. Allen, ed., *In the Eye of the Beholder*, p. xviii.

74 Ibid., p. 77.

During the period between 1954 and 1958 Idrīs published his fifth collection of short stories, i.e., *Ḥādithat Sharaf*[75] (*An Affair of Honour*, 1956). These years fall within the first decade of the 1952 Revolution, and the experiences of the Czech arms deal, the withdrawal of European and Israeli forces after the invasion of 1956, and the attempts at the unification with Syria. At the same time, the government began to exercise tight control on the media in Egypt, and literary works were subjected to very strict censorship. As a result of this process, the collection *Ḥādithat Sharaf* was published for the first time in Lebanon. In these stories Idrīs continues his discussion of moral issues and he portrays the desperate situation of young poor girls who eventually become easy targets of middle class unscrupulous men.

In the 1950s, besides the realistic short story collections, Idrīs also published two novels, namely, *al-Ḥarām*[76] (*The Taboo*, 1958) and *al-Bayḍā'*[77] (*The White Woman*, 1959).

Al-Ḥarām is the story of ʿAzīza, an agrarian worker who killed her own child, conceived in sin, and the criminal investigation connected with it. In this novel the author discusses the problem of sin and its meaning according to Islamic tradition. What does it really mean, to commit a sin? How can we justify blind attachment to the traditional concept of *ḥarām* (forbidden) and *ḥalāl* (permitted)? These are the issues Idrīs focuses on in his novel and attempts to encourage the reader to take steps against the traditional ways which may no longer be appropriate. The events presented in *al-Ḥarām* show clearly that rigid subordination to traditional moral norms and values very often forces people to lie, to do bad deeds, to commit acts of brutality and even murder. Furthermore, this commonly accepted

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75 Y. Idrīs, *Ḥādithat Sharaf*, Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1958; the title story is translated by Nādiya Faraj in: M. Manzalaoui, *Arabic Writing Today: the Short Story*, pp. 234-255.

76 Y. Idrīs, *al-Ḥarām*, Cairo: al-Sharika al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Ṭibāʿa, 1959; the novel translated into English: Y. Idrīs, *The Sinners*, trans. Kristin Peterson-Ishaq, Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1984; and into French: Y. Idrīs, *Le taboo*, trad. France M. Douvier, Paris: J.C. Lattes, 1987. The novels of Idrīs are discussed by H. Kilpatrick, *The Modern Egyptian Novel*, London: Ithaca Press, 1974, pp. 113-126. For a discussion of this novel and its film version see: Aḥmad al-Ḥaḍarī, "Film al-Ḥarām", *al-Majalla*, July 1965, pp. 133-137.

77 Y. Idrīs, *al-Bayḍā'*, Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalīʿa, 1970.

morality becomes contradictory to the true feelings and it turns people toward "hidden sins". In *al-Ḥarām*, Idrīs points out clearly that these traditional ethical norms and values are sometimes contradictory to human ethics, which should respect the dignity of human beings.

The novel *al-Bayḍāʾ* is an unhappy love story about a leftist, Yaḥyā, and his companion, a married Greek woman Santī. The character presented by Idrīs, namely Yaḥyā, shares some common features and experiences with the author. They are both born in a village, have studied and practised medicine and have an interest in literature. Furthermore, their attitudes towards the achievements of Europe are similar and they both want to preserve their Arab identity. Yaḥyā says:

> I never wanted to become a European. I dreamt of possessing their wonderful inventiveness and sense of order, but possessing them myself as an Arab, for I was not prepared to have one single hair of my head changed. Sometimes, when taking part in demonstrations against the British occupation, I noticed to my surprise that I shouted our slogan "Down with England!" catching myself on a thought that my anger and hatred towards them were as big as my admiration of what they did and built in Ismāʿīlīya, Alexandria, and Port Said.[78]

Al-Bayḍāʾ is an interesting realistic and psychological novel and may be considered as an important document of the late 1950s.[79] Yaḥyā's views and conduct resemble those of the Egyptian intelligentsia from the period of the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s.

The 1960s, especially the first half of the decade, were years of spiritual crisis for the Egyptian intelligentsia. Ghālī Shukrī explains the reasons for it as follows:

> The intelligent liberals fought with colonialism and feudalism. The July Revolution gave them national sovereignty, they should have been happy. However, at the same time, this Revolution destroyed their liberal dreams and therefore they suffered.
>
> The intelligent social-democrats fought with colonialism, feudalism, and the higher classes of the bourgeoisie. The July Revolution gave them a

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78 Y. Idrīs, *al-Bayḍāʾ*, Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalīʿa, pp. 181-182.

79 The novel *al-Bayḍāʾ* is discussed extensively by W.N. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, pp. 92-103.

> developed, national economy but did not pay attention to their democratic views.
>
> The intelligent Marxists fought colonialism and oppression of all kinds. Their dreams not only did not come true with the reality of the Revolution but in many cases they were in contradiction with it.[80]

As a result of ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir's autocratic policy and especially the severity of censorship, the position of the Egyptian intelligentsia became more complicated and their freedom to express their views almost vanished. Al-Ṭāhir Aḥmad Makkī says:

> The problems and anxieties began to sound anew, even stronger because they were hidden. The old writers kept silent because they were hypocrites or became apologetic, seduced by a luxurious life and false honours. The young did not talk because they lacked the necessary knowledge or experience. Only when the defeat of 1967, with all its shame and grief, showed clearly the hypocrisy of our political life, did the wall of fear break down.[81]

This ideological crisis of the Egyptian intelligentsia had a great impact on the content and form of literature. Censorship forced the writers to veil their ideas in allegory or symbols. Therefore, literary images became unclear and complicated and their inner, hidden meaning difficult to grasp and explain. Gradually, the realistic pictures of Egyptian society were superseded by complicated metaphors and unclear symbols. Sometimes allegory was used as a mask under which the writer could express his critical attitude toward the existing political, social, and cultural order. The hidden but strong call for freedom and democracy became a very important issue. As a reaction to the literary engagement (*al-adab al-multazim*) and to the school of socialist realism (*al-wāqiᶜiyya al-ishtirākiyya*) many writers took inspiration from the philosophy of existentialism and preoccupied themselves with the concept of man in contemporary society. Soon, the existentialist call for complete freedom of an individual became a widespread concern in Egyptian literature.

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80 Ghālī Shukrī, *Thaqāfatunā bayna "naᶜm wa lā"*, Beirut 1972, cited by W.N. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 105.

81 al-Ṭāhir Aḥmad Makkī, *Al-Qiṣṣa al-Qaṣīra*, Cairo: s.n., 1977, p. 104.

The fiction of Idrīs from this period clearly illustrates all these changes. The new fictional world created by the author in the 1960s remains under the strong influence of the philosophy of existentialism and the works of Dostoyevsky.[82] Idrīs addresses himself to the general human matters of individual freedom in society, free choice, the problem of crime and punishment, the relationship of executioner and victim, and the issue of killing a man. Furthermore, he has changed and developed his means of expression by introducing surrealistic visions, allegory and symbols to hide his thoughts in terms which could be understood by the readers and yet survive the attention of the censor.

The stories from the collection *Ākhir al-Dunyā* (*The End of the World*, 1961)[83] are good examples of all these literary transformations. In one of these stories, namely, "Alif al-Aḥrār"[84] ("The Omitted Letter"), we come to one of Idrīs's most effective expressions of the conditions of modern man. In this story the author attempts to discuss the problem: Is modern man being dominated by mechanical tools which are supposed to help him, and does he have any freedom of choice or can he exert any initiative?

Aḥmad Rāshān, the hero of "Alif al-Aḥrār", an ideal and punctual civil servant, resolves to settle the issue for himself when he refuses to insert into a typed document a letter which he has deliberately left out. He wants to assert his individuality: "'Excuse me, Sir,' Aḥmad replied, 'but I won't type it again... because I am a human being, Sayyid ᶜAbd al-Laṭīf, not a typewriter'".[85] However, ᶜAbd al-Laṭīf is quick to inform Aḥmad that he has no individuality. The boss makes no concessions to Aḥmad's personal feelings as he clearly

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82 Idrīs talks about his fascination with the works of Dostoyevsky in his book: Y. Idrīs, *Ahammiyyat an Natathaqqaf..yā Nās*, p. 82.

83 Y. Idrīs, *Ākhir al-Dunyā*, Cairo: Muᵓassasat Rūz al-Yūsuf, 1961. For a discussion of this collection see:Muḥammad ᶜAbdallāh al-Shafaqī, "Ākhir al-Dunyā", *al-Ādāb*, May 1961, pp. 38-42.

84 This story is translated into English by R. Allen, *In the Eye of the Beholder*, pp. 89-109.

85 Ibid., p. 93.

points out this fact to him: "Go away and get on with your work. Learn your proper place. You are just a typist here, which means you type, you do as you are told. You know the typewriter, you are just like the typewriter, understand?!"[86] Aḥmad has become obsessed by the notion of the dignity of mankind and he continues his defiance. His case reaches as far as the Director-General who surprisingly tries a more gentle approach to the whole affair and explains to Aḥmad that everyone, including the Director-General, has to obey orders. Aḥmad insists on his decision and at this point he is fired. However, at the end of the story the typewriter key for the letter which he deliberately left out is found to be not working. Aḥmad's post is saved but his crusade for individual rights completely lost: "'My boy,' the boss commented with a cough, 'machines are not fired when they refuse to type, they are repaired. Consign it to the workshop and have it put right.'"[87]

The issues of a contemporary man are discussed further in Idrīs's novels *al-Gharīb*[88] (*The Stranger*, 1961) and *al-ᶜAyb*[89] (*The Shame*, 1962) and in the collection of lengthy short stories, namely, *al-ᶜAskarī al-Aswad*[90] (*The Black Soldier*, 1962).

The novel *al-Gharīb* shows an evident influence of Dostoyevsky. The main problem of his work is the same as that of Raskolnikov, that is, what does it mean to kill a man? The hero of the novel, a fourteen-year-old boy has a strange desire. He wants to kill someone to

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86 Ibid., p. 98.

87 Ibid, p. 108.

88 The short novel *al-Gharīb* was published in *al-Jumhūriyya* (14 May 1960) p. 12, (21 May 1960) p. 12, (28 May 1960) p. 10, (4 June 1960) p. 10, (11 June 1960) p. 11, (18 June 1960) p. 8, 11.

89 Y. Idrīs, *al-ᶜAyb*, Cairo: Muᵓassasat Rūz al-Yūsuf, 1962. For a discussion of this novel see: Karam Shalabī, "Al-ᶜAyb", *al-Ādāb*, November 1962, pp. 49-51; Niᶜmāt Aḥmad Fūᵓād, "Al-ᶜAyb", *al-Majalla*, November 1962, pp. 113-116, Ghālī Shukrī, "Al-ᶜAyb", *Ḥiwār*, January 1963, pp. 115-117.

90 Y. Idrīs, *al-ᶜAskarī al-Aswad*, Cairo: Dār al-Maᶜārif, 1962; the story is translated into English: Y. Idrīs, *Rings of Burnished Brass*, trans. C. Cobham, London: Heinemann, Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, pp. 71-116. For a critical assessment see: Muḥammad ᶜAbdallāh al-Shafaqī, "Al-ᶜAskarī al-Aswad", *al-Majalla*, August 1963, pp. 107-108.

prove to himself that he is a real man. He hides himself with a gun ready to kill the first person who will stand in his way. However, when the critical moment comes, a mysterious voice from the innermost of his being says: "Do not do it!" The author resolves the problem in accordance with the existentialist theory that the subject remains the ultimate source of good and evil as long as he has freedom of choice.

The subsequent novel *al-ʿAyb* presents us with the problem of an individual in a corrupt society. A young, innocent girl, a fresh graduate from university, enters the world of corrupt public officers. At the beginning she tries to ignore the situation and stays aloof. However, soon her emotional resistance crumbles and she takes a bribe. This "change" comes as a result of a strong, primitive instinct which urges a human being to aspire to things which will secure for him "warmth and light" and protect against "cold and darkness", and as Idrīs shows in his novel, this instinct proves to be stronger than sound moral values.

In the long story "al-ʿAskarī al-Aswad" Idrīs has another of Dostoyevsky's themes, that is, the problem of the relation between the executioner and the victim. The presentation of sad images of brutality and cruelty and the discussion of the psychology of both the executioner and the victim, lead Idrīs to conclude that force and violence are double-edged weapons, their effect will turn against the executioner and he will be punished by his own conscience.

The last three collections of short stories, i.e., *Lughat al-Āy Āy*[91] (*The Language of Screams*, 1965), *al-Naddāha*[92] (*The Clarion*, 1969), and *Bayt min Laḥm*[93] (*A House of Flesh*, 1971) continue Idrīs's reflections on the situation of contemporary man and his

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91 Y. Idrīs, *Lughat al-Āy Āy*, Cairo: Muʾassasat Rūz al-Yūsuf, 1965.

92 Y. Idrīs, *al-Naddāha*, Cairo: Dār al-Ḥilāl, 1969. The title story is translated into English: Y. Idrīs, *Rings of Burnished Brass*, trans. C. Cobham, London: Heinemann, Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1984 pp. 116-141, and into French: Y. Idrīs, *La Sirène et autres nouvelles*, trad. Luc Barbulescoet et Philippe Cardinal, Paris: Sindbad, 1986.

93 Y. Idrīs, *Bayt min Laḥm*, Cairo: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1971.

problems, fears, frustrations, and obsessions. These stories are the finest examples of the author's second approach to the short story; they are a combination of themes based on both the real and the unreal.

In *Lughat al-Āy Āy* Idrīs successfully presents the inner world of the human being. It seems to us that the characters have lost their external features and it appears as if they are the embodiments of various emotional stages of the author. The narrator subtly analyzes these emotions and it looks as if all the feelings and impressions with their different tones pour themselves into a stream of grief, nostalgia, and despair.

In the stories from this collection Idrīs shows that (1) man has the awareness that when love is gone nothing can be repaired ("Hādhihi al-Marra", "This Time"), (2) he constantly fears the hostility of the surrounding world ("Laʿba", "Play"), (3) he can be betrayed even by the closest relative ('Liʾanna al-Qiyāma lā Taqūmu", "Because Resurrection will not Come"), (4) he is capable of oppression and cruelty ("al-Awurṭā",[94] "The Aorta"), (5) he suffers from spiritual tragedies ("Lughat al-Āy Āy") and (6) he is unable to attain happiness and, therefore, should give up his fight for it ("Sāḥib Miṣr", "The Ruler of Egypt"). In all these stories Idrīs undertakes the task of going deeply into human psychology and attempts to grasp the hidden, unconscious impulses which have their roots in the biological basis of sense perception. Man suffers from a penetrating pain, he suffers physically and, what is even worse, psychologically. It seems that this scream of a suffering man, that is his pain, constitutes for Idrīs the most authentic and sincere voice of the human soul. If a man suffers in silence the suppressed scream can cause him even greater pain.

The artistic value of the collection *Lughat al-Āy Āy* was highly estimated by the critics. Here is what Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿAlīm said about it:[95]

> This is a new and one of a kind collection of short stories in contemporary Arabic literature. Compared with the previous stories of Yūsuf Idrīs, this

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94 This story is translated by R. Allen, *In the Eye of the Beholder*, pp. 111-118.

95 This statement of Amīn al-ʿAlīm is cited by W.N. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 132.

> collection should be viewed on a different level of art and originality. In this collection the author has almost completely given up his previous descriptive approach in presenting facts, events and people. The reader is taken immediately into the middle of the action and becomes part of it. The author describes nothing and he enchants you as if you are in the middle of the turmoil of life. He completely subordinates you to his will by not letting your eyes see, your mind think and your feelings react spontaneously.

This combination of themes based on both the real and the surreal which can be observed in the stories from *Lughat al-Āy Āy* is carried into the next collection, namely, *al-Naddāha* (*The Clarion*, 1969). In his many previous stories Idrīs looks at the world through the prism of the psychological life of his characters. However, it seems as if in the stories from *al-Naddāha* the psychological level of presentation is no longer sufficient for the literary aims of the author. Idrīs goes deeper and deeper into the human soul and uncovers in it biological and instinctive motives of human acts. According to the author at this point, a sexual impulse which cannot be controlled by the mind becomes a driving force for human beings.

These remarks may be illustrated by one of the stories from the collection, namely, "al-ᶜAmaliyya al-Kubrā"[96] ("The Big Operation") in which the complicated structure of human psychology is reduced to the basic instinct of sex. ᶜAbd al-Raᵓūf, a young doctor and a nurse spend the night taking care of a dying woman whose condition has worsened as a result of a mistake during the operation. Seeing the patient in agony causes in ᶜAbd al-Raᵓūf a tremendous fear of death. He tries to escape from this and looks for a remedy in the arms of the nurse. The act of physical interaction between the doctor and the nurse in front of a dying woman may symbolize the eternal struggle between life and death and the eventual triumph of life. The story ends as follows:

> It seems as if everything has become one and the end is mixed with the beginning, the first beginning with the last end and the moment when life goes out of death with the one when it comes into death. At that moment it

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96 This story is discussed by W.N. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, pp. 186-188.

> looks as if the good woman wanted only one thing: to gather all her forces and register all that she has seen that could stay in her eyes forever.[97]

The role of sex and the relation between man and woman are discussed further in Idrīs's collection of short stories, i.e., *Bayt min Laḥm*. A few stories from the collection depict the frustrations, temptations and even loneliness involved in the relationship between a man and his wife and indeed between a man and a woman outside marriage. The title story, "Bayt min Laḥm"[98] constitutes a good illustration of these remarks.

The author presents us here with the problem of the family without a father, and more precisely, with the emotions and tensions inside a house full of women, a widowed mother and her three daughters. The fact that the mother does not want to remarry before her daughters have settled down, together with the lack of a man in the house, means that no man would ever have the pretext to go there, except for the blind reader of the Qurʾān. Anything is better than nothing, and the mother, under pressure of her daughters, marries him. The mother puts on her wedding ring at night as the couple go to bed and make love while the daughters lie awake in the same room following every sigh and groan. As they grow up, reach maturity and no man comes to ask for their hands they plead with their mother to help them. She lets them put on the ring which eventually becomes a passport for the relief of the girls' sexual frustrations and the blind man does not know what is going on or he pretends not to. The author ends the story as follows:

> They (the mother and the daughters) alone have the blessing of certainty, since they are able to make distinctions. All he could offer was doubt, something which could only become a certainty through the blessing of sight. As long as he was deprived of that blessing, the certainty was missing too. He was blind, after all, and you cannot reproach the blind. Or can you?[99]

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97 S. Sasson, ed., *Dūnyā Yūsuf Idrīs min Khilāl Aqasīsih*, Tel Aviv: Dār al-Nashr al-ʿArabī, p. 193, v 1-4.

98 This story is translated into English by Mona Mikhail in: R. Allen, ed., *In the Eye of the Beholder*, pp. 191-198.

99 Ibid., pp. 197-198.

The sexual theme is not the only one discussed by Idrīs in the collection. *Bayt min Laḥm* contains also other stories of different subject matter, for example, "Sūrat al-Baqara"[100] ("The Chapter of the Cow"), an amusing, rustic tale, full of lively colloquial dialogue and touches on local descriptions of Egyptian villages; and "al-Riḥla"[101] ("The Journey") an allegory on the necessity of abandoning the cult of ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir.

Idrīs's fictional works published in the 1980s differ considerably from those written earlier. It seems that the photographic descriptiveness from the 1950s and the explosion of emotions, frustrations and fears from the 1960s and 1970s are replaced by a new feature namely, the refinement of themes and means of expression. In other words, Idrīs's fiction of the 1980s synthesizes and develops the best artistic features of his previous stories and novels. In his recent work Idrīs is still preoccupied with the presentation of an image of the Egyptian (Arab) man. However, it is no longer only an image or a picture. We would prefer to call it an artistic study, created with both vision and perspective. Emotions are tempered with wisdom, humor, irony and fantasy.

The shorter stories from the collection *ᶜAtb ᶜalā al-Naẓar*[102] (The Blame is on Vision, 1987) and the longer ones from the collection *Uqtulhā*[103] (Kill her, 1982) introduce us to the world of both Egyptian village and city. Our attention focuses on two original stories which clearly illustrate the new features of Idrīs's fiction from the 1980s.

The story "Abū al-Rijāl" [104] (The Father of Men) presents us with (possibly) the first attempt in Arabic literature to probe deeply into the mind and soul of a latent homosexual. Idrīs draws here a psychological study of a man in his fifties who is forcing himself to

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100 Ibid., pp. 141-147.

101 This story is translated into English by R. Allen, "The Journey" (al-Riḥla), *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. III (1972) pp. 127-131.

102 Y. Idrīs, *ᶜAtb ᶜalā al-Naẓar*, Cairo: Markaz al-Ahrām li-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 1987.

103 Y. Idrīs. *Uqtulhā*, Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1982.

104 Y. Idrīs, "Abū al-Rijāl", *Atb ᶜalā al-Naẓar*, pp.7-19. This story is translated into English by Saad Elhadem, *A Leader of Men*, Fredericton, N.B.: York Press, 1988.

confront and come to terms with the odd feelings and bizarre emotions that have been tormenting him lately. In this process the man uncovers his latent homosexuality and then he proceeds to adjust himself to this frightening reality. Despite the fact that this new, uncovered reality is shameful the man accepts, so late in his life, his true self as the only thing that has any validity for him.

The story "Abū al-Rijāl" reveals the real force and mastery of Idrīs's pen. Despite the fact that the author is dealing here with a subject matter that is regarded by the great majority of Islamic Egypt (Arab World) as repugnant and distasteful, he is capable of creating a well-balanced picture, never uses vulgar expressions or depicts an obscene situation. Idrīs's selection of scenes and choice of words is done with the utmost care and precision.

The story "Atb ʿalā al-Naẓar"[105] brings us to Idrīs's world of fantasy and irony. This story appears to be an allegorical satire on the Egyptian realities and especially on the Egyptian world of the press.

Ḥasan, the acknowledged owner of the village donkey kept for breeding purposes has a problem with his animal. The donkey cannot see well and the reproductive source of good, steady income seems threatened. Ḥasan decides to buy glasses for his donkey and this solution seems to work quite well. Soon, the donkey in glasses becomes an attraction for the tourists and a special exposition home is built for him. Ḥasan is happy, his income multiplies. It also happens that the donkey has a special talent, he has learned to read and he can read newspapers. However, Ḥasan cannot use the donkey's literacy to make extra money. The donkey not only reads newspapers but also (and here is the problem) expresses his emotions and takes a firm stand regarding the issues discussed by the Egyptian press. When he likes something he licks that particular piece of paper with joy but when he disapproves he chews that piece of paper and noisily spits it out with disgust. At this point

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105 Y. Idrīs, "Atb ʿalā al-Naẓar", *Atb ʿalā al-Naẓar,* pp.71-99.

Ḥasan decides to abandon the further education of his donkey, fearing that it may cause unnecessary problems and embarrassment.

Idrīs's novel *Niyū Yūrk 80*[106] published in 1980 also deserves consideration. In this work the author deals with the issue of the encounter between East and West[107]. Although this theme has been already discussed by some other novelists such as Tawfīq al-Ḥakim, Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī, Suhayl Idrīs and Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ, Idris presents us with a different approach in his novel. *Niyū Yūrk 80* is a story of a relationship between a young Egyptian man who has come to the United States and an American call-girl who is fascinated by the man's different personality and seeks more knowledge about this native country and its culture. Idrīs's encounter between East and West is no longer the traditional fascination by the West or the East (as presented by some other writers). The author points out clearly the need for better understanding of the differences and similarities between these two cultures.

In spite of the fact that in his last years Idrīs concentrated on journalism, he still remained one of the most creative short story writers in the Arab world. Although some of his stories may be more interesting than others, according to Roger Allen, one thing we can be sure of is that: "They will show a continuing concern for man and his existence on Earth, they will arouse both admiration and opposition for their experiments in theme and style. Such is the essence of Idrīs".[108]

The presentation of Idrīs's biography, the exposition of various influences which shaped his artistic personality and his attitude towards the role and aims of modern Arabic literature, together with the brief review of his fictional works constitute a starting point for the discussion of his drama. All this will make it easier to present, analyze and understand all the thematic and artistic developments which have occurred in his plays over the years.

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106 Y. Idrīs, *Niyū Yūrk 80*. Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1980.

107 For an interesting discussion on this issue, see: Issa J. Boullata, "Encounter between East and West: a Theme in Contemporary Arab Novels", *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature* (ed. by Issa J. Boullata), Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980, pp. 47-60.

108 R. Allen, ed., *In the Eye of the Beholder*, p. xxxix.

Furthermore, it will also help to show that Idrīs's drama is like a mirror which reflects the social changes in post-revolutionary Egypt.

Chapter II
Early Experiments with Drama

When Idrīs began his career as a playwright, Egyptian drama and theatre had already established traditions and entered their own phase of creative development.[1] In the history of Egyptian literature, the years between 1918-1952 constitute a formative period of basic dramatic literature. In the 1940s, realism, being enriched by the influence of the European and Egyptian dramatic traditions took on a definite shape and gained a dominant position in Egyptian drama. The realistic drama of the pre-revolutionary period is a mirror-image of the Egyptian world of reality, toward which playwrights have a didactic or moralizing attitude. Undoubtedly, it has certain affinities with the type of play which was well known in Europe under the name *pièce à thèse*.

After ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir's Revolution, that is, between 1952 and 1962, Egyptian realism continued to be the dominant trend, and realistic drama developed in close relation with the other genre of post-revolutionary literature, namely, fiction and, in particular, the short story. The influence of journalistic and reporting style, as well as the ideology of the 1952 Revolution are also evident. This trend crystallized and gave way to the well-suited name, the Egyptian post-revolutionary realism. The plays illustrative of that literary current focus on the political, social, and moral problems of contemporary Egyptian and Arab society. According to the author of a very recent monographic study on trends in modern Arab drama,[2] these plays, with respect to their typical thematic motifs, may be divided into four groups. The first

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1 For a discussion on the history of modern Egyptian drama and the main works of its best representatives see: I. ᶜAbd al-Munᶜim, *Drama and Society in Contemporary Egypt*, Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-ᶜArabī, 1967, M.M. Badawī, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, Cambridge: University Press, 1989, J. Bielawski, K. Skarzynska, J. Jasinska, *Wspolczesna literatura arabska 19i20w.* Warsaw: Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1978. N.R. Faraj, *Yūsuf Idrīs and Modern Egyptian Drama*, Cairo: Dār al-Maᶜārif, 1976. For modern criticism see: *al-Masraḥ* (Cairo) vol. 1-74, 1964-1970.

2 E. Machut-Mendecka, *Glowne kierunki rozwoju dramaturgii arabskiej* (The Main Development Currents in Arabic Drama). Warsaw: Polish Academy of Science (forthcoming).

group deals with the issues of nature and society: these plays are descriptions of people's feelings, emotions and desires, as well as critical remarks concerning the sphere of ethics and morals. The second presents the various issues of moral tradition and social emancipation; here, the playwrights discuss in detail issues, such as class division, family relations and the status of women. The third group focuses on the problem of class struggle; these plays touch upon other important aspects of Egyptian social life including the clash between tradition and modernity, the oppression and exploitation of the poorest classes by the aristocracy and landowners and the growing influence of a new emerging class of progressive intelligentsia and bureaucrats. The last group consists of works in which the authors deal with the issue of foreign expansion and struggle for independence.

Egyptian post-revolutionary realism as it is manifested in the plays of authors, such as Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, Nuʿman ʿĀshūr, Luṭfī al-Khūlī, Fatḥī Raḍwān, Rashād Rushdī, Saʿd al-Dīn Wahbā, Alfred Faraj and Yūsuf Idrīs may be described as a synthesis of a few basic elements: the tradition of pre-revolutionary realism, European models with the particular influence of Russian writers, such as Gorki and Chekhov, the creative methods of the Egyptian short story and journalism, as well as the spirit and ideology of ʿAbd al-Nāṣir's Revolution. The plays, mostly written in colloquial, present the reader with a panoramic picture of Egyptian society. In the early 1950s, the playwrights were still basically preoccupied with the depiction of society, and their creative methods were similar to those of journalists or authors of fiction. Only in the late 1950s can one notice some changes and creative developments concerning both thematic aspects and the artistic approach. Gradually, the social panorama of the city, which had dominated Egyptian drama thus far, begins to change, leaving more space for new elements, such as images of the village, psychological portraits of characters, the creation of new types of heroes and the appearance of new means of expression.

In this process of changes and new developments, Idrīs's three plays, that is, *Malik al-Quṭn* (The Cotton King, 1957), *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* (Faraḥāt's Republic, 1957) and *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija* (The Critical Moment, 1958), have played very important roles.

Malik al-Quṭn: the new image of the Egyptian peasant

Malik al-Quṭn (The Cotton King, 1957),[3] the first of Idrīs's plays was written shortly after the publication of his anthology of short stories *Arkhaṣ Layālī*. The only critical assessment of that work which is available so far, is rather scanty. There are a few short discussions of the play by Arab literary critics, such as ᶜAlī al-Rāᶜī[4] and Fārūq ᶜAbd al-Wahhāb;[5] however, there has yet to be a single article on it published by a Western scholar. This is rather surprising because Idrīs's first attempt in drama was a work of literary art of the same high quality as that of his first short stories, which were highly esteemed by the critics and brought the author immediate fame and popularity. *Malik al-Quṭn* with its interesting conflict, good dramatic construction, skillfully-conducted action, well-shaped characters and lively language reveals the tremendous dramatic potential of the author. One could even say that Idrīs's originality as a playwright, began not, as has been assumed by many critics, with *al-Fārāfīr* but with his very first play *Malik al-Quṭn*, which definitely deserves much more attention than it has received up until now. The literary value of *Malik al-Quṭn* and the incredible dramatic potential of Idrīs has already been recognized by ᶜAlī al-Rāᶜī. Here is what he says in the introduction to the play:

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3 Y. Idrīs, *Malik al-Quṭn; Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1981.

4 ᶜAlī al-Rāᶜī, *Foreword* to *Malik al-Quṭn; Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, by Y. Idrīs Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1981, pp. 5-14.

5 Fārūq ᶜAbd al-Wahhāb, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa Masraḥ al-Fikr", *al-Masraḥ*, July 1966, pp. 164-75.

> Idrīs's ability to write a play is far greater than he himself can imagine. With his first attempt in drama, he has been able to construct the play which is richer and much more beautiful than the story it contains.[6]

What are the main themes and artistic features of this short one-act play?

Malik al-Quṭn is not only a realistic picture of an Egyptian village, a "slice of life" which reveals the author's strong criticism of social injustice and inhumane exploitation and oppression of poor peasants by their landlords. A new post-revolutionary way of thinking, as well as a fresh, innovative presentation of the peasant surface in the play. It has been said that the century of the peasant in Egyptian drama begins with *Malik al-Quṭn*.[7] In light of our analysis of that play, this statement seems to be adequate.

The plot of the play is quite simple; it revolves around an argument between al-Simbāṭī, a landowner (of some twenty feddans) and a cotton grower in his fifties, known as the "Cotton King" and Qamḥāwī, a poor peasant, share-cropper who each year grows cotton. *Malik al-Quṭn* is illustrative of the unity of time, place and action, and consists of a few scenes in which the main problem, along with other themes, is exposed. The action takes place in the courtyard of al-Simbāṭī's house, one October day, before sunset.

In his play *Malik al-Quṭn*, Idrīs describes a specific social problem of the Egyptian village, namely, class relations between poor peasants and their landlords. This relation is presented on various levels, i.e., between adults, youths and children. The main idea, developed by the author, is the inhumane exploitation and oppression of the peasants by their landlords and the call for change, that is, the call for social justice and equality.

Idrīs presents in *Malik al-Quṭn* a usual situation taken from the Egyptian world of reality; each year, for six months, a poor farmer, Qamḥāwī, grows cotton for his landowner al-Simbāṭī, and as usual, the work is done very well, the cotton is the best quality but the

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6 ʿAlī al-Rāʿī, *Foreword* to *Malik al-Quṭn; Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, p. 13.

7 Ibid., p. 14.

reward for all this effort is negligible. As usual, Qamḥāwī is in despair, swears that he will not touch this soil again, while al-Simbāṭī rejoices in his success at cheating once again.

However, this year something different is happening; Qamḥāwī's attitutde has changed. The peasant no longer remains the passive victim of previous years; on the contrary he is unwilling to give in, and his antagonistic stand indicates that he is absolutely determined to fight for his rights. When al-Simbāṭī, in his long and deliberately confusing explanation, opens his books and claims Qamḥāwī's final balance to be five pounds and forty piasters, common sense and simple logic urge the peasant to make a clever and brave remark:

> Qamḥāwī: Listen, my Afandī! I have only one word. Your book-keeping does not enter my brain.[8]

Qamḥāwī protests and he does not want to accept the payment:

> Qamḥāwī: I do not need the money! Allah is rich! Let the amount be *zakāt* on behalf of my children.[9]

His sound judgement does not let him agree with this unfair situation, and he absolutely insists on the correct amount of money. Qamḥāwī has enough courage to even involve his relative al-Ḥājj Shawāḍfī in the problem; he asks him to verify al-Simbāṭī's book-keeping and act as a judge. When he sees that al-Ḥājj is also unfair and would rather see Qamḥāwī give in, Qamḥāwī decides to fight for himself. The poor farmer does not want al-Ḥājj's mercy, and therefore, he rejects his "friendly" solution of one extra pound. What he insists on is justice and fair payment for his hard work, because he knows and feels what he truly deserves.

In his portrait of Qamḥāwī, Idrīs shows that the poor, oppressed peasant is becoming increasingly aware of the situation, that his mind is open to news from the outside world and that he is capable of synthesizing and applying all this new knowledge and insight in solving his problem. When the new evidence of al-Simbāṭī's cheating comes to light, namely, the

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8 Ibid., p. 31, v. 1-2.

9 Ibid., p. 30, v. 11-12.

incorrect weight of the cotton and the deflated price of cotton per kantar, he takes the initiative and, together with his son ʿAwaḍ, draws up a bill of his own and boldly presents it in front of everybody:

> Qamḥāwī(screaming): I want twenty-two pounds and my right to half the ownership of the cotton. I want (money) right away to the last millieme.[10]

The evidence of al-Simbāṭī's cheating is obvious, even al-Ḥājj Shawāḍfī criticizes him for the expensive lease and incorrect weight of the cotton,

> al-Ḥājj: Oh, people! Lying in the name of God is forbidden! His (ʿAwaḍ's) weight, al-Simbāṭī, is correct![11]

The attitutde and determination of Qamḥāwī to fight for his rights are firm, decisive and strong. He is no longer afraid of criticizing his opponent:

> Qamḥāwī: How is it correct? Totally impossible! This is nonsense. So, the book-keeping that has made me and my children work six months for five pounds is correct?! How can it be correct? This is totally wrong![12]

He now can raise his voice or even scream:

> Qamḥāwī: What kind of oppression is this,oh people! There is no more justice in this world! I have been working with my wife and children for six months and all this for five pounds! Oh, people!...There is no more justice, oh, humans![13]

Will it all help Qamḥāwī to regain his fair money? Is it enough to obtain justice?

Not this year. Qamḥāwī realizes that he cannot win yet and surrenders. So, eventually the whole problem takes its usual turn, and the poor peasant will not even see his five

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10 Ibid., p. 61, v. 19-20.

11 Ibid., p. 47, v. 22-23.

12 Ibid., p. 45, v. 9-13.

13 Ibid., p. 31, v. 3-6.

pounds and forty piasters because this amount will remain in al-Simbāṭī's books to be added to the balance of the next year. Then, as in other years, he screams and swears not to touch the soil anymore, and his oppressive landlord believes that he can forever exploit this naive peasant. Although this year Qamḥāwī has again lost his money, he has gained something else, that is.his self-confidence, the strength of faith, patience and belief in his son's words that this unjust exploitation and oppresstion is about to change:

Muḥammad (from the inside of the [cotton] bag):
It is all right, father. Soon a day will come when everybody will be satisfied.[14]

Qamḥāwī knows and feels that this cotton belongs to him and will in the future. This is why he has insisted on his book-keeping, on his right to the ownership of half of it, and later on, this explains why he has saved it from the fire. The surprising end of the play, i.e., when Qamḥāwī extinguishes the fire, reveals the playwright's large dose of optimism. As the author presents it in *Malik al-Quṭn* Qamḥāwī's speedy efforts in saving the cotton puzzles al-Ḥājj Shawaḍfī: Why has he saved the cotton? After all, he has gained nothing by doing that. It would be better to let it burn. For a poor peasant like Qamḥāwī, who is deeply attached to the soil and who knows the real value of hard work and respects it, the explanation is natural, logical and very simple:

Qamḥāwī (screaming very loudly): How would I let it (burn), al-Ḥājj?! How will I let it burn oh people?! If this were you who planted it, you would not say that. This is my sweat. It's my misery, it is part of me. How would I let it burn?![15]

Idrīs has made his hero save the cotton because this action enabled the poor peasant to prove his right to the ownership of the cotton and manifest his insistence on that right.

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14 Ibid., 63, v. 1-2.

15 Y. Idrīs, *Malik al-Quṭn; Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, p. 67, v. 1-4.

The image of the peasant created by Idrīs in the play *Malik al-Quṭn* differs considerably from that of pre-reveolutionary drama: it is a true depiction, sketched with attentiveness, presented seriously and with respect. The peasant looks poor and his clothes are dirty; however, what is hidden deeply inside his heart is pure and clean. He is sensitive, just, honest and strongly believes in the good will of human beings. He is deeply attached to the earth, works hard and respects his work. He is also religious, and his deep faith in God makes it easier for him to patiently bear all the burdens of his poor existence.

The way Idrīs's hero is presented reveals certain affinities with socialist realism. Qamḥāwī's fully human personality, his outlook, behaviour and attitude towards his work remind us of the positive type of hero from the literature of socialist realism. Idrīs's hero fights with determination and when finally he fails, we really feel sorry for him and strongly believe in his future victory.

The author's discussion of the relation between the peasant and the landlord is enriched by the interactions between the representatives of the younger generation, namely, the younger and older children of Qamḥāwī and al-Simbāṭī. Ten-year old ᶜAwaḍ and nine-year old Saᶜd are often together; they play various games, and as children, they also fight. However, when we watch them playing, we can see clearly that they are growing up in a world with deep social differences, that they belong to two different social groups. Saᶜd, like his father, always wants to dominate, be the first and most important, and treats his poor friend badly. The attitude of ᶜAwaḍ reflects the growing awareness and changes in the mentality of his father. He demands to be treated equally and is unwilling to obey his rich friend's orders. Furthermore, he would also like to be sometimes the first and the most important, and he feels that he can fight for his rights in their games:

ᶜAwaḍ: I will not play unless I am the head (of the train)...

Saᶜd: If you will not accept this, I will...

ʿAwaḍ: No. I will not play unless I am the head.[16]

The future belongs to the younger generation, the generation of boys like ʿAwaḍ who, thanks to the education received from their fathers, will one day be able to fulfill their dreams and live in a world of social justice and equality.

As Idrīs consistently points out in his play, the time of social change and social justice in the Egyptian village is approaching. His depiction of the young generation carries a lot of hope and optimism. The author even encourages his young heroes to take more decisive steps towards real change. Muḥammad, the older son of Qamḥāwī ,is in love with Suʿād. It seems they are both ready for the process of reconciliation between classes; they are no longer preoccupied with the material aspects of life, instead they listen attentively to their feelings and apply pure common sense in their conduct:

Suʿād: I need the one who marries me to be as tall, as strong and as firm as a pillar in the salon.

Muḥammad: And me? Am I not good?

Suʿād: Are you as tall as this pillar?

Muḥammad: I am this tall or even taller.

Suʿād: Then I accept you.[17]

The mother of Muḥammad absolutely rejects the possibility of her son marrying Suʿād because of the consequences. A girl from a rich family needs a husband of the same social status, and obviously no one will permit her to consider a poor candidate like Muḥammad. However, for the confident young man, this is an assumption of the past. He does not pay attention to the social differences between people, all that really matters to him, is the human personality. Muḥammad explains this as follows:

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16 Ibid., p. 39, v. 9, 13-14.

17 Ibid., p. 33, v. 4-9.

Muḥammad (to his mother): You know nothing. No matter what the lady does, she needs a man. That is it. I am a peasant but a man. She is a lady; so, what? Isn't she a girl like other girls?![18]

In contrast to the optimism and approbation shown in the image of the poor peasant, in his depiction of the class of landowners, Idrīs reveals irony, antipathy and strong criticism. Even, the direct characterization of al-Simbāṭī and his wife Naẓīra expresses the author's rather reluctant attitude toward them:

al-Simbatī...red face, ... Naẓīra, his wife, fat and ugly.[19]

Furthermore, their conduct, their way of thinking and presenting their ideas yield a more complete set of characterisitcs of their class. which points out their greed, gruffness, dishonesty, insatiable hunger for material goods and willingness to oppress and exploit the poor and helpless. Naẓīra is obssessed with possessing more and more things for herself and her children. When al-Ḥājj Shawāḍfī proposes to raise the payment of Qamḥāwī, she cannot stand the possibility of one extra pound slipping out of her hands:

Naẓīra (from inside the house): You want to give him six pounds and half! Oh, Prophet! It is impossible![20]

The minute her husband receives one hundred pounds from the merchant, she urges Kamāl to bring her a hundred-pound note right away to see it with her own eyes:

Kamāl (shy): I would like to have a word with you.

al-Simbāṭī (takes him aside): What is the matter?

Kamāl: My mother (asked me) to tell you that she wants to see a hundred-pound note.[21]

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18 Ibid., p. 34, v. 22-25.

19 Ibid., p. 18, v. 3-4.

20 Ibid., p. 49, v. 10-11.

21 Ibid., p. 59, v. 3-4.

As we can see in the play, al-Simbāṭī is no better. All the numbers in his accounts books are false; he wants to cheat his poor tenants as much as he can. Furthermore, al-Simbāṭī neither understands nor appreciates the value of hard, honest work as he is always preoccupied with becoming wealthy. When the fire breaks out, the only thing he remembers is his land and that he might lose it. The fact, that the cotton is the result of Qamḥāwī's six months of work does not even enter his mind:

al-Simbāṭī: Oh, Lord! The cotton is gone! The land is finished! It is gone![22]

Apart from presenting a new image of the Egyptian peasant, *Malik al-Quṭn* offers a sarcastic depiction of the landowner class and exposes two personalities, namely, al-Ḥājj Shawāḍfī and the merchant Abū Ismāʿīl, who are rather neutral to the social problem but whose participation in it throws better light on the class system, and clarifies Idrīs's ideas.

Al-Ḥājj Shawāḍfī represents the same social status as al-Simbāṭī's but he is an owner from the city. His attitude towards the problem presented in the play clearly indicates that his way of thinking considerably differs from that of al-Simbāṭī's. Al-Ḥājj Shawāḍfī is well aware of the post-revolutionary changes, and he knows that the era of the landlord's complete domination and peasants' submissiveness is inevitably coming to an end. Therefore, while helping in the argument between Qamḥāwī and al-Simbāṭī, he attempts to ease the tension and appeals to family feelings to avoid unnecessary anger and hatred:

al-Ḥājj Shawāḍfī: So look, Qamḥāwī! It is a matter of family relations. We are all related. This year, it is like this. Next year, if God will, it could be better![23]

Al-Ḥājj Shawāḍfī knows that in this argument, the poor peasant is right. He even criticizes the landlord for the high rent and sides with Qamḥāwī concerning the weight of the cotton. However, we can detect some hypocrisy in his role as judge. On the one hand, he

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22 Ibid., p. 66, v. 9-10.

23 Ibid., p. 44, v. 23-25.

would like to remain friendly with people like Qamḥāwī because he thinks they are about to win their battle for social justice, freedom and equality, and they could even be in power. On the other hand, at the moment, he has to be loyal to the members of his own social class, and therefore, he would rather side with the landlord. This class solidarity and perhaps even the threat from al-Simbāṭī urges him to "encourage" poor Qamḥāwī to surrender this year:

Qamḥāwī: How much are you saying, Afandī?

al-Simbāṭī (with deliberate ignorance): Six pounds and half.

al-Ḥājj (wispering to Qamḥāwī): ... Take the money, that's better than nothing.[24]

As for the merchant Abū Ismāʿīl, we may suspect that Idrīs deliberately refuses to have him side with either the landlord or the peasant. However, during his conversation with Qamḥāwī, he clarifies some important matters to the peasant , such as the market price of the cotton, the policy of buying and selling, and the bases of bank operations. Thus, the merchant makes Qamḥāwī more aware of the outside world's problems, encourages him to learn more and apply that to his own problems. As we see in the play, the result of this "hidden education" is immediate, and Qamḥāwī makes a bill of his own for the cotton. Although, under the circumstances, the poor peasant cannot succeed yet, he definitely has learned how to fight and possibly win in the near future.

The main aim of *Malik al-Quṭn* is clear and can be easily grasped. The author has repeated it many times as his voice speaks behind the various scenarios and dialogues. The main aim is to present a new image of the Egyptian peasant, a peasant whose mentality has been considerably changed, who is well aware of his right to social justice and equality, who will insist on fair pay for his hard and honest work and who is capable of fighting and eventually winning. The play *Malik al-Quṭn* presents the author's decisive call to put an end to the peasant's exploitation and oppression, to encourage and speed up the process of

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[24] Ibid, p. 63, v. 7-10.

reconciliation between social classes in Egypt in particular, to expose, promote and cultivate real human values and to free the world from hostility and evil, in general.

Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt: confronting the brutal reality and searching for a way out

With the play *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* (Faraḥāt's Republic, 1957),[25] idrīs's realism develops into a full, complete and creative mode of expression, leaving behind the narrowness of *Malik al-Quṭn* and introducing the reader to a broad spectrum of social problems. This one-act play is a successful transformation of one of the author's earlier stories which bears the same title.[26] In spite of the fact that *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* is considered by ārūq ᶜAbd al-Wahhāb to be Idrīs's best play,[27] this work, similar to *Malik al-Quṭn*, has been rather neglected by both Eastern and Western literary scholars.[28]

The story *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, which Idrīs has transformed into a play, draws our attention with its original presentation of the problems in two separate but somehow related plots, interesting narration, skillfully developed and maintained dramatic tension, well-constructed culminative point and surprising turn of the plot which results in the story's unexpected end. This story is not built on narration only; the author frequently utilizes short, lively dialogues, and thus makes the reader feel as if he is in the middle of the action and movement. Therefore, as ᶜAlī al-Rāᶜī pointed out in his introduction to the play,[29] for a

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25 Y. Idrīs, *Malik al-Quṭn; Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1981.

26 *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* (1954) is the last story Idrīs wrote before he was imprisoned for political reasons and as such it marks the close of his literary career's first period.

27 Fārūq ᶜAbd al-Wahhāb, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa Masraḥ al-Fikr", *al-Masraḥ*, July 1966, p. 167.

28 Here we can mention two short studies by Arab scholars, namely, by Fārūq ᶜAbd al-Wahhāb, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa Masraḥ al-Fikr", and by ᶜAlī al-Rāᶜī, *Foreword* to the play; there has yet to be a single article on the play published by a Western scholar.

29 ᶜAlī al-Rāᶜī, *Foreword* to *Malik al-Quṭn; Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, by Y. Idrīs, 1981, pp. 13-14.

talented author such as Idrīs, the transformation of an already well-dramatized story into theatrical form should not present a difficult task. Later, however, the same critic expresses his disappointment with the result of the playwright's literary task; in ʿAlī al-Rāʿī's comparison of the story to the play *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* there are no new significant thematic developments or original artistic features and solutions. Despite these unenthusiastic remarks, the play has achieved a great deal of success: it is frequently performed on Cairo stages and enjoys the applause of both the audience and the local media.

The play is set in the office of Sergeant Faraḥāt, around 9 p.m., in a Cairene police station. The atmostphere is rather gloomy; the office with its dirty walls and shabby furniture, is crowded with policemen, detainees and clients.

Sergeant Faraḥāt while performing his duties has engaged himself in conversation with a young man named Muḥammad. He is a political detainee. However, Faraḥāt mistakenly takes him for an *afandī* who has come to the station to file a complaint.

As action develops, the old sergeant's dislike for his job becomes evident. For him the police station is not a serious place; it is more of a circus or a mad-house, and the complaints he has to listen to, are all lies, fraud and deception. After thirty years of work in such a place, Faraḥāt knows all the usual people's troubles and complaints and a simple, careful look at those people is sufficient for him to identify their problems with no need for interrogation or questioning. Therefore, while performing his duties, the old sergeant lacks patience, displays ignorance, indifference and even anger. He shouts, screams and uses bad words. According to Faraḥāt, his book of records contains nothing but lies and fabrications; he is the real victim in all of this because he is the one who has to make an official report from all these fabrications of dishonest and crazy people.

Faraḥāt's dissatisfaction is not limited to his work; he is also disappointed with the Egyptian cinema and especially film scenarios. According to the old sergeant, a film should satisfy the mind. As for the stories with belly dancing and cheap romance, which the cinema presents most often, they are useless. To Muḥammad's surprise, Faraḥāt has written a film

scenario of his own, and while questioning a young woman, he begins narrating it to his attentive interlocutor.

While narrating the story, Farahāt becomes a different person. He is polite and patient; he smiles; his voice is soft and gentle. However, he cannot stay that way because his story is interrupted by his "disturbing clients". That night on duty, he releases a few detainees, defends an aging woman against a young man, listens to illogical stories of Khadija Muḥammad who was beaten in the cinema, calls an ambulance for a wounded tram controller looks into the case of a few beggars and poor children. He does not pay attention to his work. Instead he is preoccupied with his film scenario about an ideal republic.

This scenario, reminiscent of an old fairy-tale or *usṭūra*, involves a rich Indian who, while visiting Egypt, loses an expensive diamond ring and the poor unemployed Egyptian who finds it and returns it to the owner refuses any reward. However, upon his return home, the rich Indian finds a way to reward the honest but poor man. The Indian buys one hundred lottery tickets and one of them wins the first prize, a million pounds, tax-free. Then, he buys a tremendous cargo ship which he loads with the best Indian silk, ivory, cashmere and fine furniture. He sends the freighter with its crew and goods to Alexandria. The bill of sale is prepaid and mailed to the poor Egyptian; all he has to do is to receive the goods. The poor man sells the cargo and buys a second freighter. The two ships travel abroad and return loaded with exports and imports, making a large profit. Within a year, the poor Egyptian becomes prosperous; his business expands quickly. Step by step, he buys all the freighters in Alexandria until there are no longer any British or Italian ships; all raise the green flag of Egypt. Then with the income from the ships, step by step, he re-organizes his country. He rebuilds industry, modernizes the agriculture, improves the social conditions of the workers and farmers, builds them new houses, dresses them in clean uniforms and sends them to school. People are happy and work well. Production doubles. The man has so much money that he becomes sick of it; it is cheaper than sand. One tires of money after amassing so

much of it. One day, the man makes an announcement on the radio: he declares that he would distribute all.

While uttering the last words of his fable, the sergeant stumbles onto another problem which worries him, and suddenly he asks the nearby policeman why he has spent the entire day standing there instead of doing something useful. The policeman feels rather uncomfortable in answering him. He has spent his entire day in the office because he is Muḥammad's guard. Faraḥāt is confused: it must be difficult for a proud policeman like him to admit that despite his extensive police experience, he was unable to identify a detainee. Muḥammad, still preoccupied with the story and eager to know its end, asks Faraḥāt to continue. However, the old sergeant has completely lost his fascination with the scenario, and his dreams of a paradise have vanished. He returns to his desk and makes an abrupt remark about the story being merely words and unworthy of much attention.

His face has changed, as have his manners. Then, he looks at the old beggar, standing in front of him and with his usual unpleasant tone, anger and foul language, he begins questioning.

The play *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, presents a fairly close transformation of the story with very few detailed changes. The only innovation made by the author is the introduction of the problem of the two men, namely the tram controller and the worker who have come to the station severely wounded after having a fight over a nickel.

Similar to *Malik al-Quṭn*, the play *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* also presents us with a picture from the Egyptian world of reality. However, this time the author does not limit himself to the depiction of a simple conflict of "small society", as in the case of *Malik al-Quṭn*. In *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, Idrīs undertakes a more difficult task, that is, to examine the various problems of the members of poor, urban society, composed of different social groups, full of divisions and contradictions and exposed to a lot of negative influences. While discussing the problems of this "larger world" of Egyptian realities, the author goes even further, that is,

beyond the frame of this realism into the world of the modern *usṭūra*, fairy-tale or utopia, in an attempt to find solutions there to the problems witnessed in Faraḥāt's office.

Idrīs, in his play, presents a clash between brutal, disturbing realities and the kind, smooth, utopian world. A first glance at the depiction of these two worlds may suggest that this utopian scenario, about a well-organized, happy republic may constitute for Faraḥāt and others like him, tired of their difficult and unpleasant surroundings, a sort of antidote to all the problems they are unable to cope with, a remedy for all their sorrows, pains, griefs and disappointments, an escape from life's everyday burdens and a method to retain psychological equilibrium. However, when we look more closely into the play, we may find some other reasons for weaving these two only apparently-contradictory plots into a single play.

What are the reasons for this thematic and artistic experiment of Idrīs? To understand Idrīs's idea and find an answer to our question, we must first look closely at the content of the play, that is, to analyze briefly those two separate plots.

The first plot, which consists of the events taking place in a Cairene police station, exposes the reader to a naturalistic portrait of both the people and life in a poor quarter of Cairo. The office of old Sergeant Faraḥāt, who is on duty that night, becomes a dark and oppressive theatre of the human tragedy of these poor Egyptians. In his depiction of the station, Idrīs emphasizes the ugliness of the setting, the atmosphere of fear and terror, the lack of humanity and the indifference shown by the sergeant's actions and words. Whoever is held here as a detainee or comes with a complaint or problem should not expect to be treated fairly or seriously. Everything depends on the mood and fantasy of Faraḥāt, who conducts his affairs with anger, impatience, indifference, rough manners and foul language. His actions are unexpected, and his decisions are surprising and often not related to the problem. After his thirty years of experience working with the police, he claims to know all the usual crimes and to understand the people's problems and complaints. As Faraḥāt has

explained to Muḥammad, his first glance at a person can give him enough information as to the nature of the crime, abuse or complaint:

Muḥammad: This woman is here from the morning. What does she want?

Faraḥāt: I am not Faraḥāt if she will not say that somebody has beaten her or has stolen her jewelry.[30]

However, he is not performing as he is supposed to; he is not willing to offer his clients real help or protection. On the contrary, he instills fear in them, deliberately muddles facts and confuses them, making the real victims feel as though they were the cause of their problems. As for human pain and tragedy, to the indifferent and ignorant sergeant Faraḥāt, they seem to have no meaning at all.

On that particular night on duty, Faraḥāt has a few matters to take care of. His manner of dealing with people and their problems, reveals the author's strong criticism of the Egyptian police administration, justice and medical organizations in particular and the governmental infrastructure in general.

The first case is that of the detainees, kept at the station for many days without reason or by mistake. The police bureacracy does not take into account the simple fact that these people are human beings, with families, jobs, business to take care of, and that, in the first place, they have every right to know why they are being held, for how long, and what is happening with their petitions or letters. They ask, they complain and finally they scream:

Voice: Stop using bad words! We have been shutting up since yesterday. Does anybody talk?

Voice: Take us away, then!

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30 Y. Idrīs, *Malik al-Quṭn; Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, p. 80, v. 1-2.

Voice(relieved): It cannot be worse than it is. It has been already ten days: everyday shut up and shut up.[31]

However, nobody wants to listen and their call for help and understanding remains unanswered; on the contrary, it may arouse harsh words from the officer:

Faraḥāt: Blindess in your eyes and in the eye of whoever brought you...

Faraḥāt(embarrassed): Hey you! Be quiet!... or else, I swear by the soil of the my father's grave, I will make your night darker than the bottom of the cooking pot.[32]

Surprisingly, Faraḥāt's night on duty is a lucky one for these angry people. Their papers have arrived in time, and Faraḥāt, angry yet relieved, sends them home. However, his happiness will be short-lived; there will be more problems to deal with during the coming night.

As Faraḥāt has expected, the next matter comes soon and it is a complaint from an aging woman who accuses her neighbour, Shawqī, of following her. Faraḥāt has agreed to intervene and the man is brought to the station for questioning. From the outset of the questioning, it is clear that the young man is a victim of the woman's plot; he does not even know her:

The young man: I do not understand what you are saying, auntie!

The widow: Do you like this, sergeant, that in front of you he is making fun of me?

The young man: Truly, I do not know her.[33]

Shawqī is innocent but it doesn't matter; under the circumstances, he is unable to defend himself and could eventually become a victim of the woman's desires:

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31 Ibid., p. 74, v. 6, 8, 17, 21-22.

32 Ibid., p. 74, v. 7, 19-20.

33 Ibid., p. 90, v. 18-19, 22.

The widow: You come to me to my place at five o'clock tomorrow to make peace. If not you will go to prison.

The young man: Oh, auntie, what do you want?

The widow: My name is Ḥikma (Wisdom). When they spoiled me they called me Ḥukūma (Government). I live in the house just in front of yours and my eyes do not leave you all day. If you do not come (she points to Faraḥāt)...[34]

The woman is free to do anything she wants because due to a fantasy or a reason unknown to us, Faraḥāt has decided to side with her:

Faraḥāt: Listen! I do not want to see you disturbing this woman again.

The young man: Yes, uncle.

Faraḥāt: If she comes to complain about you another time, I'll teach you a lesson.[35]

Subsequently, the sergeant has to deal with the problem of the two wounded men, namely, the tram controller and the worker brought to the station by the driver. The matter is obvious; the severely wounded and bleeding tram controller must be treated immediately; his life is in danger. How does Faraḥāt deal with that? The way Idrīs presents this demonstrates the real power of his pen and reveals large doses of sarcastic humor and irony. Faraḥāt is not in a hurry; instead he takes his time to talk and make sarcastic jokes. Then, he calls an ambulance but he does not bother too much to explain that the bleeding man really needs immediate help:

Driver: Afandī, they are severely wounded. Please call an ambulance for them. The tram controller is in very bad shape.

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34 Ibid., p. 91, v. 16-17, 19-23.

35 Ibid., p. 92, v. 2-3, 4-5.

Faraḥāt: Ambulance, no ambulance, everything will be done step by step. (He picks up the telephone) 'Allo, 'allo, wake up, Fatḥī, brave boy, and answer! Answer, our brother. Your mouth is full of what? Potato? So leave some for me and give me the ambulance, Fatḥī! We need a car here. Yes, right away...Someone is dying.[36]

The ambulance is finally called, meaning that Faraḥāt's problem is over. The wounded men and driver are told to wait outside. They wait and wait; there is no trace of an ambulance. The tram controller is still bleeding and he gets impatient. He approaches Faraḥāt begging and pleading for help, and when this does not convince the policeman to act more effectively, he screams demanding a more humane treatment:

Tram controller: We are dying. I have lost lots of blood. There is no justice, no humanity!

Faraḥāt: What do you want me to do? Am I the father or the mother of the ambulance? What do you want me to do?

Tram controller: Find a way! Act humanely![37]

What does Faraḥāt do? Is he willing to speed things up? Not at all. He screams back:

Faraḥāt: Talk according to your standard. Humanity! This you say in a coffee shop...

Tram controller: This is very bad; this is chaos; this is death and destruction.[38]

Then with the same funny manner he calls again. So, they wait again and still the ambulance doesn't arrive. They approach Faraḥāt again asking to intervene. What does he do this time? He gets angrier:

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36 Ibid., p. 79, v. 3-6, 10-15.

37 Ibid., p. 94, v. 20-26, p. 95, v. 1-2.

38 Ibid., p. 105, v. 3, 8-9.

Faraḥāt: Where (is the ambulance)? What do you mean? Is it in my pocket or in the drawer? We have already asked for it.[39]

When finally, after the third intervention, the ambulance arrives, and the medical staff cannot find the men who need it, Faraḥāt says with a disturbing calm and complete indifference:

Faraḥāt: So, they were bored and they went.[40]

He doesn't care about the wounded; he is busy with his reports:

Faraḥāt: Thank God that we have not written a report about them, because if we had done that we would have to bring them from wherever they are (now).[41]

In the meantime, a shy young woman walks into Faraḥāt's office. She has been attacked and beaten up in the cinema by the family of her former husband. The woman seems to be uneducated and very naive. Therefore, clever Faraḥāt right away takes advantage of the situation. He does not want to listen to her explanation of the problem; instead, he asks the questions and focuses on details unrelated to the matter. Actually, even the act of interrogating her makes Faraḥāt uncomfortable and mad because, at the same time, he has engaged himself in an interesting conversation with Muḥammad and is narrating his scenario about a utopian world. However, the old sergeant is well aware that, while on duty, he has to somehow solve the case of this young woman and write something in his book. So, in order to get rid of Khadīja Muḥammad, he hands her a referral slip for a medical examination, and then, free for the moment, proceeds with his story.

Why is Faraḥāt so nasty and why does he treat his poor clients with sarcasm, make fun of their shyness, lack of education and naiveté, by screaming and using bad language? Why

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39 Ibid., p. 104, v. 11-12.

40 Ibid., p. 107, v. 9.

41 Ibid., p. 107, 10-11.

does he instill fear in them and create an atmosphere of terror? Why is he so indifferent to the human pain and tragedy of these poor people while, when the matter concerns the missing dog of an "important" owner, he is ready to act quickly, properly and efficiently? Is he the only one to blame for this kind of behaviour?

The presentation of Faraḥāt's night, with all of its brutal features uncovered, allows Idrīs to criticize strongly the corruption of Egyptian government offices. When we look closely at Idrīs's sketch of the character of Faraḥāt, we hesitate to blame him alone for his unmannerly, rude behaviour, gruffness and indifference. It is the system which has led the people to grow up that way; it is the system that has made Faraḥāt and others like him to work hard without even the slightest chance for advancement and a better life. It is the system that has given the poor people nothing but sorrow, pain, bitterness and has made their dreams vanish. All those years of dealing with lies, corruption and "dirty" affairs, have made Faraḥāt suspicious, reserved, distrustful, unfriendly to people, callous, impervious to pity and deaf to any human call for help and protection. He is not happy with his life but he simply does not realize that it could be different. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that Faraḥāt hates his work and the whole order in the station. Since he cannot change anything, he is forced to play a part in this sarcastic and painful comedy:

Faraḥāt: I swear hard labour is better than work here.
Being in prison for one year is better than sitting
for one hour here.

Muḥammad: What is happening, lots of work?

Faraḥāt: This is work? This is a circus, a madhouse.
People become crazy and everything is expected
of me alone.[42]

While tired of his surroundings, the old sergeant is desperately looking for relief from his stress, for a way out, an escape from his disturbing reality, and he finds it in his dreamy

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42 Ibid., p. 79, v. 18-24.

scenario told to an attentive listener such as Muḥammad. The indifference of the officer to the problems of the real people of his own society is portrayed by Idrīs in sharp contrast with the spirit of love and compassion in his vision. It seems the author is presenting us with two different faces or even masks of Faraḥāt: the first, he wears in the office to play his part in the "circus of life"; and the second, he wears when he gets carried away with his own fantasy and with his imagination, and temporarily leaves this madhouse to enjoy the life of a utopian dream.

There is no doubt, that the essence of the play lies in this ideal scenario and that the literary aim of Idrīs is hidden therein. It may puzzle us why the author inserts this motif of utopian literature, i.e., a kind and gentle story of an ideal republic, into his realistic *tranche de vie.*

Since Plato, the description of the Ideal Commonwealth has been one of the standard byways of literature. Among classic utopias, Plato's *Republic* is by far the most important, for it deals with every aspect of common life including its ultimate ends in religious and philosophic insight. The *Republic* had a great impact both on Western and Eastern concepts of the organization of society and set the pattern for utopia. Plato's work was followed through the centuries by many great utopian visions by such famous authors as al-Fārābī, More, Campanella, Bacon, Mercier, Cabet, Bellamy, Wells, Shaw and others.

The characteristic feature of utopian literature is its didactic aim. The author usually presents a plan of a well-organized society, a just political regime, ideal social order or perfectly-functioning institutions. In general, utopian literature is rooted in ideals which are in deep contradiction with the social and political reality, known to the author and his readers from direct experience. The appearance of utopia is usually associated with periods of social and political crisis. Therefore, if we take into account all the known facts about utopian literature, its features and aims, it should not be surprising that during the post-revolutionary social crisis in Egypt, Idrīs presents his version of an ideal society in *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt,* turning his play into a *pièce à thèse.*

When we look closely at these two different worlds presented by Idrīs, the one dirty, brutal and hopeless and the other ideal and happy, and when we focus more on the playwright's depiction of the ideal one, we may arrive at some reasons for the existence of these extremes in the play other than to simply relieve the tired mind through an "escape fantasy". Idrīs is an author who, despite his constant thematic and artistic experiments, never left the framework of reality, and for whom the country's problems are of great concern. Why when we read this utopian fairy-tale do we become fascinated by it, and, like Muḥammad, want "to catch every word of it"? We are fascinated, because this beautiful, gentle *usṭūra* tells us about our reality and teaches us how to improve ourselves and our society. Obviously, in the first place, the author has in mind the Egyptian reader. However, the matters he discusses can apply to any other reader in the world.

The utopian scenario of Faraḥāt presents us with two beautiful characters: the poor Egyptian and the rich Indian. Their story is a story about human honesty, an honesty which knows neither social differences nor political borders, an honesty which can build anything and which can neither be sold nor bought with any kind of money:

> Faraḥāt(narrating): If somebody offers to buy your honesty, for how much will you sell it? I will not sell it, even for Qārūn's money, he (the Indian) said. So, why do you want me to sell my honesty for a piece of gold? It is impossible.[43]

For Idrīs, as revealed through Faraḥāt's story, being rich implies being honest, being rich in soul and spirit. Money comes and goes, and therefore should never become our priority; our real wealth lies in our souls which will forever be with us. Such an understanding could be, according to the playwright, the key to building a happy and healthy society. It should not happen only in a dreamy scenario where the rich and the poor become good friends:

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43 Ibid., p. 89, v. 10-13.

Farahāt(narrating): The period (the Indian) stayed in Egypt, the Egyptian did not leave him. Everyday they used to meet each other in front of the hotel to go sightseeing.[44]

This kind of friendship should become a real fact of life.

Honesty can build everything, and everything should be built on it. As described by Idrīs in the story, it was the poor Egyptian's destiny to become rich but his honesty remained in its place and "the money did not go to his head". Instead he worked hard to multiply it and the profit he invested in the well-being of his country. First, in a relatively short period of time, he was able to buy all foreign ships which were operating there; all the ships were united under the Egyptian green flag. Subsequently, the man turned his attention to industry; he soon became the owner of all the factories in Egypt, and then, he decided to construct a huge industrial centre where all the factories were built next to the workers' pleasant living quarters. The workers were paid fairly; production doubled; the life of the industrial centre was full of happiness and joy. Agriculture also needed change. So, he decided to take care of that too, and with the help of imported machinery and highly qualified foreign engineers and workers, a vast piece of desert was transformed into a paradise for farmers. The man took care of all their needs, dressed them in uniforms and even sent them to schools where they could learn not only how to read and write but also how to become aware of their rights and duties. The man did not stop there. He reorganized the police work making it pleasant and easy, and built a radio station. However, one day, he had so much money that he became tired of it, and he announced that he was giving it all up.

Idrīs cuts the story at that point, so we do not know what follows. However, we are not preoccupied with that. The matter which captivates us is finding an answer to the question: Why was the man eventually unhappy with all his efforts?

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44 Ibid., p. 92, v. 16-17

If the architect of this ideal society himself was unhappy with the outcome of his project, possibly, so were the people too. It seems that while building this new happy world, the man, although fully committed to the well-being of his society, forgot some important things or made mistakes. When we read Faraḥāt's story one more time, we may notice that his utopian fairy-tale has some dark corners, although apparently colourful. In this scenario, there are important missing factors and false solutions.

First, the man, while creating his happy society, forgot about people's participation in that process; he establishes it for them but without consulting them. As Faraḥāt narrates, on behalf of the author, "the man built", "the man decided", "the man did", etc., but there is no single sentence saying: "the man asked the people". Secondly, he did not take into account the simple fact that every human being is different and has some individual needs; instead he treated them all according to a pattern:

> Faraḥāt(narrating): ... Khaki trousers to the knee, white hats, double-soled shoes. The farmers walk in order, then spread out to work till noon and come back in order.[45]

Thirdly, his project for a happy society did not consider the necessity of the keeping close links with the past, i.e., with the historical and cultural heritage of the society, preserving and cultivating its system of values, ideals, spiritual developments and achievements. Instead, he wanted to topple the old walls and solid foundations and replace them with newer, light-weight versions.

There may be, here, a criticism of the deposed Egyptian monarchy and perhaps indirectly of the 1952 Revolution, for although in the form of a literary metaphor simple enough to decipher, Idrīs's utopian story can be seen to hide some critical remarks about the performance of the Revolutionary Government. It was the fate of ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir to become the head of the government as it was the luck of this poor Egyptian to become rich. They

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45 Ibid., p. 103, v. 2-5.

both were honest; they had a lot of charisma, and wanted to make people happy. However, both wanted to fulfill their projects too fast and made mistakes.

As for the well-being of society, it is not possible to make "revolutionary" changes right away or to construct everything anew. The easiest part is to seize the opportunity, namely, to take advantage of the right moment to overthrow the old government and go ahead with material development. Then comes the hardest and most difficult task, that is, to maintain the link with the tradition, carry on with the ideological development, awaken old ideals and give them a new meaning and force so that they may stay in the hearts of the people, helping them to achieve their new aims and goals. Each society has its unique traditions and system of norms and values; each society has also its times of crisis and very often, a man will appear to rescue it from trouble and pursue its treatment. Idrīs's *Jumhūriyyat Farafāt* gives some directions as to how the leader should carry on with his task and, most importantly, points out the mistakes and wrong steps to avoid.

According to the playwright, it is essential to awaken society and expose the people to its old ideals anew. Subsequently, to work step by step towards improvement and progress, always keeping in mind that material achievements must be accompanied by intellectual and spiritual development, that the system of old ideals and values should be cultivated and preserved in the spirit of modernity, and that the individuality of the human being and his uniqueness should never be forgotten.

In his play, Idrīs presents us with the contrast and tremendous tension between the two worlds, that is, between the real world with its disturbing brutality and the utopian one, which is beautiful, harmless and happy. Is it possible to "escape" from the first one by dreaming about the second? According to Idrīs, the utopian dream cannot give us an asylum, it might inspire action. The real solution may be achieved by picking up the ideals which have been lost and by working hard towards bringing society closer and closer to the ideal model.

al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija: a psychological study of human fear

The thematic analysis of Idrīs's two previous plays, namely, *Malik al-Quṭn* and *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* points out clearly that they fit well into the framework of Egyptian realism. In both plays, the author discusses human nature, the clash between tradition and modernity, emancipation and the struggle of the poor classes for survival; in both plays, he gives us a naturalistic, panoramic picture of society and presents a slice of life from the Egyptian world of reality. In *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, the playwright goes a little bit further than *Malik al-Quṭn*, he also includes other features: elements of symbolism, allegory and utopian literature. Both plays are relatively short, concise and simply structured.

With *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija* (The Critical Moment, 1958),[46] Idrīs's realism enters a new stage of development, for this play contains new distinguished features. Despite the fact that Idrīs also presents a realistic and sometimes even photographic depiction of Egyptian society and the nature of social and political changes, the author's aim stretches further than that; his attention is focused on the problems this society is facing. Therefore, the playwright does not describe the events of the 1956 war, nor does he sketch images of patriotic propaganda or even war heroes, as some critics would like to see; instead he concentrates on the social consequences of the war in general and on their effect on the life of an Egyptian middle-class family in particular. When we look at the content of *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, we hesitate to categorize it as a photographic *tranche de vie*, preferring to label it an attempt at a psychological study, a depiction of society from within. The play is written in a new spirit ;[47] it exposes a close relationship between reality and people's attitudes towards it, portrays

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46 Y. Idrīs, *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1981.

47 E. Machut-Mendecka in her study on modern Egyptian drama categorizes the play as neo-realistic; see E. Machut-Mendecka, *Wspolczesny dramat egipski lat 1870-1975* (Egyptian Contemporary Drama), Warsaw: Polish Academy of Science, 1984.

human weaknesses, faults and wrong-doings and presents them as the negative outcome of the Egyptian socio-political system.

Obviously, this new content requires a new dramatic structure and form. Therefore, in *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, the playwright has abandoned the short one-act play form and replaced it with a full-length, three-act, dramatic structure. This larger form gives him enough time and space to present and develop new issues and ideas, and allows him to slowly sketch the heroes. The extensive use of discursive dialogues and monologues creates more complete portraits of the heroes by highlighting the evolution of their outlooks and ideas, and depicting the decisive changes in their personalities as a result of the events of the 1956 war.

The critical assessment of *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija* is much richer than that of Idrīs's previous two plays, and it includes studies in Arabic by Fārūq ᶜAbd al-Wahhāb,[48] Maḥmūd Amīn al-ᶜĀlim,[49] Ismāᶜīl ᶜAbd al-Munᶜim[50] and Luwīs ᶜAwaḍ,[51] and a short study in English by M. M. Badawī.[52] The publication of *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija* provoked a lot of controversy and critical remarks. Luwīs ᶜAwaḍ, for example, praises the author for undertaking the patriotic theme depicting the nature of human fear, but at the same time, he criticizes Idrīs for unskillfully constructing an unconvincing portrait of a hero, namely, the character of Saᶜd.[53] Fārūq ᶜAbd al-Wahhāb criticizes the author for being too "narrative" and turning the play into a narrative structure,[54] while Maḥmūd Amīn al-ᶜĀlim points out the lack of patriotism and heroism in

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48 Fārūq ᶜAbd al-Wahhāb, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa Masraḥ al-Fikr", *al-Masraḥ*, July 1966, pp. 164-185.

49 Maḥmūd Amīn al-ᶜĀlim, "al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija", *al-Ādāb*, September-October 1958, p. 103.

50 Ismāᶜīl ᶜAbd al-Munᶜim, *Drama and Society in Contemporary Egypt*, Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-ᶜArabī, 1967, pp. 179-187.

51 Luwīs ᶜAwaḍ, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa Fann al-Drāmā", *al-Kātib*, April 1961, pp. 85-96.

52 M. M. Badawī, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 153-164.

53 Luwīs ᶜAwaḍ, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa Fann al-Drāmā", p. 92.

54 Fārūq ᶜAbd al-Wahhāb, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa Masraḥ al-Fikr", p. 168.

it.[55] However, some of the scholars and critics agree that there are new and original features in the play, such as a rather successful attempt at creating a psychological portrait of a hero and presenting Egyptian society from within.

The play *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija* depicts the reactions of an average middle-class, Egyptian family to the Suez War of 1956. These reactions enable Idris to comment on the crucial problems of Egyptian society, as well as on human matters in general. This play is far from being a patriotic, propagandistic stereotype; it presents an unusual situation in a simple family, one of thousands.

The head of the family, Ḥājj Naṣṣār, is a man of poor background, who by his hard work and strong resistance to misery and hunger, has managed to build a small carpentry business. He lives with his wife and five children in his own home in Port Said. According to Ḥājj Naṣṣār's decision, his older son, Masʿad, stays with him in the carpentry business. Masʿad is married and lives with his wife, Firdaws, in the family home. As for the younger son, Saʿd, thanks to the help and sacrifices of the whole family, he is an undergraduate studying engineering and hopefully, one day, will be able to fulfill all the hopes and dreams of his father and become a respected engineer.

Everything seems to be going along smoothly and happily in this family. However, the many discussions between the family members reveal some minor problems and misunderstandings. Firdaws, Masʿad's wife, is critical of the family. They all have to sacrifice for Saʿd's future. Firdaws's thoughts are caught up in her own hard life, and she does not want to accept that because of Saʿd's future, her husband has to refrain from his own ambitions and thus, their children, who will remain the children of a carpenter, will be deprived of their own chances for a better future. Therefore, she demands change and warns Masʿad that if he does not provide her with everything she needs, she is ready to leave him and return to her parents.

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55 Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, "al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija", p. 103.

We quickly discover, with the development of the action, that these frequent squabbles which characterize all families, are not the only problems in the home of Ḥājj Naṣṣār. There is something much deeper and much more dangerous. The relatively quiet life of the family is disturbed by the threat of the war, which comes as a result of the nationalization of the Suez Canal. We also discover that Saʿd, the hope of the family, is engaged in patriotic activities. He has secretly joined the National Guard and, fascinated by the revolutionary ideas and slogans, wants to fight the British and free his country from their domination. The family discovers his secret activity and reacts to it quite strongly. The mother of Saʿd, Haniyya, unhappy at the possibility of losing her son should war break out, desperately attempts to dissuade him from doing his clandestine activities. The father, who initially does not consider the possibility of war, does not see much danger in this activity. For him military activities are only games which young men like to play. However, when the war breaks out his attitude toward "the game" changes drastically, and at this point, he resolves to stop his son from this dangerous activity. The father is unable to understand why, despite self-sacrifice and the care that he has lavished on his son to secure him a bright future as an engineer, Saʿd should want to risk his own life in the defence of a country which had offered his father no help whatsoever when he was poor. Ḥājj Naṣṣār does not feel that Egypt belongs to him, and his loyalty stretches no further than his immediate family. Saʿd attempts to make his father understand that everything in Egypt has changed and his primary duty is toward his larger family, that is, his country Egypt:

> Naṣṣār: For whom do you want to fight?
>
> Saʿd: For ourselves. For you, for my brother, Masʿad and my mother, for our neighbours, our relatives and our friends, for the people of our town, for all Egyptians...[56]

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56 Y. Idrīs, *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*", p. 72, v. 15-18.

Matters come to a head when the battle of Port Said begins, and Saʿd is called up to join the National Guard. Masʿad advises Saʿd to leave the house quietly at night in order to avoid unnecessary disturbance. However, it does not happen that way, and the whole family is awake. Protests, screaming and crying have begun. Saʿd is afraid to go but he wants to prove to everybody that he is strong and able to face the danger. However, his shouts: "Leave me, I want to go and fight!"[57] are only empty phrases. In reality, Saʿd is afraid and with a feeling of relief, he pushes away his critical moment and literally without resisting he allows his father to lock him in the room. Now, "safe" and deprived of the possibility of making a choice, our "hero" screams from behind the locked door:

Saʿd: I want to fight but I cannot go! Let me out![58]

However, his father takes no notice of his screaming, his wish to be let out, or his shouted abuse.

In the meantime, the news has reached the family that many young people from the neighbourhood have gone to fight. Even unprepared Masʿad has decided to go and later returns wounded. Saʿd, the leader of the National Guard, is a hostage in the locked room; he only screams. Soon, the events of the war approach the area where the family lives, and the neighbour's house is destroyed by the British soldiers. In their search for the National Guard members, they also come to the Ḥājj Naṣṣār's house. Ironically enough the father, engaged in praying in gratitude for the safety of his sons, is shot by the British soldier George for failing to respond to his orders. The soldier, however, is upset by the sight and the crying of the little girl, Sawsan, who reminds him of his own daughter.

Meanwhile, Saʿd whose critical moment has arrived one more time, finds himself again failing the test: frightened of being found by the British soldiers, he takes off his uniform and

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57 Ibid., p. 95, v. 6.

58 Ibid., p. 96, v. 17.

hides under the bed. Sa'd does not have enough courage to blow the door's lock open and help his father.

After the soldier's departure, Sa'd is let out of the room by his little sister Sawsan, who pushes the door open as the faulty lock had not really properly latched. He comes to find his father dying. They have their last conversation. Now Sa'd frankly admits his cowardice; he claims he must have known all along about the lock or, in any case, he could have blown the lock open with his gun. Eventually, the father grows disappointed with his son's "performance". However, he does not want to blame Sa'd, and he himself assumes the responsibility for his son's fear, for being too protective of his son and bringing him up that way. Ḥājj Naṣṣār feels sorry that he could not live his life in a different way and he explains this to his son:

> Naṣṣār: Do not worry, Sa'd. I am finished and it is all right for me. But do you know that I would like to have my days back again? I would like to live another life, different from the life I lived before. To live without fear. To live without enduring any insult, and bring you up again without being afraid for you. I swear that he who accepts an servile life deserves fairly not to stay alive at all.[59]

It seems that the father's death pushes Sa'd to the other extreme. He is no longer unable to overcome his fear:

> Sa'd: Was it necessary, dear father, to die, so I would be able to overcome my fear?[60]

When George, the British soldier, disturbed by killing an innocent man, returns to the house of Ḥājj Naṣṣār to look for the little girl Sawsan, who in his confused state of mind, he now believes to be his own daughter, Sa'd kills him. Then he goes off to join the National Guard.

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59 Ibid., p. 122, v. 23-26, p. 123, v. 1-2.

60 Ibid., p. 135, v. 3-4.

As mentioned earlier, in his play *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, Idrīs attempts to present us with a new, realistic psychological depiction of Egyptian society, i.e., to portray this society from within, to plunge into its problems and seek their causes. The author focuses on people's various attitudes towards their world of reality which the wind of revolutionary progress has changed tremendously. The main issue repeatedly presented by Idrīs is the generation gap, that is, the conflict which manifests itself in the sharp differences in outlook and contradictory ideas between the generation of Ḥājj Naṣṣār and his son Saʿd, the conflict which carries a political significance. According to the author, this conflict involves much more than the usual misunderstanding between the two generations; it concerns totally different ways of thinking and eventually contradictory ideologies.

At the beginning of the play, Ḥājj Naṣṣār's family appears to be a happy one; apart from minor squabbles and conflicts, the family is rather united, and their bonds seem strong. However, this apparently quiet and peaceful life is disturbed by the threat of war. In the play, the political anxieties of 1956 enable Idrīs to expose people's various attitudes towards these anxieties and point out to what extent these different outlooks, ideas and views are the direct outcome of the social and political circumstances, which the Egyptian people have had to contend with.

Ḥājj Naṣṣār, the head of the family, is still judging the present by the past. This man, who had to face a life of deprivation under an inhumane regime, who, thanks to his sacrifice and determination to resist hunger and misery, built a relatively stable and happy future for his family, is now incapable of understanding that the country has belonged to anyone except those few who enjoyed all the profits and privileges. Therefore, he believes that "those to whom Egypt belongs" should defend it. For Ḥājj Naṣṣār, the meaning of *patrie* does not stretch further than his own family. His past experience remains forever with him, and although he understands, he does not want to admit that, with the Revolution of 1952, Egyptian reality has changed. Ḥājj Naṣṣār wants to protect his "small happy world" and save it by all means. The attitude of his wife, Haniyya, is similar. When she learns about her son's

military service, she considers that to be a serious threat to the stability of her family life and she asks her son to abandon it immediately:

> Haniyya: Let whoever is defending defend, my son, and let us stay as we are.[61]

As for the young generation, namely, Sa'd and Mas'ad, their outlooks and views differ considerably from those of their parents.

Sa'd, the hope of the family, brought up by a caring father, having enjoyed a good education and living under a new egalitarian system has realized that the country belongs to him and that it is his duty to defend it. His head is full of revolutionary ideas and he would like to pass them on to his parents. In discussion with his mother, he attempts to pull her out of her world of intellectual darkness:

> Sa'd: You are slaves! (This is) the behaviour of slaves and the philosophy of slaves. You will even worship the Lord with fear. All your living has one pivot, that is cowardice. Don't look at me like this! I am not crazy!...
> When will you leave this eternal fear? When will you move and be human beings? You live wrongly and you want us to live like you.[62]

Sa'd wants his father to understand that now is the time to leave the "small, happy world", that the love of *patrie* means much more than the love of family and that the time for people to prove themselves, i.e., to take the test of the critical moment, is approaching. He says to his father:

> Sa'd: Perhaps I am really going to defend the country. But to tell you the truth, I have another reason. I wish to know how I am going to behave at the critical moment.[63]

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61 Ibid., p. 14, v. 1.

62 Ibid., p. 40, v. 8-14.

63 Ibid., p. 43, v. 4-6.

Does Saᶜd believe in what he is saying? Is this new revolutionary ideology a part of him? Luwis ᶜAwaḍ, in his study of *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, calls Saᶜd a "cowardly talker".[64] Is he truly one? As Idrīs presents him in the play, Saᶜd is unsure of himself, and although his ideas are clearly and firmly formulated, his mind seems to be confused. What prevents Saᶜd from really committing himself and adhering to his newly-articulated ideology? Saᶜd has a problem, and it is fear, an inherited, negative factor which weighs heavily in his mind, a fear he tries to overcome. When he discusses the problem of fear with Sāmiḥ, it seems he really understands its nature and that he is able to cope successfully with it:

Saᶜd: Aren't you ever afraid?

Sāmiḥ: Me? It is impossible. Afraid of what? He will have a rifle, and I will have one, will I be afraid, why?

Saᶜd (smiling): That he will hit you and shoot you.

Sāmiḥ: I will hit him before he hits me.

Saᶜd: But he might hit you first.

Sāmiḥ: It is I, for sure, who will strike first.

Saᶜd: How can you be sure about that?

Sāmiḥ: Because he is going to be afraid first, and whoever is afraid first, his bullet will come last. Do you think I am a coward because I am a little bit afraid?

Saᶜd (with anger): Coward? What kind of an empty word is that? These little fears, these are courage itself and as somebody told me, these little fears make the bravery of the brave...They are a nourishment against cowardice.[65]

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64 Luwīs ᶜAwaḍ, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa Fann al-Drāmā", p. 90.

65 Y. Idrīs, *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, p. 51, v. 1-17, p. 52, v. 8-12.

Saʿd wants to withdraw from these inherited views and to abandon his fear, but he proves to be too weak to confront the danger. When the war breaks out and Saʿd is called up to join the National Guard, he fails to prove himself, he does not go successfully through his first critical moment. Before confronting his father or the members of the National Guard, he is unable to confront himself, that is to make the decision to go and join the fighters. Saʿd is overcome by fear, and instead of leaving the house secretly, as his older brother Masʿad has advised him, he walks into the living room talking to himself:

> Saʿd: Do you know what is your problem, Saʿd? You are not afraid. The story (of your fears) means only one thing: you are afraid that your fears will overcome you at the moment of serious action. Exactly! You fear your fear! Really, I feel like this. I feel as if the sky is covered with clouds of fear and it is going to rain...Oh, I should resist all this. Where has this feeling come from? But, it is all right. A mouse does not fear a mouse, and a lion does not fear a lion. I will not be afraid. This is foolish weakness that I should get rid of. Long live Egypt, boy![66]

Saʿd does not pass his first test of "fire and water". Ḥājj Naṣṣār settles his son's problem, though only temporarily, by locking him up in the room. The critical moment is deferred and Saʿd, who knows that the door is not properly locked, yet is overcome by his fear, contents himself with empty shouts and protests, and mere attempts at self-deception. However, the second critical moment is approaching and is even more important than the first. The house is stormed by British soldiers searching for members of the National Guard. Saʿd with his gun is supposedly locked up in the room, which even the smallest push would open. However, he is still paralyzed by his fear. Instead of coming out to help his father, he takes off his uniform and hides under the bed. His father is shot by the British soldier. Saʿdiyya, Saʿd's little sister, opens the door with a small push and lets her brother out.

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66 Ibid., p. 55, v. 6-13.

However, it is too late, his father is dying. Saʿd realizes that again he has not been able to face his critical moment and frankly admits his cowardice to his father.

However, Ḥājj Naṣṣār knows, that Saʿd is not solely to blame for his fear. The oppressive socio-political system deserves most of the blame, for it was that system which forced people to live in constant fear, which did not allow them to be free and act as they feel. This fear became an inherent part of them and their lives. That is what happened to Ḥājj Naṣṣār; he lived all his life with fear, struggling to secure a better future for his family and his constant fear completely overwhelmed him. While raising his son, Saʿd, he was over-protective, fearing obstacles to his future. Ḥājj Naṣṣār never realized that this protectiveness prevented Saʿd from developing real maturity; instead, he unknowingly instilled fear in his son as well as feelings of uncertainty and the inability to choose between right and wrong. Even now Ḥājj Naṣṣār does not want Saʿd blaming himself for his cowardice, and prefers to take upon himself the responsibility for his son's mistakes:

Saʿd: It is I who killed you, father.

Naṣṣār: He who killed me is an Englishman.

Saʿd: I was able to open the door.

Naṣṣār: If you did, you would have gotten yourself killed as well as me.

Saʿd: I've bought my life with fear...

Naṣṣār: Never mind...Why not? He who brought you up felt deadly afraid for you, that is why you've grown up afraid for yourself. Damn the father who brought you up. Damn my own father, too.

Saʿd: You always consider yourself responsible for everything, even my own fear.[67]

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67 Ibid., p. 122, v. 10-20.

The father feels responsible for Saʿd's fear because he knows that he himself has not been able to face the critical moment, nor has he fulfilled his duty as a father in helping his son to strengthen his character, to correctly shape his ideas about the surrounding world, and to prepare him to face danger. Ḥājj Naṣṣār's fear forced him to lock Saʿd in his room, and then later, when wounded Masʿad came home, he locked him in another room too, thinking that both his sons would thus be best protected:

Naṣṣār (kissing his own hand): Thank God, all this folly and my two sons are in my hand. This is Saʿd (holding the key of Saʿd's room) and this is Masʿad (holding the key of Masʿad's room). Your men are under your ceiling, Naṣṣār, and the keys are here. Thousands of thanks to the Lord.[68]

Was Ḥājj Naṣṣār really content with his life, was he really satisfied with the way he brought up his children? Was he aware of his fears?

As we see in his monologue, he was not. The war events really upset Ḥājj Naṣṣār but when his youngest son, Muḥammad, brought the news about the end of the war, his mood remained the same:

Naṣṣār (to himself): Is it true, what they are saying or not? If it is the truth, why am I sad?... Since the morning I am mad, why? Are you mad at yourself, mad at Saʿd or at the English, at the war or at your life? It could be that what you did was wrong, Naṣṣār! Wrong? How? The job of the father is to protect his children. Why am I mad, then? I did more than that.

Ḥājj Naṣṣār was confused and unhappy but also overcome by his fears which never left him. Shortly, before he died, he plainly admitted this to his son Saʿd. It was too late for Ḥājj Naṣṣār to change anything in his life but probably, he hoped his son would do that. The father was not mistaken; his son Saʿd finally understood the nature of his fear, he was no

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68 Ibid., p. 100, v. 12-16.

longer a coward and was able to overcome the fear which had been paralyzing him for such a long time.

As mentioned previously, for Luwīs ʿAwaḍ, the character of Saʿd, in *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, has neither a "convincing" nor a "moving" personality.[69] The critic cannot believe in the sudden change from a "coward talker" who "recites" slogans from his verbally-acquired revolutionary ideals into a "hero", who after revenging his father's death joins the fight against the British. According to Luwīs ʿAwaḍ, his dissatisfaction with the character of Saʿd is due to the author's inability to shape his personality properly and endow it with the features of a truly human, heroic character.[70]

We would rather hesitate to share ʿAwaḍ's views in accusing such a talented playwright as Idrīs of a lack of literary skills. We prefer to assume that the creation of Saʿd as a confused, uncertain person overcome by fear and unable to chose the right path or even as a young lost man is not a mistake but the author's aim. Society does not consist of brave, confident "heroes" only. The majority of people need help and guidance in order to gain a maturity of their consciousness. As is obvious in the case of Saʿd, ideology is not always something given; it needs time, and ought to be earned through self-experience, self-education and discussions with other people.

When Idrīs wrote *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, Egyptian society was in an ideological crisis and in desperate need of a new mind and a re-birth of lost ideals and an ideology built on the basis of real truth. In order to help society move on the right path towards modernity and progress, Egyptian literature was in need of a withdrawal from the framework of falsely idealistic socialist realism. It needed to replace it with a new realism which would present real men and discuss the nature and causes of their problems and anxieties.

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69 Ibid., p. 103, v.7-15.

70 Luwīs ʿAwaḍ, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa Fann al-Drāmā", p. 92.

Egyptian literature was also in need of a new kind of hero or rather an anti-hero, a complete opposite of socialist realism's positive hero, a hero similar to Saʿd, whose ideology would still be in the process of being born, who would discover and admit his weaknesses and consistently strive to overcome his fears and uncertainty, and who, with the help of his own experience and self-education, would finally gain maturity, and become able to distinguish between right and wrong.

In his critical study Luwīs ʿAwaḍ also points out that "the coward talker Saʿd" with all his negative characteristics and his "rotten personality", when he collapses during the critical moment, does not deserve our pity, as possibly another "truly human" hero would.[71] At that point, again, we beg to disagree with the critic. Idrīs does not want us to feel sorry for Saʿd; he prefers to uncover his imperfect nature and present him exactly as he is, without any mask, even risking an attack from the critics who instead of a "cowardly" Saʿd, would prefer to see "a victorious hero" of the battle of Port Said.[72] It is, thus, clear that Idrīs is able to avoid unnecessary sentimentalism[73] and easy moralizing tendencies. The author risks that because he is about to create something new, that is, a psychological depiction of Egyptian reality, a depiction from within, focusing on an Egyptian man, attempting to tell us more about his inner struggles, fears and problems, creating a picture which might help the reader look more consciously at his own surroundings.

While the character of Saʿd and the problem of his fear have met with so many comments and critical remarks, the other representative of the young generation, namely, the older son of Ḥājj Naṣṣār, Masʿad, happens to go rather unnoticed by the critics. His personality is a complete opposite of that of his younger brother, Saʿd. Undoubtedly, Masʿad

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71 Ibid., p. 92.

72 Ibid., p. 93.

73 In the early 1950s Idrīs was under the influence of the Chekovian literary visions. However, he "struggled" to free himself from these influences and in his writings of the late 1950s he attempted to avoid Chekovian literary features, especially sentimentalism.

is a positive character. He is a simple carpenter, who does not speculate about revolutionary ideas, whose mind is clear and uncomplicated. Masʿad acts as he feels is necessary, and, as is presented by Idrīs, he is always ready to assist whenever help is needed. When his family has to sacrifice for Saʿd's education and future as an engineer, he is ready to suffer for his brother; when the country needs to be defended; Masʿad feels that this is his duty, too, and without unnecessary philosophizing and preparations, he simply joins the fighters.

Idrīs is well aware, that there are also people like Masʿad in society, who are simple, honest, helpful and humanitarianly-minded. They have no need of a "fire and water" test in order to prove themselves; with their intuition, common sense and sincere feelings, they are able to guide themselves, and correctly and easily distinguish good from evil. All they need is a call, and the call they are waiting for is a call for help. They know very well that society needs them, and they need society to faithfully fulfill their duties towards it. Masʿad explains this to his wife as follows:

> Masʿad: ...For whom am I working? For my brother, so he can finish his studies and for my sister, so she can get married. What is wrong with that?
>
> Firdaws: ...Tomorrow your brother will become an engineer and will have children who will be the children of the chief engineer... Your children will be the children of a carpenter and your wife will be the servant.
>
> Masʿad: What you are saying is servant's talk! ...Is it necessary that one should be captain to be good? It is all right like this, I am happy. My brother is happy that he will become an engineer and I am happy that I am helping him to become an engineer.[74]

When we look at Masʿad's personality, who undoubtedly shares some affinities with the socialist realist type of positive hero, we may ask ourselves a question: In a play in which

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74 Y. Idrīs, *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, p. 30, v. 10-9.

Idrīs portrays human fear, creates a new psychological picture of society, introduces a new type of hero or rather anti-hero, why does he present a character that would rather belong to his previous realist framework? Is there any special need for such a character in *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*?

As we may notice from reading the author's previous works, both fictional and dramatic, his attention always focuses on man and his situation in society. Human life becomes more and more complicated. The negative outcomes of an unjust social and political system always weighs heavily on people's minds, being an obstacle to the healthy growth of their personalities and to the proper development of their characters. Therefore, it is important for a man to know himself and understand the nature of his emotions and feelings. People are in constant struggle to shape their ideas and formulate their system of values. Some of them are trying to attain their goals like Saʿd, i.e., by philosophizing about the simple facts of life, and putting these basic truths into slogans, which often may confuse them and awaken their weaknesses and fears.

Human fear, as portrayed by Idrīs in *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, is a negative outcome of oppressive social and political systems, and it constitutes a very destructive factor in people's lives. Therefore, according to the author, it is not only necessary to know the nature of fear but, what is even of greater importance, to find a "weapon" against it or a remedy for it. In light of the analysis of the play, one may notice, that according to Idrīs, it is not so difficult to find a "weapon" against human fear because all people are fortunate to possess such an internal "weapon", their honesty. When people are honest and free to act according to their feelings and intuition, they will never fear and their efforts will never turn against the well-being of society.

There is a growing need for contemporary man to listen more attentively to the voices of his intuition, to pay more attention to his inner feelings and to be ready to offer help to whoever needs it. By presenting the character of Masʿad in his play *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, Idrīs attempts to remind his reader of these centuries-old truths.

Form, style and language: from the simple scheme of the short story to a full-length three-act play

Arab and Western scholars consider Idrīs the real master of the *qiṣṣa qaṣīra* (short story). As the author says, he himself did not yet discover the nature of this literary form and kept on writing short stories, hoping one day to grasp the essence of this form and be able to define it.[75]

Idrīs's short story is written with real mastery of narrative art.[76] Usually it focuses on characters and situations, and is concerned with a single effect. Within this relatively limited form there is frequently concentration on a single character involved in a single episode. The author usually does not fully develop his characters, and the background against which the characters move is described briefly. Idrīs's short stories always carry a lot of expression and are illustrative of great dramatic tension. The author frequently utilizes the type of climax called the "surprising ending", involving an ironic reversal of expectation.

Idrīs's form of the one-act play, as it is seen in *Malik al-Quṭn* and *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, has great affinity with that of his short stories from the 1950s. One may even say that the author's one-act plays are a dramatic transformation of his short stories. Furthermore, they could be considered Idrīs's exercises or a transitional safe and conscious step to creating a new original Arab dramatic form.

Both these plays, that is, *Malik al-Quṭn* and *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* are illustrative of Egyptian realism and use the slice of life technique. *Malik al-Quṭn* reflects life in an Egyptian

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75 Nabīl Faraj, "Yūsuf Idrīs", *al-Majalla*, January 1971, p. 103.

76 An extensive discussion of Idrīs's short story form may be found in the following books:
Kurpershoek, P. M. *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981;
Somekh, S. *Dunyā Yūsuf Idrīs min khilāl Aqāṣīṣih* (selected short stories with introduction) Tel Aviv: Dār al-Nashr al-ʿArabī, 1976;
idem. *Lughat al-qiṣṣa fī adab Yūsuf Idrīs*, Acre: Tel Aviv University & Srugy Press, 1984.

village; its scenery, typical characters, local colour and unique atmosphere are portrayed with an almost photographic precision. The *dramatis personae* are very lively; their conduct is natural and reactions spontaneous. Their characteristics are shaped well both directly and indirectly: that is, directly by the stage directions and indirectly through dialogues. In *Jumḥūriyyat Faraḥāt*, in this *tranche de vie* from one of the Cairene police stations, Idrīs presents us with a disturbing picture of a place designed to defend justice. Similar to *Malik al-Quṭn*, here again the author depicts the setting with naturalistic precision: emphasizing its ugliness and gloomy atmostphere; sketching directly and indirectly typical characters, i.e., representatives of various circles of urban poor society, portraying them with a sharp eye, a large dose of biting irony and severe criticism.

The structure of both plays is dynamic. In composing them, Idrīs follows relatively closely the classical model of play construction, which is very similar to that of the short story, i.e., the scheme which includes: exposition, development of action, climax, peripethy and falling action. In both plays, the tension culminates in a sharply sketched climax, is released by peripethy, and as a result, we observe a surprising turn of action and eventually the unexpected endings of these two plays.

Malik al-Quṭ and *Jumḥūriyyat Faraḥāt* are illustrative of unity of time and place. As for the unity of action, only *Malik al-Quṭn* is constructed according to the one unified line of action and consists of one plot presented in a few scenes. The structure of *Jumḥūriyyat Faraḥāt* is more complicated; for it contains two separate plots, the main plot which tells us about the events taking place at the police station and the subplot, the story narrated by Faraḥāt. This combined structure enables the author to double the scenic reality and obtain a dramatic effect similar to that of a play within a play construction, with the difference that it is a dramatized story within a play. In *Jumḥūriyyat Faraḥāt*, the main plot contains a series of connected accidents (various complaints of police station clients) and it is centred on the figure of Sergeant Faraḥāt. The subplot, i.e., the utopian story of Faraḥāt, which is an allegorical picture of the perfectly organized society, hides the significant message of the

author, and becomes a very important or even competitive part of the play and thus contributes to the destruction of the unity of action.

The dialogues in both plays are written in the modern, lively and terse Egyptian dialect. These dialogues are composed of short, concise, well-turned sentences, full of meaning and expression which make the characters vibrant and the plays dynamic. The language and the style of the dialogues are always well adjusted to the situations and the play *Jumḥūriyyat Faraḥāt* illustrates that well. The language changes smoothly with the change in the situation and the atmostphere:

(1) when Faraḥāt talks to the detainees his statements are very antagonistic and the language sharp, naturalistically vulgar and dirty, for example,

> Faraḥāt: Blindness in your eyes! We have said a million times that I am the sergeant on duty, gipsy. Am I not important in your eyes? Each of you, respect yourself or else I will make your night darker than the bottom of the cooking pot.[77]

(2) when his interlocutor turns out to be a naive, shy and uneducated person, Faraḥāt immediately takes advantage of the situation and makes the person a victim of his unpleasant sense of humour, for example,

> Faraḥāt: Do you have another statement to make?
>
> Girl: Another statement? What does that mean, sir?
>
> Faraḥāt: It means to say another thing.
>
> Girl: Yes, sir. ʿAyyūsha, she is the one who took my earrings and her mother is...
>
> Faraḥāt: Uf! Something else, girl, other than what you have said before!
>
> Girl: Did I say anything?

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77 Y. Idrīs, *Malik al-Quṭn; Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, p. 90, v. 23-26.

(Farahāt and Muḥammad laughing. Farahāt quickly writes down something on a paper)

Farahāt: This is a letter. Tomorrow morning you go to the local doctor ... (imitating the girl) I did not say anything yet.[78]

(3) when he talks to Muḥammad whom he mistakenly took for an *afandī*, he is tactful and treats his interlocutor as a partner in conversation, for example,

Farahāt: I know I've let you wait too long. One more minute, please, and I will be free for you.

Muḥammad: But you've not let me wait ... I am actually ...

Farahāt: I know I've made you wait because I deal with polite people like you this way.[79]

(4) when he speaks with his superior, he is disciplined and obsequiously polite, for example,

Farahāt (talking on the phone): Yes, sir. I am the officer on duty. Who is calling? Yes (he stands up). Yes. (Still standing), yes. Yes, sir. Farahāt, sir. Yes. She came, sir. Yes.[80]

and (5) when he is carried away by his imagination and begins to narrate to Muḥammad the dreamy scenario, his language changes completely. This soft and gentle flow of words reminds us of the language of a fairy-tale. For example,

Farahāt: There was an Indian man who came to Egypt, a very rich man ...One day when he was leaving the hotel, a diamond ring fell from his finger ...Who saw it? A poor man, who had no job, like they say, employed by the "Sun Company".[81]

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78 Ibid., p. 101, v. 5-16.

79 Ibid., p. 86, v. 4-11.

80 Ibid., p. 91, v. 3-7.

81 Ibid., p. 87, v. 10-12, p. 88. v. 17-20.

In both plays, the lively dialogues become an important source revealing indirectly the characters of the *dramatis personae*. For example, in the play *Jumḥūriyyat Faraḥāt* the strong voice of the tram controller and his severe criticism of Faraḥāt's work uncover important features of his character, such as bravery, openness, confidence and the ability to stand up for his rights:

> Faraḥāt: ...What do you want me to do? Am I the father or the mother of the ambulance? What do you want me to do?
>
> Tram controller: Find a way! Act humanely! ...This is very bad; this is chaos; this is death and destruction.[82]

Another example of these lively dialogues lies in *Malik al-Quṭn*. Al-Simbāṭī's muddling explanation about the numbers marked down in his book-keeping clearly indicates his dishonesty:

Al-Simbāṭī (interrupting Qamḥāwī's):

> No more words! How much will it be, all of it? How much! Five and eight is thirteen, and three is sixteen (he changes to a whisper and points out with his pencil an additional operation as if he were adding it again). Look, sir. You owe (me) 5660 piasters, that is, fifty -six pounds and sixty piasters and (this) deducted from the actual amount (sixty-two pounds) will leave you with 540 piasters.[83]

As for the stage directions (*didascalia*), they constitute a substantial portion of the text in both plays and their role is of great importance. Generally, they serve to introduce the cast:

in *Jumḥūriyyat Faraḥāt*,

> A group of detectives enters wearing Bedouin *jalābiyyas* and skullcaps. Each of them holds the hand of a child in his hands and that of an elderly person;[84]

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82 Ibid., p. 94, v. 23-26, p. 95 v. 1-2, 9-10.

83 Ibid., p. 28, v. 23-26, p. 29, v. 1-3.

84 Ibid., p. 103, v. 13-15.

in *Malik al-Quṭn*,

> Al-Simbāṭī's son Saʿd, and Qamḥāwi's son ʿAwaḍ appear imitating a train, Saʿd is the head and ʿAwaḍ is holding the tail.[85]

The stage directions also describe the setting:

in *Jumḥūriyyat Faraḥāt*,

> The action takes place in the interior hall of one of the police stations. On the right, an arch leads to the outside door; in the front there is the office of the officer on duty, and on the left, the room of the superior. His door is closed, and there is a sign on it;[86]

in *Malik al-Quṭn*,

> The curtain opens on ʿAwaḍ and Saʿd Zaghlūl playing in a big cotton bag near the door. Al-Simbāṭī is sitting on another one in the middle. Near the door (inside the house), the wife (of al-Simbāṭī) is making a *jalābiyyā* for her older son on an old sewing machine which makes a lot of disturbing noise.[87]

Furthermore, *didascalia* become a direct way for the author to present the characteristics of the *dramatis personae*:

in *Jumḥūriyyat Faraḥāt*,

> A fat old women enters. Her appearance is harried. She looks like an artist;[88]

in Malik al-Quṭn,

> He (Ḥājj Shawāḍfī) enters wearing an old *jubbah* and a dirty caftan. He is in his fifties, has neither moustache nor beard. In his hand he has a rosary of a thousand beads. His back is bent; his voice is weak. He is approaching the fight.[89]

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85 Ibid., p. 39, v. 3-4.

86 Ibid., p. 71, v. 1-4.

87 Ibid., p. 19, v.13-18.

88 Ibid., p. 76, v. 6-7.

89 Ibid., p. 36, v. 3-7.

Finally, they constitute part of the action:

in *Jumḥūriyyat Faraḥāt*,

> The door of the superior opens as if he was leaving. Faraḥāt looks at the woman, and begins immediately questioning her;[90]

in *Malik al-Quṭn*,

> During that time, Qamḥāwī is about to settle his own bill with his son. (Then) he approaches the group. His face shows a very dangerous plan.[91]

On analyzing *Malik al-Quṭn* and *Jumḥūriyyat Faraḥāt*, we do not hesitate to conclude that both the content and the form of these plays are equally interesting and innovative, and that the playwright demonstrates tremendous potential and unique ability to create original, meaningful as well as skillfully-worded, short one-act plays. With *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, we come to Idrīs's first attempt to "enlarge" and develop his simple dramatic structure, i.e., to compose a full-length three-act socio-psychological play. As mentioned previously, the new thematic aims of the author required that he abandon the short one-act play form and create of a new one, more elaborate and extended. With regard to the content of *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, it may be considered innovative and original; his portrait of Egyptian society carries new features. However, it would be difficult to apply the same statement to the form of his play. Looking closely at the play, we rarely notice new, distinguished elements. Despite the innovative and original content, the form has yet to leave the realistic framework (still holding tightly to the naturalistic and photographic descriptiveness which the author develops).

We may say that *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija* is constructed and composed "correctly", "in conformity with the rules" and without visible mistakes. The play is illustrative of the unity of time, place and action; the plot is designed in accordance with the classical model, the only

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90 Ibid., p. 95, v. 11-12.

91 Ibid., p. 61, v. 8-10.

exception being that the two culminative points (the two critical moments Sa'd is facing) may be distinguished. The dialogues are written in lively Egyptian dialect. The stage directions play important roles similar to those of the previously-discussed two plays. The characters are shaped well, both directly and indirectly, and the description of their personalities is enriched due to the extensive use of monologues. These monologues, the only innovative formal element in the play, already presented in the preceding section contribute significantly not only to the more complete sketches of the characters but also to the presentation of the feelings and emotions of people in society and thus to portraying them from within.

Although constructed and composed "correctly" and "in conformity with the rules", *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija* does not present us with an original dramatic form. The play seems to be too narrative and too descriptive and it definitely has lost the dynamism and vividness of *Malik al-Quṭn*, and *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*. What are the reasons for that? Why would we be inclined to share ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's point of view[92] saying that the formal achievements of Idrīs's two previous one-act plays are somehow "lost" in his longer dramatic structure?

First, the presented picture is too photographic; Idrīs's dialogues and stage directions "grow longer"[93] carrying more, sometimes too many details, thus depriving the play of real movement and action. Second, the literary material, i.e., the presented world which includes the description of the characters, the situations and the events of the play, is not well organized.[94] Without selectively presenting his images, and by "bombarding" us with endless chitchat, not only does Idrīs prevent us from focusing fully on his psychological study of human fear but he also overwhelms us with an unnecessary level of detail. Finally,

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92 Fārūq ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa Masraḥ al-Fikr", *al-Masraḥ*, July 1966, p. 164.

93 The stage directions often become too extensive, for example the description of the setting is more than three pages long, see: Y. Idrīs, *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, pp. 9-13.

94 Idrīs himself was not sure about the form of the play; he changed it several times; the first title of the play was *al-Bāb* (the Door).

the movement, and the actual events in the play are limited; the action takes place mainly in dialogues where we learn secondhand about the play's major developments.

In spite of these formal imperfections, the play *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija* with its prognostication of further changes and developments in Egyptian drama, should be considered, as Luwīs ʿAwaḍ pointed out,[95] very important for the history of post-revolutionary realism. During the late 1950s, this play together with *Malik al-Quṭn* and *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* brought significant changes in the way Egyptian realism is developed, overturning its ideological stereotypes and ossified artistic models and becoming a forerunner and initiator of "revolutionary changes", which would later occur in the 1960s.

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95 Luwīs ʿAwaḍ, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa Fann al-Drāmā", *al-Kātib*, April 1961, p. 95.

Chapter III
Search for Identity

A remarkable revival of Egyptian drama and theatre which began in the 1950s reached its apogee during the 1960s.[1] There is no doubt that many factors contributed to this efflorescence. First, the optimistic spirit of the 1952 Revolution galvanized and prepared the nation to embark on new ideological and cultural ventures. Secondly, the young government undertook many important measures to establish institutions promoting culture both in the cities and villages. The new regime recognized at the outset the importance of cultural propaganda in mobilizing the forces of the nation and created a Ministry for Culture and National Guidance. In 1960, the Ministry established the General Foundation for Theatre Arts and Music. Thirdly, the playwrights who constituted this theatrical and dramatic revival were nearly all young open-minded people eager to learn more about their native culture. They wished to explore their culture creatively and to experiment with the form and language of their plays.

During the five-year plan (1961-65), Egyptian culture, including drama and theatre, enjoyed the patronage of the Government. The Egyptian Television Station,[2] established in 1960, inspired activity in the theatre and helped create many public and private theatres and theatre troupes. In order to promote the cause of experimental drama, the Pocket Theatre was established in 1961. By 1966, there were ten theatre troupes and nine main theatres were active in Cairo.[3] These theatres put on several productions during the same season and the repertoire included foreign authors both ancient and modern such as Aeschylus and

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1 For an interesting discussion on the post-revolutionary drama in Egypt see: R. Allen, "Egyptian Drama after the Revolution", *Edebiyyāt*, 4/I 1979, p. 129.

2 During the first year The Egyptian Television Station presented two hundred television plays by both Arab and Western Authors.

3 M.M. Badawī, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 141.

Aristophanes, Brecht and Dürenmatt. Some of the Egyptian playwrights included in the repertoire were Alfred Faraj, Anīs Manṣūr, Rashād Rushdī, Saʿd al-Dīn Wahba, Maḥmūd Diyāb, ʿAlī Sālim, Nuʿmān ʿĀshūr, Mīkhāʾīl Rūmān, Yūsuf Idrīs and the poets ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr and Najīb Surūr.

This remarkable theatre activity was not limited to the cities. Due to the initiative of the Cairene cultural institution *al-Thaqāfa al-Jamāhīriyya* (Mass Culture), theatre professionals, especially producers, began to organize theatre troupes in all Egypt. This regional theatre with its often illiterate actors introduced the Egyptian professional theatre to the common people and popular culture. Possibly this authentic regional theatre became an inspiration for some Egyptian playwrights in their search for a truly Egyptian (Arab) drama and theatre.

Young writers and journalists like Idrīs, turned to drama spontaneously hoping that this literary genre would let them reach a wide audience. As the regime addressed the masses in socialist and populist slogans, many young authors adopted colloquial language in their plays. That experiment helped both playwrights and audience achieve greater communication. The post-revolutionary government began to ban political parties and discourage the free exchange of opinion. The theatre then became an *erzatz* parliament, where the authors voiced their political views and ideas, often obliquely because of the severe censorship.

The Egyptian playwrights of the 1960s were well aware of exciting events taking place in the theatre world in London, Paris and New York. They had read or seen the plays of Ionesco and Beckett; they were acquainted with the experimental theatre of Brecht. They were exposed also to Pirandello's *commedia dell' arte* and the productions of other Western playwrights. *Al-Masraḥ*,[4] (The Theatre), a monthly review published in Cairo, became a forum of discussion and polemics about theatre life in Egypt and important theatrical events in the West.

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4 *Al-Masraḥ* was published during the years 1964-1970.

Egyptian playwrights were inspired both by Western theories on total theatre, epic theatre, symbolism, expressionism and surrealism, and by internal political considerations such as the growing nation-wide feeling of Egyptian nationalism. They raised fundamental questions about their drama and began a quest for a genuine Egyptian and Arab drama and theatre.

The plays of the 1960s and especially the first half of the decade are "very Egyptian", dominated by national themes and issues of political and social significance. During the second half of the decade these "Egyptian" problems seem to leave more space for playwrights' reflections about general human matters.

The dramatic forms of the 1960s are characterized not only by a variety of means of expression and artistic innovations but also by a persistent search for Egyptian (Arab) roots and identity. Some authors tried to establish their works on the basis of traditional village entertainments such as *al-sāmir*; others related their plays to medieval literary forms such as *maqāma* or took their inspiration from *khayāl al-ẓill* (shadow theatre) and *qaragöz*.

Idrīs's plays written in the 1960s, namely, *al-Fārāfīr* (The Farfūrs, 1964), *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* (The Terrestial Comedy, 1966) and *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn* (The Striped Ones, 1967) and his series of articles "Naḥwa Masraḥ Miṣrī" (Towards an Egyptian Theatre) illustrate well the changes, inspirations and creative transformations which have occurred in Egyptian drama during the most fertile phase of its development.

Al-Fārāfīr and *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*: the life of an Egyptian man, a tragic farce

The writings of Idrīs are filled with original ideas, imaginative thoughts and new means of expression. His writings always provoked unresolved discussions, polemics and attacks by the critics. However, none of the author's work attracted as much attention, nor produced

as much critical review as his famous play *al-Fārāfīr*.[5] There are shorter and longer studies of the play in Arabic, English, French and Russian. When we look at this apparently rich critical assessment of *al-Fārāfīr* we may more easily notice one striking feature, namely, that most of the critics tend to see the play through the prism of Idrīs's introduction to *al-Fārāfīr* entitled "Naḥwa Masraḥ Miṣrī"[6] (Towards an Egyptian Theatre). The ideas presented there by the playwright became an obstacle to the objective analysis of the play and directed the attention of the critics towards only one issue, that is, to determine whether this *masraḥiyya* (play) is truly "Egyptian" or composed out of the European theatrical forms and ideas.

On analyzing the critical assessment of *al-Fārāfīr*, we notice that with the exception of the recent study by Hanita Brand,[7] the analysis by W. Kirpicenko[8] and the discussion by Fārūq ᶜAbd al-Wahhāb,[9] the critics are preoccupied with its form and with seeing things that are not there. Not much attention was paid to a genuine analysis of the play's content. Even Fārūq ᶜAbd al-Wahhāb, who in his introductory remarks points out the need to put aside Idrīs's introduction "Towards the Egyptian Theatre" and to analyze the play itself,[10] "forgets" his own words and eventually preoccupies himself with the issue of the "Egyptianness" of the play.

In our opinion the critical assessment of *al-Fārāfīr* needs to be supplemented. The play requires re-thinking, a new analysis of its interior meaning and an attempt to explore Idrīs's concepts and symbols anew.

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5 Y. Idrīs, *al-Fārāfīr*, Cairo: Maktabat Gharīb, 1977. The première of *al-Fārāfīr* took place on *al-Jumhūriyya* Theatre (16 April, 1964). After three weeks the play was taken off the stage.

6 Y. Idrīs, "Naḥwa Masraḥ Miṣrī", *al-Fārāfīr*, Cairo: Maktabat Gharīb, 1977, pp. 7-48. The article was also published in *al-Kātib*, January, February, March 1964.

7 H. Brand, "*Al-Fārāfīr* by Yūsuf Idrīs: the Medium is the Message", *Journal of Arabic Literature*, XXI, pp. 57-71.

8 W. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, Moscow: Nauka, pp. 147-162.

9 Fārūq ᶜAbd al-Wahhāb, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa Masraḥ al-Fikr", *al-Masraḥ*, July 1966, pp.170-173.

10 Ibid., p. 171.

When we look at the content of *al-Farāfīr* we tend to agree with Fārūq ʿAbd al-Wahhāb who says that the plot of the play is simply-structured and easy to read but most critics' studies make it look as if it was very complicated, and try to find a number of impressive references and search for possible influences by various foreign playwrights and theatrical traditions.[11] In *al-Farāfīr*, Idrīs presents us with a story about the relation between the master and his servant, a story the basic lines of which we may find in some other literatures but at the same time a true Egyptian story closely attached to the Egyptian world of reality, to Egypt's unresolved political, social and cultural problems. However, the artistic aim of the author stretches further than that. Idrīs, not only presents the disturbing Egyptian reality but with clear signs of optimism decisively calls for radical change, that is, to put an end to the human exploitation of one another.

Al-Farāfīr is composed of two acts. The first act of the play opens with the Author, dressed in a funny uniform: a starched white shirt, an elegant jacket, brief shorts and shoes without socks, addressing the audience and thus preparing them for the kind of drama they are about to experience. He suggests eliminating the distance between the actors and spectators. Furthermore, he emphasizes that whatever will happen on the stage is not the truth but rather mere acting. The Author announces the entrance of Farfūr, a skinny strange-looking, individual, dressed in a clown suit, his face covered with white powder, his head covered with a tarboosh. Farfūr commands the Author to "produce" a Master for him to serve as well as a Mistress, so he can get on with the show. Soon, the Master is found asleep amongst the audience, so he is awakened and the play can begin.

As the action develops the Master demands a name for himself in the play but after a few suggestions he is persuaded by Farfūr to abandon this. However, he still demands an occupation. Farfūr proposes various professions, such as an intellectual, an artist, a doctor, a broadcaster, a football player, a thief, etc; all of of which the Master turns down after making

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11 Ibid., p. 172.

fun of most of them, finally accepting the occupation of grave-digger. Farfūr finds it difficult to obey the orders of the Master and the matter even requires the Author's intervention. The problem is settled temporarily and the relationship between Farfūr and the Master seems to work well. Subsequently, they both get married. The Master marries two women, that is, the one found for him by Farfūr amongst the audience and another one sent by the Author. Farfūr gets married to an ugly, thin, mannish-looking bride. Soon, both Master and Farfūr start begetting children.

The grave-digging business is going slow. There are no dead to bury. The wives need money for their housekeeping. Farfūr is told by his Master to find a corpse to bury, i.e., to kill someone and to his surprise, a man in the audience conveniently happens to be looking for someone to end his life for him. At this point, the obedient Farfūr absolutely refuses to follow the order and appeals to the Author. Finally, the impatient Master resolves the problem, that is, he himself kills the man. Farfūr, horrified at his Master's crime and his growing lust for blood, runs away.

The events of the second act take place sometime later. The Master, angry and miserable because of his servant's desertion, is wondering where he can find him. Suddenly Farfūr arrives from the back of the auditorium pushing a handcart filled with surrealistic models representing Europe and America and bits of guns, aircrafts and gallows. Farfūr offers to buy or sell: old iron, old glory, a hydrogen bomb, a philosophy, an author or an audience. Farfūr and the Master are delighted to see each other. They exchange the news about their children. It seems that the Master's children, amongst them Alexander, Napoleon, Mussolini, and Hitler, have not only relieved their father of his work but have also perfected his profession burying quickly and easily millions of corpses. As for Farfūr's descendants, named after famous dark-skinned characters and slaves of history, they have become the victims of the Master's "activities".

The Master and Farfūr decide to resume their life together but on a completely different basis. They agree to try out, with the help of various suggestions from the audience, different

relations between themselves. They reverse their roles, become equal; they form various regimes and even an empire of freedom. However, nothing works. Once they have established an egalitarian cooperative they are approached by the dead man from the first act, who is looking for a place to be buried. However, their venture irritates him, and he leaves them without hiring their services. Finally, when all the attempted solutions fail, the Master and Farfūr quit their roles and resume them only when their wives force them to provide for their families. Their search for a solution continues. They even have decided to turn back to the Author. However, they are told by the audience that he has disappeared. Surprisingly, he is delivered to them in a bundle looking like a newborn baby, which they untie only to find smaller and smaller bundles inside, until what remains is too small to be seen. The dramatic tension increases and the search for a solution continues.

Finally, at the suggestion of a stage-hand who has to rush home (his wife is about to have a baby that evening), they commit suicide as a way out of the problem, since death obliterates all distinctions and renders all men equal. However, even this last, desperate move does not help because to his horror Farfūr discovers that instead of their becoming two equal atoms with neither master nor servant, he has been turned into an electron, spinning forever round the proton, his master. The play closes with Farfūr's plea, as he addresses the audience pathetically gasping for breath, weeping and spinning round and round:

> Farfūr: Good people, Farfūrs. Save your brother! My voice is going. Find a solution! A solution; someone, a solution, otherwise I stay like this. There must be a solution; there must be a way out. Your brother is finished. A solution, I beg you. Not for my sake but for your own. I am just acting (his voice fades). It's you who are going round and round![12]

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12 Y. Idrīs, *al-Farāfīr*, p. 200, v.21-25, p. 201, v.1.

What are the major issues of this as many critics agree — great *masraḥiyya*? How can we "read" its inner meaning? Does the play have an underlying subject or element which keeps its apparently irrational matters together?

When we look attentively at the content of *al-Fārāfīr* and follow closely its dialogues, we notice easily that Idrīs touches here on a number of themes, makes, with a big dose of sarcasm, detailed comments on the existing Egyptian situation as well as discusses human nature in general. However, our analysis here will not focus on all the details and minor problems but it will aim to grasp the major ideas of the author and present them clearly.

As for the content of *al-Fārāfīr*, two major issues may be distinguished, namely, Idrīs's criticism of the Egyptian political, social and cultural order in the 1960s and the problem of human freedom. Apart from these two subjects discussed by Idrīs, we may also notice another important theme, i.e., the issue of modern women and their role in society.[13]

As for the form of *al-Fārāfīr*, we have to take into consideration two issues, i.e., the author's attempt to create an original Egyptian theatre and the impact of Western drama on his artistic vision.[14]

As we mentioned previously *al-Fārāfīr* is characterized by a great level of detail. A first glance at the play indicates a kind of chaos or lack of logical order of any sort. However, Idrīs endowed his play with a strong pivot or a certain magic force which keeps these only apparently illogical ideas together in one meaningful unity. This magic is associated with the personality of Farfūr and the real content of the play is presented by his actions and reactions. Farfūr is the pivot of this *masraḥiyya* and human freedom, the issue he himself embodies, is the play's underlying subject.

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13 The issue of the modern woman will be discussed in the first section of the fourth chapter, i.e., "*Al-Jins al-Thālith*: hoping for 'light' and a better future".

14 The form of *al-Fārāfīr* will be discussed in the last section of this chapter, namely: "Form, style and language: striking a balance between Egyptian sources and Western influences".

The critics easily categorize *al-Fārāfīr* amongst the plays of the theatre of the absurd, saying that Idrīs plunges into philosophical speculations about human matters. Did Idrīs here really cease to be a realist (*wāqiʿī*)? Did he really abandon the Egyptian man whose everyday struggles were always his great concern?

We would definitely agree with Ramsis Yunān[15] and point out that in *al-Fārāfīr* Idrīs not only remains a realist but his critical glance becomes sharper and his sarcasm even stronger and more bitter. One may ask: How in this apparently absurdist and disorganized dramatic structure did the author achieve a high level of social and political criticism?

In order to uncover the dark reality of the existing Egyptian situation during the 1960s, criticize the political, social and cultural order of the country and present some kind of solution and direction, Idrīs "discovered" for his play an unusual and fascinating personality. He created the character of Farfūr, a modern Egyptian jester. This funny looking individual, a wag who smoothly combines charm with a sharp tongue; a clown, who through laughter, seeks to create a new philosophy for mankind, enabled the author to speak plainly and sarcastically about all the Egyptian forbidden matters and hidden ills.

It is as difficult for a writer to criticize openly the government's policy as it is for a servant to criticize his master. Such criticism requires an acrobatic mind and a talent to create literary tricks. In *al-Fārāfīr*, Idrīs fully displays these skills. It should be pointed out that the author's basic literary trick here, namely, the introduction of the fool-clown-type personality is not new in the world of drama. Fools and clowns that may be considered the entertainers and educators of the rulers and societies have been known since the Greek and Roman empires. As for Idrīs's clown Farfūr, we would not argue here as other critics have done, whether Farfūr is truly Egyptian or not, whether his roots can be traced to the West or the East or whether he is a copy of Harlequin from the *commedia dell' arte.*[16] For the moment

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15 Ramsīs Yūnan, "al-Fārāfīr", *al-Kātib*, June 1964, pp.50-54.

16 For an interesting discussion about the similarities between Harlequin and Farfūr see: Raʾfat al-Duwayrī, "Arlīkīnū wa Farfūr", *al-Majalla*, March 1966, pp.115-137.

we will set aside questions of form and content: What is really important for us here is the purpose of Farfūr's existence in Idrīs's theatre and the effects of his actions and reactions in *al-Fārāfīr.*

Criticism of the Egyptian world of reality is present in almost every dialogue of the play in the form of allusions, digressions and humorous comments. Idrīs's sharp and sarcastic glance at the political, social and cultural order of Egypt can be seen best in Farfūr's and the Master's long dispute about the possible occupation for the Master. The dialogue begins in a humorous way. It looks like a funny game which can make us laugh:

Master: I must have a job. Listen, Farfūr, choose a very respectable job for me, boy. Something modern.

Farfūr: How about being a national capitalist?

Master: Don't you have anything better?

Farfūr: I do. Would you like to be an intellectual?

Master: What do your intellectuals do?

Farfūr: They do nothing.

Master: How come?

Farfūr: This question clearly proves that you are not an intellectual...
What about being a singer?

Master: What will I do as a singer?

Farfūr: You say "Ah" for thirty or forty years.

Master: Just that?

Farfūr: No, no. Melodious "Ahs" of course; sometimes it's "Ah, Aha"... Sometimes "Ohohoo" and occasionally "Eheehee".[17]

As the dialogue develops and Farfūr, in a similar manner, brings discredit to most of the jobs and professions discussed we begin to wonder: Why, in spite of the funny answers and jokes, do we not want to laugh? Instead we become upset. This dispute in its interior meaning is not funny at all because it refers to the existing problems, and the picture of the Egyptian reality of the 1960s as it is presented here is frustrating and disturbing. The government is corrupt, the intellectuals forced into silence, and people with power and money live off the sweat of those who are weak and poor. The Master demands a respectable job for himself. The author, speaking from behind the mask of Farfūr, says plainly that under the circumstances presently existing in Egypt, he is unable to fulfill his request. According to him a decent occupation does not exist. The government posts are filled with the wrong people. The justice system is corrupt:

Farfūr: How about being a lawyer?

Master: What do they do?

Farfūr: You beg the court's justice to judge in your favour.

Master: And if the court does not?

Farfūr: We'll have advance fees, anyway.

Master: No, I prefer to be a prosecutor.

Farfūr: That man who hates everybody for no reason? No, uncle. A judge is better.[18]

The administration is full of dishonest employees:

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17 Y. Idrīs, *al-Farāfīr*, p. 77, v. 9-13, 20-22, p. 78, v. 1-4.

18 Ibid., p. 78, v. 19-24, p. 79, v. 1-2.

Farfūr: O.K. You can work as an accountant. You save people's tax money and take it yourself.[19]

The posts which require high professional skills are often given to incompetent people, who lack necessary knowledge and qualifications:

Farfūr: Well, you can work as a physician.

Master: No, I don't know anything about medicine.

Farfūr: Do you think physicians do?[20]

As for the ordinary jobs, according to the author, it is also difficult to find a suitable one. The pay rate is low, the work conditions are bad and the work load too heavy:

Farfūr: How about being a traffic policeman?

Master: What does he do?

Farfūr: He is a poor man like the rest of us who do not have cars, yet all day long he orders around those who do have cars...

Master: How about a bus conductor? Please, a conductor.

Farfūr: Do you know how to swim?

Master Swim? Where?

Farfūr: In your sweat?

Master: Is that necessary?

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19 Ibid., p. 78, v. 10.

20 Ibid., p. 79, v. 6-8.

Farfūr: Very much so. If you don't know how to swim in your sweat you must learn how to swim in other people's sweat. If you know neither, you'd be no good.[21]

There are better-paid occupations, considered easy and clean but requiring a loss of one's self-esteem. Therefore, many people would not like to take them:

Farfūr: How about this one. Work as a doorman at the Hilton Hotel. With this outfit of yours they'll accept you at once and will even give you a clothing allowance.

Master: What do I do?

Farfūr: You'll be a European-style beggar: you stand there in all your elegance and those going in and out will give you tips...[22]

Ironically enough also sometimes by pure luck, a person without an education and professional skills may find a job which will bring him a fortune, respect and popularity:

Farfūr: I've found it! A fantastic job. Be a football player!

Master: That requires qualifications.

Farfūr: No qualifications. You throw your books away and play in the street for two or three years until you're a cub of sixteen or seventeen. In time they discover you and you become a star... And all the people in the stadium will shout "Sido! Sido!"[23]

The dispute about possible occupations for the Master continues. The Master still demands a respectable profession. However Farfūr's job description brings only confusion and disappointment. He gets impatient:

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21 Ibid., p. 81, v. 1-4, p. 82, v. 1-3, p. 83, v. 1-4.

22 Ibid., p. 81, v. 4-9.

23 Ibid., p. 79, v. 13-15, 17-21.

Master: Don't you know of any job where one can work?

Farfūr: There is one. Work as a thief.

Master: O.K. I am ready to do that.[24]

While discussing this "profession", speaking from behind the mask of Farfūr, Idrīs uncovers the brutal fact of the Egyptian reality. The author points out that this "profession" has become widespread; it even dominates the Egyptian work force. These "skilled professionals" are ready to fill all the available jobs from minor positions up to the well-paid, responsible posts in the government:

Farfūr: Now, would you like to be a big thief, a medium thief or a regular-sized one?

Master: Does it require any thinking? A big one, of course.

Farfūr: Well, then work in import and export trade.

Master: And the medium one?

Farfūr: Start a co-op.

Master: Anything but that. How about a regular one?

Farfūr: That's a really poor one who sweats doing it, climbs pipes to get into a house or picks a wallet that turns out to be empty... Something like that.[25]

Being a prosperous thief requires not only some skills but also work. For people like the Master, who according to Farfūr, would not like to make an effort, this occupation is not suitable. He has in mind something better, almost effortless:

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24 Ibid., p. 81, v. 10-13.

25 Ibid., p. 81, v. 11-19.

Farfūr: How about forgetting all that and working for the government. You have all the qualifications.

Master: How so?

Farfūr: Don't you want a place where you can sleep and dream that you are dreaming? You'll have, from one pay day to the next, a whole month of dreaming.[26]

In this statement by Farfūr lies the essence of the author's political and social criticism. As long as the policy of the government remains the same Idrīs does not see the possibility of any improvement. The changes have to begin here in the government offices starting with those very important departments in the ministry and ending with small administrative bureaus. These posts can no longer be filled with incompetent people, with those who lack commitment and determination to honestly work for the well-being of their country. Then, these changes must be spread to all sectors of the Egyptian work-force. The mentality of the people must undergo a quick evolution, their "dreaming about dreaming", interrupted and stopped forever, and their consciousness awakened and alerted to the requirements of the time. Here the author sees the role of intellectuals who instead of being forced into silence or to the practice of various literary tricks and acrobatic forms, should be encouraged and employed by the government and promoted as "missionaries" carrying out, explaining and completing its now correct message.

In his writings Idrīs always displays a lot of optimism and shows strong faith in Egyptian man and his better future. Therefore, the author's "decision" in *al-Fārāfīr* to choose for the Master a rather sad occupation associated with human life's end may puzzle us. Did Idrīs really become a pessimist? Did the intellectual crisis of the 1960s and his possible foreseeing of the inevitable "disaster" change the author's outlook that much? Certainly not. In that artistic decision we may see a light of hope. Idrīs made his heroes (the Master and

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26 Ibid., p. 82, v. 9-12.

Farfūr) busy in grave-digging because in that symbolic way he pointed out that the "catastrophe" could be avoided, that there were still chances to correct the chosen way, to learn the lesson, to bury all the mistakes and build the constructive program anew because, as Farfūr said: "Instead of living in order to die, we should die in order to live".[27]

While in the dialogues of the first act the author focuses on the presentation of his critical attitude towards the existing Egyptian reality, the discussions of the second act of *al-Fārāfīr* concentrate on human matters in general and on the problem of man's freedom in particular.

As mentioned previously the play *al-Fārāfīr* possesses a sort of magic force which is associated with the personality of Farfūr. This modern fool or clown does not only make us laugh, he also criticizes and teaches and most of all makes us realize that in order to change or improve our existence we have to understand how we live and why. The logic, the simplicity and the wisdom of his idea makes us wonder and become eager to catch and remember every word of it. His revolt against the Farfūr-Master situation fascinates us. Although, we know that it is only a theatrical play-game, it awakens our consciousness and makes us see the need to attain the true knowledge about our situation, to learn more and more and draw certain conclusions. For us, Farfūr is the agent of freedom:

> Farfūr: Well, I've decided not to act unless I understand. I must know why I am Farfūr and why you are the Master.[28]

Speaking from behind the mask of Farfūr Idrīs makes us realize that knowledge and understanding should be our first step:

> Farfūr: More important than living is knowing why we live. And even more important than knowing why is to know where we are going.[29]

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27 Ibid., p. 85, v. 16.

28 Ibid., p. 135, v. 20-21.

29 Ibid., p. 185, v. 17-18.

According to Farfūr we accept all the burdens and pains of our life because we are in the middle of a certain routine, we do not know anything else, and we do not even imagine that something else exists:

> Farfūr: And everywhere it is Master and Farfūr. Who is to be Master and who Farfūr, and why should I be Farfūr and you Master? Ever since life began it's been like that, thinking that that's the way it is and that people cannot live otherwise. But in all honesty, is that a life? Is that a way?...We accept it for one reason only, because we don't see it.[30]

Idrīs's character is courageous enough to say "No!" to his existing situation. He is no longer willing to obey his Master because he simply wants to "understand", to know why he is being used exploited and oppressed. Furthermore, he does not accept his "role" as it is "written" by his "author". Farfūr wants to be the one who would "program" himself and decide about his own actions and movements:

> Farfūr: Oh, boy! Being written is so ugly it's almost obscene. The most beautiful thing on Earth is a feeling that you are your own author, that you can do it any way you like.[31]

We were all born as free human beings but as the author pointed out in *al-Fārāfīr* we created political and social systems which turned against us, destroyed our freedom, made us hate and exploit each other and hampered our creativity. All this became the cause of our misfortunes today.

Idrīs made the heroes of *al-Fārāfīr* try different relations among themselves and various regimes but none of the proposed solutions proved to be successful. Why did the author present us with this long search knowing that it would lead nowhere? According to Idrīs, the

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30 Ibid., p. 187, v. 1-4, 6-7.

31 Ibid., p. 138, v. 4-6.

situation cannot be solved by the regimes we know. What kind of solution does he propose then?

All the critics are preoccupied with determining if the final action of the play, i.e., Farfūr's desperate call for a solution, indicates optimism or pessimism on the author's part. Surprisingly, nobody attempts to look deeply into the question: What provoked the call in the first place? Does Idrīs call upon us to terminate the relation Farfūr-Master? Is he truly against the existence of Masters?

Although, Idrīs, in his play makes fun of the Master and criticizes him severely he does see the necessity for his existence. Each society needs its big and small masters. This is the law of nature and according to the author, the law to which we must submit or else "confusion and anarchy will prevail".

We are unable to fight the law of nature. Idrīs is well aware of that and therefore he attempts to make us realize that we have to solve our problems in accordance with this natural order. As presented in the play, both Farfūr and the Master were convinced that death would render them equal. However, even after their bodies were turned into dust Farfūr to his horror discovered that they did not achieve anything, the relation of Farfūr and Master prevailed. The thin Farfūr became an electron (loaded negatively) and the bigger Master a proton (loaded positively). Due to the law of nature (physics) the lighter mass began to revolve around the nucleus (the proton is the main part of it).

As the physicists free the electron from its spinning movement and, by the ionization process, make it a free agent, we have to discover our way to improve our existing situation. It has to be pointed out that, although free, an electron does have a master because eventually its actions and reactions are stimulated by the law of physics. When we think about the situation of the electron, an analogy comes to our mind automatically: Isn't this a solution the author possibly had in mind?

According to Idrīs, every human being should be so free to fulfil his desire for creativity, knowledge and understanding. However, since we are unable to change the law of

nature, every man as a member of society should submit to the guidance of a wise master whom he will fully respect and trust, a master who will in return respect and trust each and every man in his society and will be willing to benefit from their experiences and wisdom.

Idrīs continues his reflections on the Egyptian problems of the 1960s and on humanist concerns in general in his subsequent play, i.e., *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* (The Terrestial Comedy, 1966).[32] Although some critics see that as reminiscent of *al-Fārāfīr* enriched by new ideas and visions, we agree with those scholars who say that here the author is not as original and creative as he had been in *al-Fārāfīr*. The play is long, boring and "heavy". Its content is dense, with too many problems, ideas and details. It looks as if Idrīs has turned *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* into a "debating hall" at several points, depriving the play of life and movement. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the eyes of the critics this play stands in the shadow of its predecessor. In comparison to *al-Fārāfīr*, the critical assessment of *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* is lukewarm and unenthusiastic. We can here take note of studies in Arabic by Muḥammad Barakāt,[33] Shafīq Majallī,[34] Fārūq ʿAbd al-Wahhāb[35] and Bahāʾ Ṭāhir[36] and discussions in English by M.M. Badawī,[37] French by Ch. El-Khouri[38] and Russian by W. Kirpičenko.[39]

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32 Y. Idrīs, *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* , Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1984.

33 Muḥammad Barakāt, "Qabl Rafʿ al-Sitār al-Qawmī wa *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*", *al-Masraḥ*, January 1966, pp. 32-33.

34 Shafīq Majallī, "*Al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* ", *al-Masraḥ*, March 1966, pp. 26-28.

35 Fārūq ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, "Masraḥ al-Fikr", pp. 174-175.

36 Bahāʾ Ṭāhir, "Mahzalat al-Nuqqād ghayr al-Arḍiyya", *al-Kātib*, April 1966, pp. 146-154.

37 M.M. Badawī, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, pp. 160-161.

38 Ch. El-Khouri, "Yussef Idrīs", *Le théâtre arabe de l'absurde*, Paris: Éditions A.-G. Nizet, 1978, pp. 93-107.

39 W. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, pp. 163-173.

Idrīs's former plays show that his artistic vision and literary experiments are always deeply rooted in the Egyptian world of reality. Therefore, before we assess *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*, we must ask why the author decided on this boring dramatic structure? Why did he overload his play with so many ideas and write it in a mixture of styles? Why did his message seem somehow lost or hard to grasp? A close look at the content of the play may bring some answers.

Al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya belongs to the theatre of the absurd. This realistic-fantastic drama construction, in which the dream world is combined with reality, is based on one of Idrīs's short stories.[40]

The play takes place in a public clinic of distorted appearance, crowded with people. A doctor deeply disturbed by his family problems while performing his duties is surprised by a very strange event. His nurse Ṣifr informs him that there is a man called Muḥammad I who requests a medical certificate saying that his younger brother Muḥammad III is mentally ill and should be taken into asylum. The doctor performs a regular examination and notices that Muḥammad III is not exactly mad. The patient complains about an "unknown complaint" of this world and about hostility and evil among the people. This sensitive young man sees clearly that he cannot confront all this and prefers to withdraw from the world's problems by entering an asylum. Muḥammad I is determined to get the papers. Therefore, he brings a witness, the wife of Muḥammad III. The testimony of Nūnū, who says that her husband wanted to kill her, seems to convince the Doctor. However, the whole affair is stopped by Muḥammad II, a policeman, a second brother who rushes to the clinic with a gun. He warns the Doctor that Muḥammad III is not really mad but that the oldest brother Muḥammad I is plotting to put him away so he can seize his share of land inherited from their father, having already swindled him (Muḥammad II) of his inheritance. The Doctor, who already had some doubts about Muḥammad III's insanity is ready to accept the story. However, Muḥammad I

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40 The play is based on Idrīs's short story "Fawqa Ḥudūd al-ʿAql" (1961), from the collection *Lughat al-Āy Āy*.

is persuasive in his self-defence and in attributing Muḥammad II's behaviour to his recent mental breakdown. The Doctor, who is not happy to witness the domestic argument between the three brothers, has to decide about the patient's sanity. He is not sure how to decide and the only solution to this difficult problem which he can think of is to interrogate Nūnū, the wife of the patient. However, this woman has disappeared and the Doctor is told firmly by all those present, including his nurse, that she has never been there. At this point the Doctor himself begins to doubt his own sanity.

In the second, third and fourth acts of the play a lot of strange and surprising things occur. The clinic is "visited" several times by Nūnū who wears several masks, and by other living and dead members of the family. Each of them attempts to help the Doctor in his quest for the truth and presents his own version of the story of the Brothers. The Doctor, the one who is supposed to decide who is lying and who is telling the truth, pretends to be the audience and only listens and makes observations. The truth seems to be far away. The Grandfather of the Brothers suggests forming an arbitration court to investigate the matter.

The court led by the nurse Ṣifr, who was chosen to be a judge, proceeds with lengthy and surprising interrogations and accusations. Finally, the Doctor, who does not foresee any possibility of finding the truth, prefers to withdraw from the whole affair. He is convinced that if humans continue to live in the jungle of problems they have been inhabiting, the brothers and sisters will go on fighting one another over inheritances and possessions. Therefore, the Doctor decides to put himself in a straitjacket, asks his nurse to tie it for him and instructs the policeman to take him to the asylum.

In *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* the author "moves" according to two basic lines. The first is an extensive examination of the Egyptian realities of the 1960s. The second one presents generic human concerns such as issues of justice, good and evil. Here the author focuses on the problem of truth and the human need to search for it.

The play *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* presents us with a "grotesque", frightening and bitter symbolic picture of an Egyptian family and the story of its quarrels, disagreements and

problems. The family of Muḥammad and its members represent all the important layers of Egyptian society. The family is in deep crisis, all the brothers are against each other. Who is the one responsible for the family's present situation? In other words: Who is the one to blame for the Egyptian (Arab) society's predicament during the 1960s?

According to Idrīs, it is as difficult to find anyone guilty in this family dispute, as it is to blame any faction of Egyptian society for the existing chaos and disorder. The regime has failed, so have the reforms. The "court" with the nurse Ṣifr, as the chief judge, prosecutor and attorney general, reveals the author's strong social and political criticism and points out his angry, decisive stand. Idrīs speaks from behind the mask of Ṣifr and condemns landowners (Muḥammad Qārūn and Muḥammad Ṭayyib) who leave the land to their sons forcing them to fight for supremacy. He condemns the new bourgeois (Muḥammad I) whose greed for power and money has no limits; and he accuses the army (Muḥammad II) of being undisciplined physically, morally and ideologically. He also criticizes intellectuals (Muḥammad III) who are afraid to come forward to "correct" the message. Idrīs's criticism does not end here. The author condemns working class (Ṣifr) as well:

Qārūn: It seems that this court knows (the matter).

Ṣifr: Knows what?

Qārūn: The truth.

Ṣifr: What truth? The truth of what?

Qarūn: Who is responsible.

Ṣifr: Responsible?! What for?

Qārūn: Oh, Lord! For the situation we are in, right now!

Ṣifr: Responsible?! What for?

Qārūn: For this problem, for this misery.[41]

Idrīs had already criticized Egyptian society severely in *al-Fārāfīr*. However, while condemning all the regimes, leaders and reforms, the author was unable to find a solution to the country's problems and hidden ills. In his "grotesque" *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*, Idrīs not only repeated his strong criticism again but at the same time he undertook the task of explaining why such a solution could not be found. According to the author, Egyptian society's predicament during the 1960s was that this society was missing the truth, the true essence of the revolutionary message had become misshapen and lost. The people were misled and national unity was destroyed.

When we take a closer look at this dense content of the play, it appears to us as a chaotic surrealistic "mixture" of reality and fantasy, and nothing is concrete, logical or simple. Then, it becomes clear to us why Idrīs's play is composed in this way and why the portrayed reality seems illogical and muddled. In this symbolic picture of Egypt's 1960s, we find the author's strongest political and social criticism. *Al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* is more than a portrait of an Egyptian family. It is a picture of Egyptian society in the deep crisis of the 1960s: ruined economically, and rift with ideological problems and contradictions. It is a society misled and betrayed by it leaders, instilled with fear, and completely unprepared to face the inevitable "disaster" about to come. As the author depicts in his play, the society is in complete chaos, having lost its common language and national unity, causing each of it members to turn against the other. This society needs a *ḥakīm*[42] to make a right diagnosis and put an end to the endless fights and disputes. Does Idrīs see in *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*

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41 Y. Idrīs, *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* , p. 155, v. 7-15.

42 In the play, Idrīs calls his hero Doctor Ḥakīm. This word can be translated as follows: wise, judicious, wise man, sage, philosopher, physican, doctor (H.Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. by J.M. Cowan, Ithaca, New York: Spoken Language Services, 1976, p. 196.

the possibility of restoring order to this "disturbed" society? Does he believe the truth can be found?

The family of Muḥammad is in a deep crisis and the Doctor is supposed to resolve the problem, i.e., to find out who amongst the Brothers is right. The truth has only one meaning; there is no tricky double meaning. However, the Doctor is not sure whom he is going to believe, he needs someone to direct him and help him make the right choice:

Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib: The truth will not leave this room. The truth is here.

Doctor: How is it here? Please, explain this to me.

Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib: Here, inside of us. We are the problem; we created this problem. The truth is inside of us, inside of one of us...

Doctor: Our existence, what is it for? Why should the truth be inside of us?[43]

The Doctor is confused and frightened by the lack of understanding amongst the Brothers. He is unable to grasp their illogical problems:

Doctor: The world has become crazy! One Brother is pitted against the other.
Why has my brain become the prisoner of logic?
Is all this happening "outside"... to frighten me?
What will I lose if I go with them? Why do I torture my bra.n myself?[44]

He is also afraid to decide and he wants to leave this responsibility to someone else. It does not matter for him whether this person can make a decision or not:

Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib: Do you agree that he be the judge?...

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43 Y. Idrīs, *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* , p. 117, v. 1-6.

44 Ibid., p. 148, v. 4-8.

Doctor: Yes, I agree very much. For the sake of the truth let Zero (Ṣifr) judge us.[45]

The Doctor, like the audience, listens to all the people who appear in the clinic to present their version of the story but he does not want to take sides or to acknowledge this "farce". He desperately searches for Nūnū who in his imagination becomes the symbol of justice and truth. However, it is difficult to reach her. She comes and disappears. Nobody knows her real face. The doctor believes that Nūnū is his only hope to find the truth and therefore he insists on finding her. However, her arrival does not help because Nūnū, like the others is far from the truth:

Nūnū: I am the picture without a frame. I am the picture that anyone can put any frame on. A picture is a very simple thing. You imagine it is very difficult. You see it and you touch it. You live all your life talking about ideas as though they exist.[46]

The Doctor is lost and sees no other way to escape this "farce" than to put himself in a strait-jacket and enter an asylum. Only this can give him "freedom":

Doctor: I feel free, free! The future of my children is safe.[47]

The message of the author is pessimistic. His hero's search for the truth did not bring any positive results but rather isolated him from society. Does Idrīs really see the presented realities in such dark colours? Luwīs ʿAwaḍ has called *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* a complete "capitulation".[48] Has the author truly given up on Egyptian society?

We tend to disagree with the view presented by Luwīs ʿAwaḍ. There is a dose of optimism in Idrīs's thinking. Although the Doctor's withdrawal from the "farce" may symbolize his escape from the "jungle of worldly problems" and his rejection of the

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45 Ibid., p. 122, v. 17-18.

46 Ibid., p. 160, v. 22-23, p. 161, v. 1-4.

47 Ibid., p.163, v.19-20.

48 Luwīs ʿAwaḍ cited by W. Kirpičenko, *Yūsuf Idrīs*, p. 173.

responsibility, one can see at the same time his desire for more knowledge about mankind and his problems, i.e., the desire which might benefit him in the future. At the moment, according to Idrīs, this *ḥakīm*'s temporary withdrawal is necessary. However, the author believes that the society's "doctor" will return equipped with sufficient knowledge to find the truth and put the correct frame on the picture.

Al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn: a quest for a new type of hero-leader

In 1969, Idrīs published the play *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn*[49] (The Striped Ones). With this new work, the author, as usual, surprised both readers and critics. This play, considered by Badawī as one of the most outspoken satires, written during ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir's era, caused a lot of controversy and discussion, and due to its political content, it was never produced on stage.[50] In reading and analysing the play and by examining the scanty critical assessment of it, that is, the studies in Arabic by Muḥammad Barakāt,[51] Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ[52] and Amīr Iskandar,[53] and the brief study in English by Badawī,[54] we notice that the play was neglected by the critics. As Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ actually pointed out, it was simply "rejected" without an attentive look at its content.[55] Why did the censors and some critics consider *al-*

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49 Y. Idrīs, *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*, Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1984.

50 Idrīs's version is that ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir sent Anwar al-Sadāt to inspect two new productions, the play *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn* and a film based on *Mīrāmār*, a novel by Maḥfūz. The presidential emissary judged the play politically offensive, whereas he cleared the cinema production. Interview with Y. Idrīs, May 1978, cited by P.M. Kurpershoek, *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981, p. 32.

51 Muḥammad Barakāt, "Ḥaṣād al-Mawsim al-Masraḥī, *al-Ādāb*, September 1969, pp. 75-76.

52 Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ, "Raᵓy Ākhar fī Masraḥiyyat *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn* ḍidd al-Nuẓum al-Shumūliyya lā ḍidd al-Ishtirākiyya", *al-Masraḥ*, August 1969, pp. 92-96.

53 Amīr Iskandar, "Qiraᵓa li-Masraḥiyyat *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*, Ẓalām Ākhar fī-l-Ẓahīra", *al-Masraḥ*, June 1969, pp. 55-58.

54 M.M. Badawī, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, pp.161-163.

55 Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ, "Raᵓy Ākhar...," p. 93.

Mukhaṭṭaṭīn to be the author's anti-socialist propaganda? Was it really necessary to ban the play from being staged?

We differ with those who rejected the play because they considered it to be an attack on the socialist system[56] and on ʿAbd al-Nāṣir himself and we are inclined to share Muḥammad Barakāt's point of view[57] that, in *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn*, Idrīs attempts to present an answer to his plea in *al-Farāfīr*. At the beginning, it seems that the solution is found, and Idrīs's apparently uncomplicated plan of the "striped world" (i.e., the ideal political and social system categorized by the black and white divisions) might bring happiness to the people. However, surprisingly, by the end of the play, the author revolts against his plan stating that he was mistaken and misled. Should we really see Idrīs's rejection of the "striped world" as a rejection of socialism? Was he really presenting this particular system or had he perhaps a much broader issue in mind?

The play *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn* was published after the "defeat of 1967" (1969), that is, during the time when Arab intellectuals attempted to assess the event, find its causes and try to pull society out of its predicament. Therefore, when judging the play and the author's ideas we must definitely remember this fact. As we might notice in Idrīs's previous works, namely, fictional, journalistic and dramatic, the author is consistently preoccupied with the unresolved conflict between man and society, i.e., between an individual and the social, political and cultural establishment. In *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn*, the author did not abandon this issue. On the contrary, he undertook an effort to discuss it further, shed more light on the matter hoping that will help to "wake up" the people and alert their consciousness to clearly see the problems and mistakes and eventually be born again.

By looking closely at the play's content and studying "all its corners and private laws", we would not hesitate to share Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ's opinion[58] and consider *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn* a rather

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56 Muḥammad Barakāt, "Qabl Rafʿ al-Sitār...", *al-Masraḥ*, January 1966, p. 32.

57 Ibid., p. 33.

58 Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ, "Raʾy Ākhar..," p. 94.

general discussion and an attack on any regime, that is, on any kind of regime which did not truly implement its noble aims. As presented in the play, the beautiful ideals of the "striped people" were never realized and they lived on unworthy slogans only. In reality *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn*, after having taken over, "forgot" about the true implementation of their ideology, and eventually the previous "rotten" and corrupted system began to re-enact itself from behind the mask of new slogans. As Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ emphasized in his study, socialism was not alone to claim its theory could bring happiness to the people and solve all their social problems. There were also other regimes and leaders claiming the same. In *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn*, Idrīs points out clearly that even the greatest idea has to be implemented. Otherwise it will fail as did the plan of black and white, and eventually people's situation will not improve.

According to the playwright, the only correct political system would be one which would let the people enjoy "all the colours of life", that is, a system which would never hamper their dynamism and creativity and ensure the possibility of fulfilling man's individual aims and goals. This is the essence of Idrīs's message and herein lies its importance in the development of post-1967 Egyptian drama. The government's decision to ban the play from the stage was a mistaken one. The author was judged prematurely and, without any obvious reason, deprived of the chance of presenting his stand in the nation-wide debate of the post-1967 period.

When we look closely at the play's content, we may notice that the notion of the ideal political and social regime is not the only issue which captivated the author's mind. There is also another important problem Idrīs focuses on. This is his concept of a hero-leader. A critical assessment of the play indicates that this issue remained rather unnoticed by the critics. Idrīs's portrayal of the hero-leader as it is drawn in a few lines in his previous plays, that is, *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija* and *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* and sketched clearly and more completely in *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn*, certainly deserves more attention and critical analysis.

Many works of Egyptian playwrights of the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s present images of "great" heroes, i.e., brave, strong and devoted leaders who sacrifice for the well-being of their society and fight with determination to free their people from all kinds of oppression, attempting to establish a just political and social order. This concept of a leader, which grew out of the influence of various elements such as Arab popular and literary traditions, glorious Islamic history and Western models, was to a great extent inspired by famous patriotic figures such as ʿArābī Pasha, Muṣṭafā Kāmil, Saʿd Zaghlūl, and later ʿAbd al-Nāṣir.[59] These images of the leaders, as presented by the Egyptian playwrights of the pre-revolutionary and early post-revolutionary drama, definitely bear the influence of Egyptian neo-classical drama with its model of the magnificent hero, the embodiment of the concept of one-person spiritual leader and effective ruler of Egypt such as in the plays of Shawqī, Abāẓa and Bākathīr.

In his search for a contemporary hero-leader, Idrīs attempts to leave behind the inherited concept of the great *zaʿīm* and asks: Who is this leader? What are the qualities he should possess? What are his values and what ideals does he aspire to? Is he a magnificent hero or a simple man with noble ideas?

Idrīs began to sketch a model of his hero-leader in *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt* (1957), when he introduced a poor, simple Egyptian man who, by pure luck, got a chance to devote his efforts and money to the improvement and well-being of his society. The man was honest, enthusiastic, and had a lot of charisma; however he did not succeed. His plan failed because, as the author pointed out in the play, the man neither consulted others on his project, nor realized that the material achievements should be followed by spiritual development and that the new rebuilt society had to maintain close links with its past experiences. In *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, Idrīs presented another hero or rather anti-hero, Saʿd, the leader of the *Fidaʾiyyīn*.

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59 For a discussion of the concept of a leader in Egyptian drama, see: E. Machut-Mendecka, *Wspolczesny dramat egipski* (Egyptian Contemporary Drama), Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers, 1984.

who uncovered his internal fears and weaknesses and thus conveyed the leader's need for self-criticism and self-education. Subsequently, in *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*, the author introduced the issue of the difficult choice and emphasized once again the need for a wise, just and honest leader, who in his actions would always seek the truth and, like a medical doctor, would be able to make a correct diagnosis, cure the contemporary world from all existing ills and free it from evil.

In these three above-mentioned plays, Idrīs only touches upon the problem of the leader and analyzes some of his characteristics. In *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn*, he carries his discussion of the issue further and attempts to present a more complete, "evolutionary" portrait of the contemporary hero-leader.

The three-act play *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn* is a political allegory, it is a "fantastic story" about the secret society of the "Striped People" who, under the leadership of al-Akh (The Brother), establish happiness in the world.

The first act of the play begins in a bleak Beckett-like wasteland where a group of suspicious-looking individuals with strange, comical names, members of a secret organization, are waiting for the arrival of their leader. The Brother, who is already one and a half hours late, finally arrives and descends from the sky in a helicopter. From the beginning, he presents himself as an authoritarian leader who expects blind obedience from his group. Without any explanation for his late arrival, he informs them that that day is the most crucial day in their lives, as they are planning to take over power and go public. Meanwhile, the group is joined by the last of its members, that is, Almāz, a well-known actress who turns up dressed in a tight-fitting garment with black and white stripes. Then, on the command of the Brother, all the members of the society change into similarly striped clothes and head for the nearby theatre.

The second act takes place in the theatre when the Striped People occupy the front stalls and watch the play entitled "The Foundation of the Great Happiness". During the performance of this play within the play, in which many absurd incidents take place, the

Striped People begin to execute their plan. The actress Almāz goes on stage and attacks the show accusing the Foundation of the Great Happiness of fraud and corruption. It is mostly due to her intellectual and physical charms that she and her colleagues manage, in a relatively short period of time, to take over the management of the Foundation, with the Brother ousting the Chairman of the Board of Directors. The Striped People change the name of the foundation into the "Foundation of Real Happiness".

In the third act Idrīs presents us with a picture from one hundred months later. This is the anniversary of the establishment of the Foundation of Real Happiness, that is, the anniversary of the rise to power of the Striped People. From the movie presented to us on the big screen, we learn that the entire globe became governed by the Striped People. Everything and everyone is painted in black and white: people, buses, houses, birds, even children's balloons, are all striped black and white. The whole world seems happy and pretends to be satisfied with the simple black and white order. The movie ends with a huge picture of the hero-leader. Then, Idrīs takes us to the meeting room where we can witness a very strange conversation between the Brother and Almāz. This conversation reveals to us that the architect of the only supposedly happy world is not happy himself. On the contrary, during the last year, he has been plagued by doubts about the truth of his white and black revolution and by the fact that people's conversion has not made them any happier and has not solved their problems. For the first time he doubts his judgment and admits that he was mistaken and misled. Now he sees clearly that the world is really full of colours and is convinced that people should be allowed to choose any colours they want. The Brother shares his views and doubts with his colleagues. However, now that they enjoy power and privileges the Striped People are not ready to obey their leader and follow his new ideas. They even accuse him of reaction, betrayal and reneging on his past revolutionary principles. Having been turned down by his closest people, the Brother decides to go to the street to preach there about his new-found philosophy. that is, the revolution against black and white. When the Brother, dressed in red, goes to a café trying to find new believers, he is suspected of being a

government secret agent and is finally beaten up and taken back by police to the Foundation Headquarters, where he is forced by the Striped People to broadcast an official anniversary message prepared for him on tape. He is physically prevented from telling them what he now truly believes. At this time the previous dictator has to obey the orders and becomes a victim of his own past principles, a mere figurehead kept for the benefit of the corrupt, powerful and privilege-hungry few whom he has himself appointed to positions of power.

Why has the idea of the black and white and its founder failed? Why has the Brother discovered the need to revolt against the system he himself created? Can the play *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn* be regarded as the answer to Farfūr's call for a solution to the problem of the relation between man and the system? Finally, can we sketch Idrīs's portrait of the hero-leader? A close look at the personality of the Brother and the content of the play may bring some answers.

From the first act of the play the Brother (al-Akh) appears to us as a glorious *zaʿīm*, a magnificent hero coming from above as though from the sky. His personality is dictatorial, and he wants people to know him as such in each and every moment:

al-Akh: Who brought the idea that everyone does as he wants... You did not know that our first idea was to discontinue that everyone does as he wants.

Doctor ʿĀrrīq: This is only for security... Only a mistake. This will never be repeated.

al-Akh: This mistake should be corrected immediately![60]

The members of the secret society are completely under his control. He expects absolute obedience from them, he successfully controls their actions, sayings, and thinking:

Farkat Kaʿb: How many is one third?

al-Akh: One third is equal to one.

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60 Y. Idrīs, *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*, p. 14, v. 13, v. 19-23.

All of them: One third is equal to one.

Farkat Kaʿb: How do you expect me to know it by myself?

al-Akh: Shut up.[61]

Furthermore, he is even capable of directing their physical movements:

al-Akh: (to all of them): Come close!

(They have approached him. Then al-Akh pushes Akhū Kalām saying:)
Come close, do not jump on me?..."Come close" means come from far, so you will stand at the nearest distance. Understood?![62]

The members of the secret society work precisely as al-Akh had planned, they have to trust him completely and obey him blindly. They are afraid of him and flatter him in ridiculously exaggerated terms. The Striped People are not allowed to question anything. When one of them demands an explanation for why the leader was late, he ignores him and even imposes undignified punishment.

al-Akh: Now you stand here... Take off your clothes and do not put them on again, until the second part.[63]

The Brother is the sole architect of the plan of the secret society, and he is the only one who decides that their action begins:

al-Akh: Our meeting tonight is not the first... This is a decisive one. It will bring us from underground to the outside world...from the belief we hide in our hearts to the strategy to expose it to all the people who want to believe in it.[64]

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61 Ibid.,p. 14, v. 4, v. 17-20, p. 18, v-7.

62 Ibid., p. 21, v. 18-21, 23-25.

63 Ibid., p. 21, v. 8-10.

64 Ibid., p. 22, v. 21, 23-24, p. 23, v. 1-2.

Al-Akh has been very lucky to have with him persons such as Almāz, Doctor ᶜĀrrīq, Farkat Kaᶜb, Akhū Kalām and others who are completely faithful and who accept, without hesitation, his ideology and repeat his words as their own:

Doctor ᶜĀrrīq: Everyone acts as he wants and as the result of this (we have) chaos, destruction, wars, quarrels, stupidity and ignorance...

Akhū Kalām: The world must be planned. Human beings must plan everything, even themselves. Everything should be clear, understood and sane. White is white and black is black.[65]

These people are ready to go with his idea to the end:

Farkat Kaᶜb: I will not relax till I achieve everything in my brain. All the world must be black and white.[66]

According to the Brother's vision, in a relatively short period of time, the Striped People carry out their plan. Due to the action presented by Idrīs's revolution, the whole world became similarly striped, i.e., black and white. Everything in the ideological and material aspects of life was planned, organized, and categorized simply according to black and white lines. However, the revolution has remained in slogans only. In reality, as discussed by Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ,[67] the changes in the system were slight, mostly in name (the Foundation of Happiness had changed its name from Great into Real), the previous structure and employees, even high officials were kept. Therefore, the old system began to act under the mask of a new one and the people continued to take advantage of the system running after power, money and privileges. The same thing happened with the members of the secret society. While enjoying new careers and posts they forgot completely the ideas they had preached, they forgot about happiness for other people:

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65 Ibid., p. 23, v. 7-8, 10-13.

66 Ibid., p. 23, v. 18-20.

67 Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ, "Raʾy Ākhar...," p. 94.

Doctor ᶜĀrrīq (bringing to the meeting a bottle of whisky): Who wants whisky?

The Director: It is good with a Cuban cigar.

Farkat Kaᶜb: And Finnish cheese.[68]

They became so attached to their new privileges that they were unable to notice that the new system did not make people any happier than before and thus did not solve any of their existing problems. For their own convenience, the Striped People forgot about everything and they only repeated their slogans. What happened, then, to their leader?

As we can see from the third act during the year preceding the anniversary, the Brother had changed considerably. The long dialogue with Almāz, his best employee and friend, clearly exposes these changes. He was not happy with the system he himself had created; he wanted to revolt against it:

al-Akh: I am fed up... with all these nights... I have spent by myself talking... Sometimes I get up from my sleep frightened, and I feel that I am a liar . I see one thing, and I say something else. I am not like this. I preached black and white because I believed in it.

Almāz: And now?

al-Akh: I see that we have to revolt against black and white. I believe that always we have to be advanced. We need a new revolution.[69]

These new ideas of al-Akh were not approved by his colleagues, they absolutely refused to revolt against black and white:

Doctor ᶜĀrrīq: ... We all have one idea. We have become friends on one path. Now you are the one who has betrayed us and who wants to leave this path.[70]

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68 Y. Idrīs, *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*, p. 85, v. 14-17.

69 Ibid., p. 74, v. 20-21, p. 75, v. 4-7, 10-12.

70 Ibid., p. 87, v. 2-4.

Having been rejected by his own people, al-Akh went to preach his new revolution in the street. He was also rejected there, even beaten up and later brought by the police to the Foundation Headquarters. Now, the previous leader and dictator had to listen to his lesson:

> The President: Didn't what happened to you make you think?... You went to the people to tell the truth and they refused you. The whole world has rejected you because the whole world is striped. There is not even one hole in the middle for any colour.[71]

The Brother has become a victim of his own strategy. Now his black and white system, which left no place for human creativity, originality, free thinking, fantasy, sensitivity and pure, honest feelings, has turned against him. The people whom the Brother himself created became indifferent, even hostile to his new ideas. Our leader realized that the truly happy life of the society he sought could not be categorized simply according to the black and white lines. The Brother left alone was unable to fight or to change anything and he became a puppet in the hands of the people whom he himself had given power and privileges. They forced him to read the anniversary message prepared on tape and while he was protesting they prevented him physically from telling the people the truth.

What is the main message of the play *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn*? What final touches can we give to our "evolutionary" sketch of Idrīs's portrayal of the contemporary hero-leader? The play presents the leader as a sensitive, honest man who would understand that all members of contemporary society are different and all of them should be equally allowed to express their ideas, to show their potential, originality and creativity and that it is necessary for a leader to listen to, and respect, the voices of the people. Being a leader in today's society requires a great deal of responsibility. Therefore, as Idrīs points out in *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn*, the contemporary leader should never forget that he is also a simple man who can doubt, and make mistakes, who sometimes does not know how to act, decide or answer, and who

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71 Ibid., p. 94, v. 10, 12-15.

should always consult with the people and constantly seek more knowledge about human nature, the world and its problems. The Brother explains this as follows:

al-Akh: That was my view but now...I have another one. I need the truth...I do not know...

Almāz: This is the first time I have heard that from you. We used always to have answers from you.

al-Akh: Except for this one. I cannot know if people are happy or not.[72]

Contemporary societies are in a deep ideological crisis. There is a strong need to listen attentively to the voice of Idrīs's Farfūr to find a real solution. We are "going round and round", and we have to get out of this situation. Each society needs a good guide, that is, a wise, honest, sensitive and experienced leader for whom the truth would remain the most important issue.

While presenting his model of a contemporary hero-leader in *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn* the author dealt us a big dose of optimism and showed deep faith in the good will of man. Although his leader did not succeed in truly carrying out his plan, he did succeed in another way. Idrīs's leader discovered the nature of his mistake and, through his self-education and re-thinking of the plan, possibly found a more correct new direction. Being a great *zaʿīm*, he had enough courage to declare a new revolution, a revolution against his own principles. The power of black and white slogans did not allow him to succeed this time. However, his insistence on the new ideology and commitment to it indicates that the future belongs to his new idea, the idea of "flying colours". His road might be laden with various obstacles; he might temporarily jeopardize his efforts but strength and confidence are with him.

Idrīs's sketch of the hero-leader remains incomplete. The sudden death of the author in August 1991 ended his creative search. In his recent journalistic writing, he often mentioned

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72 Ibid., p. 73, v. 20,22, p. 70, v. 14, 24.

the Arab world's expectation of a new leader and his deep belief in his appearance. Idrīs had faith that the Egyptian (Arab) world would again produce a great leader.

At present, all we can say is that the coming days may reveal some hidden and unpublished book or notes and that we may yet be able to add the finishing touches to the author's unfinished sketch.

Form, style and language: striking a balance between the Egyptian sources and Western influences.

As mentioned previously Idrīs's experiments with drama, and especially its form during the 1960s, caused a lot of controversy. His call to create a new, genuine Egyptian form of drama and theatre was misunderstood and rejected by most of the critics. They even accused the author of artistic dishonesty and attempted to prove that Idrīs's plays carried few Egyptian features and were composed under the obvious influence of Goldoni, Pirandello, Ionesco, Beckett and Brecht. Muḥammad Manḍūr received the plays with resentment.[73] ᶜAlī al-Raʾī went to the extreme[74]; for him drama never existed in Ancient Egypt and all world theatre was formed out of Western influences. Rashād Rushdī demonstrated a better understanding[75] of Idrīs's idea that Egyptian drama had its own ancient roots and also offered a defence. According to Rushdī, Idrīs's experiments are like a game which could be called "Egyptian drama". In reality, this "Egyptian drama", is nothing but *a commedia dell' arte* or *qaragöz* in a new dimension. Therefore, he points out, most of the critics see in Idrīs's works the dominance of Western influences. However, Rushdī emphasizes that Idrīs is a twentieth century author. It is obvious then that he could not agree to be left out of the literary currents of his era because he would not agree to abandon his own tradition.

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73 N. Faraj, *Yūsuf Idrīs wa-l-Masraḥ al-Miṣrī al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo: Dār al-Maᶜārif, 1976, p. 106.

74 Ibid., p. 114.

75 Ibid., p. 106.

Therefore, Rushdī tends to consider Idrīs's experiments as an attempt to explore Egyptian tradition creatively. Nadiyā Faraj seems to share[76] Rushdī's opinion and offers further clarification. She maintains that with regard to Idris's literary work, we always have to take into account his artistic temper. Idrīs is a fast explorer and constantly searches for new literary actions and reactions. He seeks new ways and means of expression and he writes quickly and spontaneously. As for the critics, they do the same. Their opinions are usually also "fast-produced" and touch upon Idrīs's works superficially without truly attempting to grasp the "very" essence of the author's message.

We certainly agree with Nādiya Faraj. We have already examined the content of *al-Fārāfīr*, *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* and *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*. Now, we will look closely at the form of these plays trying to show their main features. Is this an Egyptian unique *Idrīsiyya*[77] form or is it composed only out of Western literary and artistic influences?

On reading and analysing *al-Fārāfīr*, *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* and *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*, a few striking features immediately capture our attention. First, Idrīs creates a unique character for his drama, i.e., a clown-fool-type personality of Farfūr and uses his mask to speak from behind it plainly and openly about important human concerns. Second, in his plays the author definitely crosses from realism to the vanguard form of the theatre of the absurd (*masraḥ al-lāmᶜaqūl*). Third, the dramatic form of Idrīs's theatre from the 1950s is replaced by the epic form which is frankly didactic and uses the play's action to show the audience the "correct" path. Fourth, in the three works discussed, the author introduces a play within a play. Idrīs uses this device to make the audience aware that the two orders of reality can coexist in time The Egyptian audience, in fact, always lives two realities: the one of the present and the one that potentially could be theirs. Fifth, one also notices in the plays the creative influence of surrealism.

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76 Ibid., pp. 93-163.

77 This word is used by Ramsīs Yūnan in his article "al-Fārāfīr", *al-Kātib*, June 1964, p. 53.

Some critics see in Farfūr a personality who shares a lot of affinity with the characters from *commedia dell' arte*, *qaragöz*, or *kabuki*, and therefore they are not convinced that this is truly an Egyptian clown. Idrīs absolutely insists on Farfūr's "Egyptianness"[78] saying that this character is the true example of the Egyptian hero. According to the author, Farfūr is the product of Egyptian society, and the Egyptian people are eager to gather around him and listen to his smart sayings. They feel that Farfūr's voice is not only his own, it is also everybody's voice, it is the voice of Egyptian society. This is a voice which would embolden people who are shy, a voice which would criticize anyone without hesitation regardless of his social status.

While writing his plays, Idrīs knew well that Egypt's political situation during the 1960s would not allow him to present his ideas openly. The author needed then to create a clown-type personality and hide his own voice. Only a mask could guarantee Idrīs's freedom of artistic expression.

How did the author create his free-man and how did he employ him in his plays? The author describes Farfūr precisely in the stage directions:

> Farfūr enters making a lot of noise and commotion. He wears a very old and peculiar suit which is a combination of the apparel of acrobats, circus clowns and puppets. He is dark or darkish in colour and has white powder or flour on his face (or a special mask). On his head he has an old fez or a pointed hat that looks like a fez. It is essential that the actor playing Farfūr should have in his own private life a talent for making fun of people or making them laugh.[79]

Farfūr looks modest, his body is light and slim. However, his personality is full of energy and unique power. He is like *'Ifrīt*. His mind is brilliant and his tongue is sharp. Farfūr always knows what to say. His dialogues with the Master, presented already in the

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78 Y. Idrīs cited by Ra'fat al-Duwayrī, "Arlīkīnū wa Farfūr", *al-Majalla*, March 1966, p. 115.

79 Y. Idrīs, *al-Farāfīr*, p. 66, v. 2-8.

first section of this chapter, clearly reveal his power, the hidden real potential of an Egyptian man. Farfūr's language is logical and simple, his satire biting and his irony bitter:

Author: My honour, Farfūr!

Farfūr: It's up to you. An author's honour is like today's matches, you strike them ten times and in the end they don't light. It's up to you. [80]

Idrīs said that he would like Farfūr to play a leading role in his *masraḥ*[81]. There he is. Farfūr is a central personality, the pivot of *al-Fārāfīr*; he is the one who controls the dramatic situation. Then, he comes back in *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* to hide himself behind the mask of Ṣifr, the nurse. At the beginning of the play, the performance of Ṣifr does not impress us. He appears to be soft-headed, resourceless, incompetent and unable to understand even simple matters:

Doctor: ...What is the name of the patient?

Ṣifr: What is the name of the patient?

Muḥammad I: Muḥammad III.

Doctor: What is the name of his father?...

Ṣifr: What is the name of his father?...

Doctor: Anyway, where do you live?

Ṣifr: Where do you live?

Doctor (to Ṣifr): We've said shut up!

Ṣifr: Yes, sir.[82]

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80 Ibid., p. 69, v. 14-16.

81 Ra'fat al-Duwayrī, "Arlīkīnū wa Farfūr," p. 126.

82 Y. Idrīs, *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*, p. 18, v. 2-7, p. 11-14.

However, all this is only a mask or an illusion. Idrīs uncovers the real face of Ṣifr when he put Farfūr behind his mask. Ṣifr undergoes an artistic metamorphosis. He is bright, intelligent and able to grasp easily the essence of illogical and complicated problems:

Muḥammad: ...I should do things one hundred percent guaranteed or I will keep on doing things you call wrong.

Ṣifr: Does anybody, my son, prefer to do wrong just because other people do that? Just because nobody tried before to do right. Acording to what law do things like this happen?[83]

The echoes of Farfūr sound again in Idrīs's subsequent play, i.e., *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*. Here he speaks behind the mask of a mysterious Ṭaᶜmiyya and comments through aphorisms on the development of dramatic events. For example:

Ṭaᶜmiyya: The builder goes up, the digger goes down. Life is on the palm of a devil. His name is Human Being.[84]

He also enters the personality of the Brother to change this "great" and over-confident hero into a simple man who can admit that he has made a mistake:

Al-Akh: I see that we have to revolt against black and white. I believe that we should always be advanced. We need a new revolution. Each time I see the world becoming black and white I feel that I am committing a crime... The world was in my brain and I was imagining that my brain was bigger than the world.

Almāz: And now?

Al-Akh: I know that the world is bigger.[85]

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83 Ibid., p. 142 v. 22-24, p. 143, v. 1-3.

84 Y.Idrīs, *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*, p. 11, v. 16-17.

85 Ibid., p.75, v. 11-14, 21-23, p. 76, v. 1.

The Farfūr presented by Idrīs in the plays from the 1960s embodies all the best features of the Egyptian man and symbolizes his desire for freedom and a better future. His soul is purely Egyptian, so is the environment he talks about. At the time of the creation of Farfūr, Idrīs was not isolated from the influence of European and world literatures. Therefore, his hero although possibly born in *al-sāmir*, grew up in a composite environment. That is why, Farfūr shares certain features with the characters from *commedia dell' arte*, *qaragöz*, *kabuki*, and the theatre of Brecht. Farfūr plays a double role in Idrīs's drama. He is a fool or clown but at the same time he is a living spirit and the consciousness of the Egyptian society. He makes people laugh or he upsets them, he criticizes them and attempts to correct their mistakes, but he first forces them to think, and think again, and he encourages them to find a new philosophy of life.

There is no doubt that he is a unique representative of Egyptian tradition and modernity. He lets us know the *ego per sei* of the Egyptian (Arab) world. We are convinced to say that Idrīs created Farfūr as an embodiment of the best features of Egyptian man: "Farfūriyya, with laughter as its prayer"[86].

In the 1960s Idrīs thematically remained a realist closely attached to his country's political, social and cultural problems. However, one may easily notice that the form of his plays does not fit into the realistic framework. All the three plays belong to the theatre of the absurd (*masraḥ al-lāmᶜaqūl*). Their formal structure is totally different from that of Idrīs's plays of the 1950s. The unities of time, place and action are not preserved. The number of characters is reduced. Things happen mostly in dialogues which are composed of concise carefully-worded sentences. The author refuses to build the action to a climax, draw a psychological picture of his heroes or develop scenic action. Instead he displays his predilection for pure nonsense, black humour, parody, scandal or sensationalism.

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86 Ramsīs Yūnan, "*al-Fārāfīr*", p. 52.

Compared to the plays of the 1950s, Idrīs's plays of the 1960's let the stage directions play a much greater role. Aside from its usual function to introduce the cast, describe the setting and provide a direct outlet for the characters, *didascalia* become an integral part of the action. For example.

in *al-Fārāfīr:*

Author (addressing the audience): ... Allow me to come closer to you. (He leaves the rostrum and approaches the front of the stage. The audience discovers that despite the elegance of his upper half, he is wearing very short pants showing his long, wiry legs and his shoes with no socks. When everyone laughs:)

With all appreciation for your noble feeling and your boundless joy...I see no reason for your laughter...(Loud music, indicating the entrance of an actor, is heard. The Author points to where it comes from:) Wait there, Farfūr...I haven't quite finished. (Addressing the audience again:) Tonight, brothers and sisters, I'd like to introduce the biggest, the greatest...(Music again. The author turns furiously towards the entrance...He remains silent for a moment...As soon as he turns around and tries to open his mouth, music is heard again. He turns quickly towards the door and says in despair:) Well then...no way. Find another author.[87]

in *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭūn:*

(The sun rises in red, like a guest who came to the sleeping world) Akhū Kalām (addressing the audience:) Wake up!... You want to be born again!

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87 Y. Idrīs, *al-Fārāfīr*, p. 65, v. 2-24.

> (While he talks another figure, Farkat Kaʿb, enters the stage. He wears elegant clothes. He comes from the left side as if he hasn't heard anything... He smiles... His smile does not express happiness but rather a big surprise...While Akhū Kalām keeps on talking, the light changes... Farkat Kaʿb comes to the front. Akhū Kalām continues:) Wake up, you people![88]

and in *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*:

> (Muḥammad III starts to panic and moves nervously...The Doctor looks at him as if he would like to make a decision:) In general (Then he looks at him again:) you have more chances there. This is not a death sentence.[89]

As illustrated by the above quotations the utterances of the characters' words are interrupted by shorter and longer insertions of the *didascalia*. These insertions contain the author's stage directions, picture the acoustic effects and even suggest the possible reactions of the audience.

The changes which have occurred in the formal structure of Idrīs's drama in the 1960s are not limited solely to the features discussed above. His basic concept of drama has changed. The dramatic form of the 1950s is replaced by an epic form, and there we may detect the influence of Brecht. Idrīs is a committed twentieth-century writer, an *engagé*. Therefore, he is not merely updating his drama but attempting to change the social function of his theatre. The author does not want to awaken our emotions. Instead, he induces us to develop critical reasoning and formulate an analysis of the events taking place in his drama. Idrīs wants his audience to see the action as already in the past in order to view it with the calm detachment evoked by his breaking the scenic illusion. For example, in *al-Fārāfīr*, the author appeals directly to the audience:

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88 Y. Idrīs, *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*, p. 5. v. 15, p. 6, v. 1, 9-23.

89 Y. Idrīs, *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*, p. 38, v. 22-24, p. 39, v. 1-3.

Author: Ladies and gentlemen, ... We are in a theatre and a theatre is a big celebration... It is a big family reunion... You will do some acting and the actors will do some spectating. Why not?[90]

In *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*, in order to break the scenic illusion Idrīs introduces a number of aphorisms delivered by an enigmatic personality, namely, Ṭaᶜmiyya:

Ṭaᶜmiyya: How lucky is the one who benefits and gives benefit. How miserable is someone who loves but is not loved.[91]

Idrīs's aim is to lead the readers and audience not to feel intensely but to judge critically, to see the character's actions determined not by the fate of human nature but by social circumstances. This form of drama aims not to drain the people emotionally; instead, it is designed to simulate them intellectually, crystallize and strengthen their determination to bring about reforms.

One of the most important features of Idrīs's plays from the 1960s is the didactic aim of his drama. The author presents man as a tiny and insignificant element in the huge and hostile *apparatus* of our civilization, an element manipulated by the actually uncontrolled governing forces of this *apparatus*. Idrīs's drama, similar to a circus, demonstrates all the "games" of our time. It refrains from psychology and gives examples of critical objectivism and change. Idrīs's plays are "open", "provocative" and "unfinished" as if they are only an "introduction". The author calls upon his readers and audience to continue the "writing".

Idrīs wants the audience to participate in his plays. As he has explained in the article "Naḥwa Masraḥ Miṣrī", he aims to offer them a part in the dramatic event. This is in accordance with the author's notion of *ḥālat al-tamasruḥ*[92], that is,an attempt to eliminate the

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90 Y. Idrīs, *al-Farāfīr*, p. 61, v. 6, 9-10, 12, 15-16.

91 Y. Idrīs, *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*, p. 13, v. 9-11.

92 Y. Idrīs, "Naḥwa Masraḥ Miṣrī", *al-Farāfīr*, pp. 7-10.

distance between the stage and home and create a sort of performance similar to that of a happening.

The long-term influence of surrealism has been enormous all over the world. Apart from poetry, it has affected fiction, the cinema, the theatre, painting and sculpture. A great many writers have continued to explore the territories of the conscious and semi-conscious mind; delving into and exposing the "private chaos" and the "social disorder".

It is no surprise that the surrealistic spirit of revolt against the existing political and social order suited well the artistic temper of Idrīs. The surrealist desire to free reason and explore the unconscious suited Idrīs's temperament. In his writings he always resisted the negative outcomes of our civilization and attempted to create new ideas in an original structure. Surrealism affected the artistic images created by Idrīs in his short stories and had great impact on his drama.

In the plays of the 1960s the presented world is not conceived in accordance with a traditional way of seeing things. Idrīs depicts this world in mysterious and unusual perspectives of feeling and thought. Dramatic events are nothing but a "mysterious circus" with their supposedly real and unreal "acrobats". This is a surrealist fancy-dress *bal à masquerade*, containing symbols of good and evil hidden under the various masks of the participating personalities. This is a drama of an unconventional and rebellious mysterium. It is a revolt not only against the existing Egyptian (Arab) realities but also against all rules and norms of human communication. This drama is an artistic manifestation of the author's desire to liberate man and to "create by negation". For example,

in *al-Farāfīr*:

> Farfūr: I don't have any role to play in that play. Farfūr! Again? Over my dead body... or somebody else's body, anyway. Forget it, man! That was a long time ago.[93]

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93 Y. Idrīs, *al-Farāfīr*, p. 132, v. 10-13.

in *al Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*:

> Muḥammad II: I do not know how to live in this world... I am not a hero to change it and I don't accept that it will change me.[94]

and in *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*:

> Al-Akh: We have to revolt against black and white... We need a new revolution.[95]

There is no doubt that Western drama had a visible influence on the form of *al-Fārāfīr*, *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya* and *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*. Idrīs never refrained from being fascinated by foreign literatures. On the contrary, he wanted Western ideas and artistic forms to be explored creatively and to enrich Egyptian (Arab) drama and theatre. He also called upon Egyptian writers not to forget their own roots and tradition and to discover them anew. Idrīs's drama, and especially his plays of the 1960s, constitute fine examples of creative artistic works inspired by various influences.

Ionesco called the playwright's creative process an "exploratory venture". However, at the same time, the playwright should never pretend that he discovered an "unknown land". According to Ionesco, the vanguard drama should not search for centuries-old and forgotten theatrical ideas in their purest form but should aim to "discover anew" the things already known:

> We have to break stereotypes. We have to tear away from narrow traditionalism, and discover anew the only true and living tradition.
>
> The theatre of the absurd is nothing but the *commedia dell' arte* of nihilism, Grand Guignol of the world of paradoxes.[96]

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94 Y. Idrīs, *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*, p. 147, v. 13-14.

95 Y. Idrīs, *al-Mukhaṭṭāṭīn*, p. 75, v. 11-12.

96 E. Ionesco cited by M.Berthold, *Weltgeschichte des Theaters*, Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1968, p. 534.

When we remember critics accusing Idrīs of being under the dominant influence of the West, a question immediately arises: What is the point of measuring the degree of Western influence in Idrīs?

Such an analysis may lead us to rather wrong conclusions. Idrīs's plays written during the 1960s, in spite of their minor defects (especially in the case of *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*) are examples of an original Egyptian drama created by a unique and concerned Egyptian mind. They are both a chronicle of the times and a synthesis of artistic passions, intentions and influences.

Chapter IV
Between Fantasy and Reality

During the 1970s a lot of socio-political changes took place in Egypt. These changes manifested themselves primarily in the "health-giving revolution" (October War of 1973) and the policy of *infitāḥ*[1] (open doors). These events confirmed that all the values crystallized on the basis of ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir's revolution did not stand the test of time. The ideals of the 1952 revolution became out-of-date and unsuitable for the actual needs of Egyptian society.

The Arab world crisis brought about by the "disaster of 1967" and intensified by ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir's death in 1970, caused the intellectuals to experience an ideological emptiness. The old values were rejected and the new ones not shaped yet. The unclarified policy of Anwar Sādāt was not promising truly optimistic changes. The Egyptian intellectuals, then, for the second time (after the political chaos of the 1950s) were missing a base, a reference point, which could help them to assess actual events. This lack of a point of reference was actually the source of the decline in the cultural life of that period. The intellectual crisis was also intensified by the total disintegration and disorganization of the cultural institutions.

All these factors affecting Egyptian culture in general had a negative impact on the development of drama and theatre[2]. During the theatrical season 1971-1972 the theatres still presented dramas by known authors, such as Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, Nuᶜmān ᶜĀshūr, ᶜAlī Sālim, Rashād Rushdī, Ṣalāḥ ᶜAbd al-Ṣabūr. However, during the subsequent seasons the Egyptian theatre had less and less to offer. The number of Arabic plays significantly decreased. Instead, the repertoire was filled with translations of world drama which were reminiscent of

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1 Sādāt's policy of free enterprise, a reaction against the Arab socialism of ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir. For a discusson see, for example : A. Goldschmidt, *Modern Egypt*, Boulder, Colorado : Westview Press, 1988, pp. 146-149.

2 For a discussion on Egyptian drama and theatre in the 1970s see : Fārūq ᶜAbd al-Qādir, *Izdihār wa Saqūt al-Masraḥ al-Miṣrī*, Cairo : Dār al-Fikr al-Muᶜāṣir, 1979 and E. Machut-Mendecka, *Wspolczesny dramat egipski lat 1870-1975* (Egyptian Contemporary Drama 1870-1975), Warsaw : Polish Scientific Publishers, 1984.

translation-adaptations of the European plays of the 1950s. The government's interest in drama seemed to be on the wane and with the public stage becoming silent, the commercial theatre once more reasserted itself. The privatization promoted by the *infitāḥ* policy helped private theatres to extend their influence, i.e., to use better stages, to employ known actors and to ensure regular attending audience.

The repertoire of the commercial stage was based on one common pattern. As for the form, it was limited to comedy and musicals. The content was dominated by trivial social criticism of commonly known annoyances of every day Egyptian life, such as the housing crisis, various crimes and offences and economic dirty businesses. In the 1970s this commercial theatre actually began to take over the Egyptian stage. Here we observe an interaction between various elements, such as the European tradition, the native folk tradition, commercial values and high artistic ambitions.

The lack of plays which could meet the requirements of the national stage became an obstacle to its development. A symptom of the decline in theatrical life can be seen in the 1974 change of the title of the state-sponsored leading theatre monthly *al-Masraḥ*, to *al-Sīnamā wa-l-Masraḥ*[3] (Cinema and Stage), a cheaper, more glossy magazine with the theatre section relegated to a handful of pages towards the end of each issue. Gone were the serious articles on dramatists and theatre matters, gone were the lengthy reviews on theatre productions. Instead, one finds gossip and brief commentaries on theatrical events.

There is no doubt that in the 1970s the Egyptian theatre was passing through a crisis. Since many of the leading figures in the theatrical movement belonged to the left, they could not view with equanimity the change of the official policy under Sādāt. Some of them emigrated to other Arab countries or elsewhere; others, like Shawqī ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm and Luṭfī al-Khūlī turned away from theatre to other genres. After 1971 Rashād Rushdī abandoned

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3 M.M. Badawī, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, p. 229.

writing plays. With the death of Mikhā'il Rūmān (1973) the Egyptian theatre lost another creative playwright.

Although drama, like fiction and poetry, experienced decreasing writers' activity many writers continued to write for the theatre. Amongst them were: Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, Nuᶜmān ᶜĀshūr, Saᶜd al-Dīn Wahba, ᶜAlī Sālim, Alfred Faraj, Maḥmūd Diyāb, Ṣalāḥ ᶜAbd al-Ṣabūr, ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī and Najīb Surūr. Although their plays remain within the sphere of post-revolutionary dramatic tradition, each writer focuses on a different aspect of it and tends to develop his own unique perspective. Despite the playwright's artistic efforts, the Egyptian drama of the 1970s and 1980s loses its dynamism, originality and becomes only an echo of the creative drama of the 1960s. However, Egyptian drama and theatre fight for survival and struggle to maintain their past legacy.

During the 1970s and 1980s Idrīs wrote only two plays, *al-Jins al-Thālith* (The Third Sex, 1970) and *al-Bahlawān* (The Clown, 1982). Although their content to a great extent remains within the sphere of fantasy, these two plays should be considered as important "documents" from these difficult periods in Egyptian history.

Al-Jins al-Thālith: hoping for "light" and a better future

In his plays from the 1950s and 1960s, Idrīs touches upon a number of important political, social and cultural issues. He also discusses general human concerns and attempts to plunge into the psychology of man. Although his plays contain problems, hidden ideas and reflections, they are still relatively easy to read and their symbols not too difficult to decipher. What really aids an analysis of these plays is their close attachment to the Egyptian world of reality. In Idrīs's play, *al-Jins al-Thālith*[4] (The Third Sex, 1970), the situation is quite different. After reading and analyzing the play, it becomes clear that here the author is attempting to withdraw from the realistic framework. Instead, he engages in science-fiction

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4 Y. Idrīs, *al-Jins al-Thālith*, Cairo : Maktabat Miṣr, n.d.

aiming to create an ambiguous symbolism, the interpretation of which requires a considerable effort.

The action of *al-Jins al-Thālith*[5] takes place in two different worlds, that is, in the real one and in the imaginative world of science-fiction. The play begins in Cairo, in the laboratory of Doctor Adam, a young talented microbiologist who, assisted by Nāra, works on an experiment with DNA. He is trying to discover a life serum that will act as an antidote to the death serum he has already discovered. While busy with his experiment, Doctor Adam hears an irresistible female voice which forces him to go to ʿAtaba Square. He leaves the laboratory accompanied by ʿAshmāwī, his driver, and he follows the voice.

Doctor Adam spends some time on the ʿAtaba Square but he finds nobody there he can talk to. He hears the people and calls for help but unfortunately nobody can see or hear him. Finally, this mysterious power which has overcome him completely "chains" Adam to a bench. Then, he is approached by ʿAshmāwī who invites him to the "car of the future", a 1975 model (the play was written in 1970). They go to a desert where ʿAshmāwī leaves him hungry and thirsty for a few days. Subsequently, Adam finds himself in a beautiful garden full of women-trees who receive him dancing and singing. They say: "She wants you!" One of these trees, the tamarix tree, attempts to seduce him. However, the tree is "punished" for her behaviour and turned into a dry piece of wood. Adam, overcome by his desire to find the mysterious Her, continues his journey.

The second act brings Adam to the "protected city" (*al-madīna al-maḥrūsa*), a utopian world where She supposedly lives. Adam meets strange, hybrid creatures there. From one of them, i.e., the result of cross-breeding a dog with a sheep, Adam learns about an elderly scientist who lives in a secret castle and conducts various experiments involving different animals, plants and materials of all kinds. Adam fears that he may be the scientist's next "guinea-pig". Subsequently, he meets another mysterious creature exuding the smell of

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5 The plot of the play is based on Idrīs's short story "Hiya" which was published in *al-Majalla*, August 1970, pp. 80-83.

jasmine. Adam is surrounded by a utopian world, a happy world where willingness becomes action and feeling becomes existence, where he can fly whenever he wishes. Without any effort, then, Adam takes off and together with the Jasmine Being flies over the utopian city. They hear beautiful music, voices of joy and happiness. The inhabitants of the city sing Adam's praises. He seems to be a very important person to them.

Finally, Adam reaches the mysterious castle and has a chance to talk with the elderly scientist. This man is the only human-being in the "protected city". He has no intention of making any scientific experiments involving Adam. Instead, the old man reveals to him some important information about this utopian world, the world of morally superior beings. For centuries these beings, related to Angels, have come down to Earth as prophets, geniuses, artists and poets to save the descendants of Cain from evil. Now this great race of beings is about to disappear. There is only one of them left, and it is this mysterious She. In order to save this superior world She should marry, because of her great affection, a man who will also be in love with Her. Together they will bring to life a new race of human-beings, i.e. the third kind (*al-jins al-thālith*). This "third kind" of human-being is the only hope of saving our existing world from plunging into an abyss of wars and hatred. The old man also reveals to Adam that, because of his deep involvement in human genetic research, he has been chosen to become the father of the "third kind". Adam is predestinated for this important mission because he belongs to the sixth generation of people, from which will be born the crucial seventh one, i.e., the generation of geniuses. Adam is terrified by this news:

Adam: Me? Who said that I am the smartest and the best?

Scientist: We are not looking for the smartest or the best. We are looking for the one who will "produce" the smartest and the best children.

Adam: Very strange? How will this "intermarriage" happen?

Scientist: This must be done in the highest stage of love...

Adam: The matter of love is not in our hands.

Scientist: I do not know how this will happen but we have to succeed. This is the last chance for humanity and a chance for the third kind.[6]

Suddenly, Adam sees a flash of an ominous yellow light. It is a sign that She has disappeared. Her absence causes sadness and despair in the whole city. The elderly scientist dies. ʿAshmāwī drives Adam back to his laboratory.

The third act of the play describes Adam's difficult return to his world of reality. Now Doctor Adam seems to be a completely different person. He has lost enthusiasm for his research. Instead, he is preoccupied with She and how to find Her. The laboratory is visited by Hilda, a beautiful Swedish lady. For a moment Adam thinks that Hilda is that mysterious She he is looking for. However, it cannot be because Adam does not feel that he loves her. Hilda leaves. Adam is in despair thinking that he has missed a chance of marrying this woman, in other words, he has missed his last chance to save the world.

However, in the fourth act, persuaded by his assistant Nāra, Doctor Adam resumes his scientific experiment with DNA. It seems that this time he is very close to a successful result. Although he is almost sure that he really has discovered a life serum, the liquid injected into a dead rabbit cannot bring the animal back to life. Doctor Adam is shocked. This time he is not capable of coping with his failure. Nāra, his assistant, who has been patient, supportive and understanding up until this moment, gets extremely angry. Her feelings explode. She accuses Adam of being selfish, weak, unable to love and make sacrifices for that love. Because she has given up all hope of Adam ever discovering that she is that sole survivor, Nāra decides on a final blow. She injects herself with the death serum. Adam is in despair. Only now does he realize that Nāra is that mysterious She he has been looking for, that she is the one whom

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6 Y. Idrīs, *al-Jins al-Thālith*, p. 64, v. 3-13.

he loves and wants to marry. Then, in a sudden epiphany he conceives of a new idea for creating a life serum, i.e., by dissolving a death serum liquid. This new life serum proves to be successful. Nāra is brought back to life and they are both united in love, announcing that the time has come to breed a new race of men, that is, the "third kind" (*al-jins al-thālith*).

The play *al-Jins al-Thālith* was performed in 1971 on the National Stage in Cairo and met with a rather lukewarm reception. The critical assessment of that work is practically limited to one long discussion of the content by Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ.[7] While the plays from the 1960s, and especially *al-Fārāfīr*, caused a lot of controversy and produced a rich critical review, it seems that in the case of *al-Jins al-Thālith* the critics were silent. Why did the scholars, except for Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ, neglect the play? Was *al-Jins al-Thālith* rejected or simply difficult to assess?

When we look at the content of the play, we may say that the relatively difficult interpretation of Idrīs's hidden messages could have caused the silence.

As Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ pointed out, Idrīs likes encounters with new ideas and new forms and he always strikes his reader with something unexpected.[8] The same happens in *al-Jins al-Thālith* , where the author moves away from politics and invites us to his imaginative world of pure fantasy. We witness the fantastic adventures in the mysterious land of strange hybrid creatures and together with Adam, we "fly" to the utopian city to "find ourselves" there. Finally, we are pleased to learn that the unusual love story presented in the play has a happy ending.

Why did the playwright introduce science-fiction in *al-Jins al-Thālith*?

Science-fiction literature which appeared during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries was born out of civilization's fascination with modern science and technology promoted by modernism. However, this initial admiration did not last long. In the

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7 Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ, "Masraḥiyya *al-Jins al-Thālith* (Irādat al-Ḥubb wa-l-Hayā fī Mughāmara maᶜ al-Ḥāḍir wa-l- Mustaqbal)," *al-Ādāb*, May 1971, pp. 15-16, 92-96.

8 Ibid., p. 15.

second half of our century, and especially in the 1960s, when the technocrats were still admiring newer and newer scientific discoveries, the foresight of the humanists told them to awaken people's consciousness and warn them against these so-called "great achievements". Science-fiction writers began then to express their frustrations, distrusts, anxieties and concerns about the possible unexpected and uncontrolled results of this scientific and technological race. The development of a super-science contrary to humanistic concerns faced a fundamental reassessment of human values. Many writers, Idrīs among them, raised the question of man's place in this new technological situation, and his resistance to the potential dangers he might face in the future.

Idrīs's escape into the world of science-fiction seems to be the result of various factors. 1967 was not only a setback for the Arab World but also Idrīs's personal "disaster" as well. The author suffered from chronic depressions and other health problems. He also experienced vicious attacks from the critics and his ideas were not held in favour by the government. At the same time Idrīs's inclination to medicine and interest in science never left him. The new post-ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir era needed new ideas, new directions and new warnings but required also a glimpse of hope and optimism. As an *engagé* writer, Idrīs knew that it was his duty to deliver a new message.

All these reasons, although important, were definitely secondary to the main one, i.e., the author's constant preoccupation with man and his situation in society. Idrīs's hero, was approaching the 1970s, the era of unresolved political, social and cultural issues. He was also entering the era of new problems, i.e., the possible negative outcome of the unchecked growth of science and technology. Idrīs's hero, then, was in need of immunization against loneliness and objectification, and of protection from the unknown and dangerous forces he himself had liberated. The new message needed a new medium. Science-fiction, a kind of modern fairy-tale, suited the artistic temper of the author and the requirements of the time.

In his previous plays Idrīs used to assess the past or present. In *al-Jins al-Thālith* the author utilizes science-fiction as a vehicle to carry his imagination forward and throw some light on the future.

Why did the author send his hero on a fantastic trip into the utopian city to search for a mysterious Her? What are the issues this imaginative journey reveals to us?

When we look at the equivocal symbolism of *al-Jins al-Thālith* two clearly defined issues come immediately to mind: First, it is man's continuous struggle to solve his great concerns, such as the problem of life and death, man and society, good and evil, and the contradiction between reality and dreams. Second, is the issue of the still undervalued role of woman in contemporary society.

In 1966, in the play *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*, Idrīs made his hero withdraw from society. The author pointed out to the reader the need for more knowledge, the necessity of self-education and re-thinking of the important human concerns. In 1967, in the play *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn*, Idrīs's hero underwent the process of self-experience, self-education and self-criticism. However, according to the author, this self-struggle did not immunize his hero against the existing order sufficiently; he was still unable to win.

In 1970, Idrīs decided on a new experiment and sent his hero Adam on a fantastic journey to a utopian world to make him realize the complexity of the real world and "find himself". This time, from the beginning the author clearly indicated his strong belief in his hero's success:

> Dog: Never do things enter this world and come out the same way...
> We make sure that you do not go out from it as you have entered.[9]

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9 Y. Idrīs, *al-Jins al-Thālith*, p. 41, v. 12, p. 42, v. 5-6.

One may say : Idrīs's former hero Farahāt (*Jumhūriyyat Farahāt*, 1957) "had already been" in the utopian world and this imaginary trip had no effect on him. How could we believe the author that this time the journey would end successfully?

We have already pointed out that the utopia of *Jumhūriyyat Farahat* was not a complete one. This world based only on faith and justice was missing other important fundamental elements such as feeling, attachment to life, and a link with the past. The utopia portrayed by Idrīs in 1970, in the play, *al-Jins al-Thālith*, was a different one. This was a "happy world" created by morally perfect human-beings, a utopia based on a triangle of love, will and life. This was the world of our dreams.

As it is presented by Idrīs in *al-Jins al-Thālith*, our existing world is composed of two worlds, i.e., the real world and the world of dreams. The destructive activity of man, his desire for wealth and power, his indifference and hostile attitude towards the others fill the real world with evil and cause our imaginary world to diminish every day. Even though our dreams have been materialized in the appearance of the messengers of the good, our predicament still exists:

> Scientist: Creation after creation they used to send us many of them. They were impersonating our kind. All messengers, poets, reformers. All art and music. All the things without which our life would become like a desert because of hatred.[10]

While doing his genetic research Adam was constantly searching for more and more knowledge. However, he was yet unable to feel and understand the true nature of it:

> Adam: I will not lie to you. I am afraid. I like science because it is an adventure to discover the unknown. Even if I lose my life while discovering the unknown, it is a million times better than losing it (life) day after day while living in the known.[11]

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10 Ibid., p. 59, v. 23-26, p. 60, v. 1.

11 Ibid., p. 23, v. 17-21.

Seeing utopia, the world of logic, justice and feelings, Adam realized that this dream-world was contradictory to the one of his existence. Full of evil, oppression, laws and barriers his existing reality was an "absurdist reality", founded on small hostile sequences of laws and governed by the dangerous equilibrium between good and evil, oppression and justice, war and peace, etc. The "normal world", then, was out of the picture and only existed in a dream.

It seems that when the utopian world entrusted Adam with the fate of its future, Idrīs's hero realized that he had changed and finally understood that real life means much more than science and research:

> Adam: I really have changed. As you say I have really changed. I have become a human who wants, who needs, a being in whom each pulse is not his own. My need is by my will or against my will, consciously or unconsciously, with energy stronger than human energy.[12]

By putting the future of utopia into the hands of Adam, Idrīs once again revealed his strong belief in the good will of man and his tremendous hidden potential to change the existing order. However, was that experience sufficiently instructive for Adam to overcome all his weaknesses and fears?

Unfortunately not. Although Adam became preoccupied with the search for a mysterious Her, he did not feel yet how and where he could look for Her. His eyes were not fully open yet. Instead of looking around himself (Nāra) he turned to something distant and unknown (Hilda). In order to see completely, Adam needed an new experience, a shock or may be somebody to confront him.

It was Nāra, Adam's assistant, who made him realize his failure, his inability to see Her both in the existing world and the fantasy world. She confronted Adam in his bitter reality:

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12 Ibid., p. 73, v. 18-23.

Nāra: I am annoyed by you and others like you, by all the people who want to live only. They do not care how. What is important for them is only to exist, to loll about, it does not matter for them, to be like worms, nothing else. They come to life by the millions and spend their life just passing the time. They live but they are not as living-beings. Nothing changes in them and they are not changing anything. If you are this "living-being", death is cleaner, nobler, and more honest. It is a guide for a clearer life.[13]

Nāra, a sensitive young woman, who appreciated the real values of life found in herself enough force and courage to push Adam's failure away:

Nāra: This time I will perform an experiment in front of you to prove to you that the real human being cannot live this kind of life. Either we live like true human beings or we end our life by our own hand and die. Life was never created for human beings to live it like rats.[14]

When Adam saw Nāra die, he reached the depth of despair. Only then, in this highly emotional state, was he able to recognize his real moment of life. Only then, he intuitively knew that she (Nāra) was Her. Suddenly Adam's "great energy", i.e, his great love and his desire to create an equilibrium between reality and fantasy, was "freed" and joined with the power of his mind capable of creating a "miracle". Thanks to Adam's brilliant idea, the death-will serum was discovered and Nāra brought back to life.

Adam's victory over himself was only possible due to Nāra's wise, considered but at the same time spontaneous actions and reactions. At the beginning of the play, while seeing Adam overly concerned with his research, she tried to point out the necessity of seeing "normal life" as well. When after his imaginary journey Adam came back disturbed, uncertain and considerably changed, she attempted to pull him back into reality and direct his search for Her properly. Finally, when all measures failed and he was still unable to see real

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13 Ibid., p. 103, v. 5-16.

14 Ibid., p. 103, v. 16-20.

life, Nāra did not hesitate to risk her own life to prove to Adam that he was "blind." Her lesson was a successful one:

Adam: How could you do that? Kill yourself to prove to me that I am small. Not me, not anybody else in this life is worth even one of your fingers. You have commited suicide?! You do not know who you are? You are Nāra, Nāra! Do you know who Nāra is? You are dead Nāra! How?! You are Nāra, Nāra!

Nāra: You are the one who does not know who Nāra is!

Adam: How do I not know! I know! Only now I know! All my life I did not know![15]

The presentation of Nāra and the importance placed on her personality reveals Idrīs's deep concerns about contemporary woman and the author's strong belief in the significant role she has yet to play in modern society. The author had already introduced this issue in *al-Fārāfīr* (1966).

According to Idrīs, the family is the foundation of society. The healthier and happier the family, the more so is society as a whole. Therefore, before solving the crucial issues of our times, we have to ensure first that our family, i.e., this tiny, important cell of society, is based on sound foundations such as love, good will and life appreciation. Only this can immunize us against possible dangers in the future. It is not surprising then that when Farfūr and the Master left their work and engaged themselves in a philosophical search for a universal solution for all human problems, Idrīs made their wives absolutely oppose this unrealistic behaviour:

Master: What is the matter? What's wrong?

Master's Wife: What do you think you are? Angels living in heaven? Ascetics? Mystics?

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15 Ibid., p. 104, v. 4-14.

Farfūr: Why? What has happened?

Master's Wife: Nothing! Except that you've left us all messed up and confused and helpless and stayed away from it all as if nothing's the matter...A solution for what?...What could be puzzling you so that you forgot about food and sustenance about living and life?

Farfūr: Why not, if it's more important?...

Farfūr's Wife: That's all you're good at, blabbering. But whatever you say, the kids are hungry. What do you give them to eat? Words? I am dizzy from the lack of money and you are fainting from the lack of lunch. How are you going to cure that, philosopher?

Master's Wife: I've never seen anything like that in my life! How can anybody leave his work, himself, and his family and sit there doing nothing until he finds a solution for his Master-Farfūr problem? Suppose it takes too long?

Farfūr's Wife: Suppose the solution refuses to come. Suppose it does not come at all, what do we do?[16]

In his many journalistic writings Idrīs emphasized the role women have yet to play in modern society.[17] According to the author, women's importance to the healthy growth of society is highly underestimated. It is true that currently, women have rights in many countries and actively participate in the development of political, social and cultural life. However, this is not the issue the author has in mind. As portrayed in *al-Fārāfīr*, *al-Jins al-Thālith* and his latest play *al-Bahlawān*[18] (The Clown 1982), woman in Idrīs's view is a

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16 Y. Idrīs, *al-Fārāfīr*, Cairo : Maktabat Gharib, 1977, p. 185, v. 70-15, p. 187, v. 25-29, p. 188, v. 1-4.

17 In his book *Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr* (p. 183) Idrīs calls woman "a flower of life". For Idrīs's discussion on the issue of modern women see : *Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr*, pp. 183-206 and *Khulūw al-Bāl*, pp. 75-86.

18 The play will be discussed in the subsequent section of this chapter.

"carrier" of basic human values. Due to her natural predestination to motherhood she "knows" intuitively what to do with the problems and obstacles of life, she can easily distinguish good from evil. Because a woman brings human beings into life, she has a better understanding of life's values than a man. She appreciates the "beauty" of life, she constantly cultivates and develops its foundations. She wants the world to be happy. Her inner nature tells her to oppose the destructive activity of man. She has intuition, high moral ideals, and a well developed sense of justice. Therefore, she cannot be easily fascinated by the world's external gloss. She will always look "inside" and search for true values. She knows that a human being should look for warmth, kindness and safety around himself and he should listen to his heart for the right instructions.

At the beginning of our discussion, we mentioned that with the play *al-Jins al-Thālith* the author seems to withdraw from the world of politics and to enter that of pure fantasy. However, in the case of Idrīs, a truly *engagé* writer, it would be difficult to believe that he has really abandoned his realistic concerns. When we look once again into the content of *al-Jins al-Thālith* and try to see it in the context of the Egyptian political, social and cultural experiences the author has witnessed up until 1970, we ask: How can we link the play with Egyptian realities? Where has the author hidden his message for the Egyptians, Arabs and their leaders?

With the death of ʿAbd al-Nāṣir (1970), an important chapter of Egyptian (Arab) history was closed, and the abandonment of a large-scale experiment in building a socialist society left people with uncertainty regarding values on which to build their future life.

Twentieth century Egyptian history can be divided into three different phases. The first period, 1922-1952, was characterized by foreign influences and an internal struggle for power. The second one, 1952-1970, was the time of optimism and contradictions. In 1970, Egypt entered the third chapter of its modern history, i.e., the time when many Egyptian intellectuals expressed their concerns, anxieties and fear for the future of their country.

When we see the title page of the play and read: "*al-Jins al-Thālith*" and remember the Egyptian historical experiences mentioned above, several questions arise: How should we translate this title? What did the author really mean? Third kind, third category, third sex, third race or maybe third nation?

It is difficult to answer. We can only make some suggestions. Perhaps Idrīs is talking about a "third kind" of government with a "third sort" of program, a program which could help the Egyptian people transform themselves into the "third (happy) nation". If he had lived longer he might have written something more to explain the issue. We only hope that in the near future some of Idrīs's unpublished writings will throw more light on the matter and help us find some answers.

al-Bahlawān: fantasy, irony and reality

The Egyptian predicament of the 1970s in all aspects of life dashed Idrīs's hopes for a clearer light and a better future as expressed in the play *al-Jins al-Thālith*. The severe censorship and constant attacks on the author made "playing with his dramatic pen" unpleasant, exhausting and potentially dangerous. Idrīs then found a retreat in journalism. For more than a decade the author devoted his time to writing articles on various subjects from the daily problems of Egyptian life to the latest discoveries in science and technology. These articles, included later in several collections[19], became interesting and important documents of the period. Most of these writings touch upon various issues related to Egyptian and Arab society. These articles comprise a unique story of the post-ʿAbd al-Nāṣir era, a dramatized chronicle of the epoch. They are also an attempt to examine and clarify the causes of today's social problems and to encourage the reader to find out: "Where did the modern and peace-loving world go?"

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19 For the titles of these collections see the first chapter of this study, footnote 1.

The period of the 1970s was for Idrīs also a time of literary reflections, reassessments and a search for universal conclusions. The author had lost his optimism, he was "tired" because of attacks, assaults and polemics. The poor Egyptian was still poor and oppressed, the rich were getting richer, and foreign influences still dominated the government to a great extent; moreover, old tensions resurfaced more strongly and new contradictions quickly arose. Egyptian and Arab life "became like a theatre".[20] Finally, in 1981 there was an explosion; President Anwar Sādāt was assassinated. The leadership was taken over by Ḥūsnī Mubārak. Egyptian history opened a new page.

Idrīs decided to come back to his theatre. It was time to say something, to confront all the unresolved issues. It was time for Idrīs's Farfūr to move again between "fantasy, irony and reality" and to deliver a new message. In 1982, the author published his last play *al-Bahlawān*[21] (The Clown).

The plot of the play *al-Bahlawān* appears to be quite simple. Ḥasan al-Muhaylamī, the main character, a famous writer and the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *al-Zaman*, has his known day face and another one at night. During the day he is a serious and respectable writer and at night he works as a clown in the International Egyptian Circus.

Al-Bahlawān takes place in two apparently different worlds, i.e., in the office of the newspaper and in the circus. Idrīs presents us here with an ironic picture of the world of the press. Through the dialogues between Ḥasan al-Muhaylamī, the editor-in-chief, ʿAlāʾ, the director of redaction, al-Gharbāwī, the owner of the newspaper and Eva, the secretary, we become familiar with all the problems which afflict the society of writers, journalists and the people with power and money. This world of the press, as presented by Idrīs, is one in which there is no place for qualities like truth, loyalty and honest feelings. Everything there is

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20 Idrīs calls the present Arab predicament a "theatre" (*Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr*, p. 119).

21 Y. Idrīs, *al-Bahlawān*, Cairo : Maktabat Miṣr, 1983.

unstable and depends on people with power, their connections and moods. Everything can change with the winds.

The world of the circus looks totally different. It is presented through dialogues among Zaʿrub, the clown, Mīrfat, the juggler, Najaf, the trainer and announcer and Sāmī, the director. It seems to us that people from this world like the truth, respect honesty, human feelings and rational order.

Ḥasan al-Muhaylamī, the editor-in-chief whose position and authority seemed to be firm and strong, is suspended because the newspaper has a new owner al-Gharbāwī. It was Mahallāwī, the pervious owner of *al-Zaman*, who promoted Ḥasan from a newspaper boy through all levels of a literary and journalistic career. Obviously Ḥasan in return used to praise Mahallāwī in all his articles and attempted to convince Egyptian public opinion that Mahallāwī was the best.

Seeing that his career is in danger and that he can be fired and replaced by ʿAlāʾ at any minute, Ḥasan tries to rescue himself from suspension. First, he wants to use the connections of his wife and then he offers services to al-Gharbāwī, his previous enemy. Ḥasan al-Muhaylamī attempts to convince al-Gharbāwī that he does not believe what he had written against him and that he was only acting as the transmitter of lies dictated by Mahallāwī :

> Ḥasan : They put me in the dark... and this Mahallāwī misled me.[22]

Now Ḥasan is ready to destroy his previous friend and to reveal his crimes so that "(Mahallāwī) would forget the day he was born".[23]

The offer is accepted and Ḥasan begins the action. Everything is prepared and the next morning the first part of Mahallāwī's *Black Book* appears in the newspaper. Public opinion is alarmed by the crimes of Mahallāwī. The worst aspect of the whole affair is in the

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22 Ibid., p. 73, v. 7.

23 Ibid., p. 73, v. 23.

relationship between Mahallāwī and Khumaynī revealed in a photograph of him and the Iranian leader. The suspense is over. Happy and proud of his smart move, Ḥasan describes to ʿAlāʾ how easy it was to play the game with al-Gharbāwī :

Ḥasan : I got him. In five minutes he was in my pocket...[24]

However, his happiness does not last long. Al-Gharbāwī has overheard Ḥasan's conversation with ʿAlāʾ and reacts to it immediately :

Al-Gharbāwī : Ḥasan Bek, why did you not wait? Who will get whom?[25]

Ḥasan has gone too far and al-Gharbāwī throws him out. Then he offers the post to ʿAlāʾ but the latter refuses it. ʿAlāʾ, the director of the newspaper, happens to be known as a straightforward man with a straightforward and stable ideology. His straightforwardness does not let him serve al-Gharbāwī. Therefore, the post of editor-in-chief is still vacant. Al-Gharbāwī cannot find the right person to fill it:

Al-Gharbāwī : One (Ḥasan) does not have an ideology, he is a clown, and another one is too straight, has a dry brain; he is a donkey...
There must be a "third kind".[26]

It seems that the bad luck of Ḥasan is not yet over. He has been fired from the newspaper, then fails in one of his circus numbers. Later his wife discovers he is a clown and that he has a lover in the circus. At this point she wants to create a scandal, using the photographers and the press. The final blow to Ḥasan's misfortunes is brought up in the twentieth scene. It has turned out that al-Gharbāwī, the owner of the newspaper who had fired Ḥasan from the post there, recently became the owner of the circus. He knows the "real" face of Zaʿrub, the clown and he also wants to fire him from the circus.

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24 Ibid., p. 93, v. 15.

25 Ibid., p. 98, v. 4.

26 Ibid., p. 100, v. 6.

However, both the day and the night faces of Ḥasan may be saved. Al-Gharbāwī is ready to "forget"everything on one condition, i.e., that he get Mīrfat, the juggler who loves Zaᶜrub, the clown. When Ḥasan is ready for al-Gharbāwī's conditions it turns out that the whole conversation has been overheard by Mīrfat. She is extremely angry :

> Mīrfat : You idiot, who would sell me before you buy me. You dog of a clown![27]

Ḥasan is in despair. He has lost everything and everything seems to be under the control of al-Gharbāwī. Ḥasan feels that this time he is a real failure :

> Zaᶜrub : From now on, you are only Zaᶜrub with lipstick and powder... because life becomes a circus. So either you own the circus or you stay as a clown. It is very difficult to own the circus, only one can own it... Therefore, you have to work as a clown... and if you have to walk on a tightrope... one day you will fall down...[28]

However, not everything looks so pessimistic. In the last scene of *al-Bahlawān*, Idrīs gives us a beam of hope. Mīrfat, the girl who really loves Ḥasan, comes to him with words of consolation. She shows him that her feelings have not changed and that he can still count on her moral support. They both are happy because they know that their strong love will help them fight the difficulties of life. The play ends with Ḥasan saying :

> "The world is a big circus"![29]

The analysis of the content of *al-Bahlawān* reveals to the reader the major political, social and cultural issues touched upon by Idrīs. The ironic picture of the Egyptian press mirrors the various problems of the country, and the author strongly criticizes the political, social and cultural situation in Egypt. The world of the press presented here — one which is supposed to educate the people and shape their opinions and ideology — appears to be

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27 Ibid., p. 125, v. 22.

28 Ibid., p. 126, v. 22.

29 Ibid., p. 128, v. 17.

corrupt and devoid of ideals or ideology: the articles and books of Ḥasan al-Muhaylamī, the respected writer and editor-in-chief of *al-Zaman*, carry no meaningful messages. His words depend on the fantasies and commands of the powerful and the direction of the political or cultural winds.

One day al-Muhaylamī would praise someone and his actions, as he did with Mahallāwī, and yesterday's hero might become a criminal connected with the world of spies and terrorists. These, suggests Idrīs, are the people robbed of truth, confused and misled.

The world of the press in *al-Bahlawān* is governed by people with no feelings :

> Ḥasan : Even if he was my father I would witness against him.[30]

What really counts is : power, money and orders. Although these "honourable representatives" of public opinion are proudly saying : "We serve Egypt, our mother",[31] their words are only empty phrases. The true meaning of their slogans is to curry favour with the strong and the powerful, and it does not matter whether these people are honest or not.

> Ḥasan : Whoever Egypt appoints, we have to accept and obey!
>
> ʿAlāʾ : And if Egypt puts us under his feet...
>
> Ḥasan : Anyway, his feet have to be on top of our heads.[32]

People like al-Muhaylamī, who are ready to serve the strong, walk on the "tightrope" of a political career; they can enjoy their luxurious life, as long as they make no mistakes; one mistake and they fall.

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30 Ibid., p. 72, v. 21.

31 Ibid., p. 40, v. 20.

32 Ibid., p. 40, v. 24.

For the poor and simple people like Najaf, Mirfat and her family, the only game left is to play the "poor Egyptian", that is, to carry all the burdens of the existing social and political order :

(the game "poor Egyptian")

Zaʿrub : (pointing out the box containing a poor Egyptian) Here's the sewage system. We balance it against the cost of digging the metro and against the price of an apartment...[33]

In the play *al-Bahlawān* Idrīs clearly points out that these simple and ordinary people, in spite of their difficult situation and all the burdens of everyday life, still remain very human. When the first part of Mahallāwī's *Black Book* appears in the newspaper Najaf, the announcer in the circus, without hesitation visits Ḥasan and plainly criticizes him for his unfair attitude towards Mahallāwī :

Najaf : For five years I am reading about the philosophy of Mahallāwī and his wisdom... that he is the best in Egypt... All this because he was the owner of *al-Zaman* and now...![34]

Among the people of the press there are individuals who, like ʿAlāʾ, the director of *al-Zaman*, are straightforward and do not like lies and corruption but Idrīs shows that they are not strong enough to fight to remedy the existing situation. At the moment, they see no possibility of improvement but they do not want to witness the crimes. Therefore, they prefer to resign and even to leave the country :

ʿAlāʾ : I will not accept this (post) because of my disagreement with him (al-Gharbāwī)... I will leave Egypt... The Earth is very wide.

Ḥasan : And you will work in Arab countries.

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33 Ibid., p. 108, v. 7-8.

34 Ibid., p. 80, v. 11.

ʿAlā' : Not necessarily. Maybe London, Paris...[35]

The reader may be puzzled as to why Idris presents us here with two totally different worlds, i.e., the world of the press and the world of the circus and why one of his heroes explains that : "The world of the circus is the closest to the world of the press and like no other".[36] It is true, as Ḥasan al-Muhaylami says, that the "press is a very serious place" and "the circus is a place for clowns, jugglers and acrobats".[37] However, when journalists play with words as in *al-Bahlawān* :

Ḥasan al-Muhaylamī : (to his secretary about changes in the article)
It is easy. Instead of Russia we put America,
instead of red - black, instead of communism -
capitalism.[38]

When articles have no meaning and "the truth disappears, both (worlds) will look alike".[39]

In the play Zaʿrub, the clown, and the circus parrot repeat the following sentence several times "The world is a big theatre"![40] It is not only the fantasy of the author to say this. For Idrīs we are living in a big "twentieth century theatre" and witnessing a lot of "different performances". On the world "scene," different nations, political leaders, military groups, religious associations and cultural organizations play their "games". Some of these "spectacles" are good and beneficial for mankind, and bring us happiness and hope for a better future. However, on our big scene we can observe also bad "plays", full of evil and brutality which bring us a lot of misery. When people care about the feelings of others, when they are serious, honest, just, loyal and work hard to improve themselves and society, the number of bad "plays" will diminish. However, when our life becomes a game of jugglers

35 Ibid., p. 44, v. 12; p. 39, v. 17.

36 Ibid., p. 119, v. 14.

37 Ibid., p. 119, v. 12.

38 Ibid., p. 14, v. 12.

39 Ibid., p. 119, v. 16.

40 Ibid., p. 65, v. 23, p. 109, v. 8, p. 111, v. 9, p. 118, v. 45, p. 128, v. 15.

and acrobats, when we have to walk on a "tightrope" and people in power behave like clowns, the world becomes, as Ḥasan al-Muhaylami says, like "a big circus".[41]

The play *al-Bahlawān* seems to have a rather pessimistic outlook on today's Egypt and the world in general. However, a closer look at the content of the play convinces us that there is a germ of optimism in Idrīs's thinking.

Although, Ḥasan al-Muhaylamī, the editor-in-chief of *al-Zaman*, strictly follows the orders of his supervisors, he dislikes his day face and treats it as a mask. For Ḥasan Muhaylamī, the only place he can be himself is the circus. Each night he goes there to play the role of a clown because he "has to be balanced",[42] because he has to find an antidote for the lies and crimes of his day life in the newspaper. The circus, the real world of Ḥasan, enables him to "breathe" the "fresh" air, act like a true human being and say whatever he wants. Although his face is covered with powder, lipstick and mascara, this is the true face of the person who feels, understands and cries. He is the clown of the twentieth-century "theatre-circus" and his tears are :

> Ḥasan : ... the most expensive tears in the world, the tears which make people laugh and the clown cry.[43]

Why, then does Ḥasan al-Muhaylamī, the editor-in-chief, cry when he takes the face of Zaʿrub the clown? He cries because he knows that during the day, instead of being honest and real, he has to be Ḥasan the "Clown" and only at night, when he may be a clown, he can play Zaʿrub, the "Real". Ḥasan al-Muhaylamī explains the reasons for his tears to Mirfat :

> Ḥasan : Life is very difficult. The blood of life is very heavy... Death is much better... People dream about tomorrow. When tomorrow comes, it will be even worse and the day after will be worse still.[44]

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41 Ibid., p. 128, v. 18.

42 Ibid., p. 89, v. 25.

43 Ibid., p. 110, v. 13.

44 Ibid., p. 110, v. 16.

The final dialogue between Mīrfat and Zaʿrub reveals to us another sign of Idrīs's optimism and his strong faith in simple and honest people. Their way of understanding and their human feelings make it easy to take off the mask of the clown :

Ḥasan : I am a player, a clown.

Mīrfat : And what if you are a clown?

Ḥasan : You will not love me.

Mīrfat : Who told you this? Do you think that I loved you because you were a famous writer? I love you because you are a clown and your being a clown makes me crazy about you.

Ḥasan : That is good. Our effort did not go to waste. This is a new understanding, a new way.[45]

Today's world becomes more and more complicated, and our everyday problems more and more difficult. People are in constant search of money, material goods, careers and posts. In this race there is less and less space for being, for thinking about others and for simple human feelings and reactions. People are wearing different masks to play in our twentieth-century theatre-circus.

Idrīs, through his latest play *al-Bahlawān*, attempts once again to remind his Eastern or Western reader and audience that it is time for change. All the people from those simple and ordinary to those with power and influence, should take off their masks and play themselves. If people are good, know and understand themselves and each other better, all the tensions and problems of our present life could be solved. According to Idrīs it is for us to take this first step, that is, to improve ourselves and direct our life to a better future and complete progress.

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45 Ibid., p. 127, v. 18.

Form, style and language: searching for a concise and expressive dramatic structure

In the 1970s and 1980s despite his preoccupation with journalism, Idrīs continued his artistic experiments both in fiction and drama. Although in these two decades the author wrote only two plays, namely, *al-Jins al-Thālith* and *al-Bahlawān*, his search for an original Egyptian dramatic form brought some interesting results.

First, Idrīs undertook successfully the task of creating the first science-fiction play in Egyptian literature. Second, the author brought Farfūr back to his theatre. He developed and enriched this character and let him play sarcastically a role between reality and fantasy. Third, in contrast to his plays of the 1960s, *al-Jins al-Thālith* and *al-Bahlawān* were shorter and simpler in structure and language. Finally, in *al-Bahlawān*, his last play, one notices that the author's formal search results in a concise and very expressive dramatic structure.

The play *al-Jins al-Thālith* is an original combination of science-fiction with some elements of the romantic fairy-tale. The elements of fairy-tale fantasy are related neither to the stories from *Kitāb Alf Laylā wa Laylā* (The Book of One Thousand and One Nights) nor to Arabic tradition. They are rather a pure fantasy of the author. As for science fiction, Idrīs seems to be inspired here by the newest achievements and ideas of genetic engineering. The author refers to the achievements of real science but at the same time utilizes its gaps. This "journey to the future" enables Idrīs to examine the complexity of human concerns.

Al-Jins al-Thālith constitutes a well-constructed dramatic form. The play is not limited to the traditional unity of time, place and action. The action takes place on two planes, that is, in the apparently real world of the microbiologist's laboratory and in the completely unreal world of utopian fantasy. In the play we observe a very smooth transition from one world to the other.

The language of these two planes differs considerably. The apparently real parts are dominated by discursive dialogue with short, concise sentences and phrases, for example:

Adam: Every thirty seconds take a reading.

Nāra: The highest and the lowest together, or only the lowest?

Adam: What did I say yesterday?

Nāra: You said the highest.

...

Nāra: Thirteen-five.

Adam: Not bad.

Nāra: Eighty eight-one.

Adam: Very strong.

Nāra: Thirteen-ten.

Adam: Continue.[46]

As for the fantastic parts, they are built on more expressive and more developed dialogue, for example:

Tamarix Tree: Really, his form is very beautiful!

Mulberry Tree: My desire is that he will scratch his long beard on my branch.

Acacia Tree: I don't like this type.

Date Tree: But he seems to be good.

Tamarix Tree: Listen, leave him to me and go from here.

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46 Y. Idrīs, *al-Jins al-Thālith*, p. 5, v. 17-20, p. 6, v.1, p. 8, v. 1-6.

Adam: Trees talk here?!

Tamarix Tree: And they sing too, and if you like they dance too.[47]

The play is composed of four acts, each divided into two or three short scenes. Our attention focuses on the "Prologue". In this new element of Idrīs's dramatic form, we detect the inspiration of Greek tragedy. Idrīs's "Prologue" is similar to that of the Greek tradition.

First, it informs us about the place of the action:

> The curtain opens on a room in Doctor Adam's laboratory. A new, modern room, its equipment represents state of the art technology. A large variety of apparatuses, most of them on a shining bench. Next there is a water basin with a vacuum unit inside it.[48]

Second, the "Prologue" introduces the main characters:

> Adam, a young man in his thirties, handsome, serious, sharp smartness shines in his eyes.
> Nāra, the lab assistant, a girl of a boyish type, in her twenties, with short hair, nice face, slim body, no make-up.
> Both of them wear white gowns.[49]

Third, it presents the main conflict of the play:

> Suddenly a strange female voice sounds. You cannot locate it. This is the kind of voice that you feel as if it is a sort of revelation. It makes you feel that whatever it asks is easy to fulfil even if it is asking you to kill yourself.

Voice: Huu!

Adam: Sh...sh...!

Nāra (still saying): Seven-seven, seven-seven, seven-seven.

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47 Ibid., p. 28, v. 12-19.

48 Ibid., p. 5, v. 1-5.

49 Ibid., p. 5, v. 11-16.

Voice: (nearer and deeper and stronger) Huu!

Adam stops doing whatever he does. He raises his head saying unconsciously.

Adam: Huu!

Nāra continues her work with the numbers.

Voice: Huu! You have an appointment in al-ᶜAtaba.[50]

The action of *al-Jins al-Thālith* is built on great dramatic tension which culminates in the skillfully constructed climax and finishes with a happy ending.

The role of the stage directions in the play is very important. Apart from their usual functions in *al-Jins al-Thālith*, stage directions also play two other important roles. First, they describe well the atmosphere and the climate of the dramatic situation, for example:

> The scene is a yellow, barren, dry desert. It is a huge space of earth, rough and hummocky. The time is noon exactly, the light is strong and the sun is in the middle of the sky.[51]

Furthermore, the stage directions contain Idrīs's innovative suggestions concerning the staging of the play, for example:

> It is possible to perform this scene as it is written. It is also possible to perform it in a pantomime, without discussion but with expressive music only. It is also possible to perform it as a ballet expressing precisely all its content.[52]

In *al-Bahlawān*, Idrīs introduces us to different formal experiments. This pl·· may be regarded as a continuation of the author's artistic search from *al-Fārāfīr, al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*, and *al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn*. *Al-Bahlawān* provides interesting structural material for investigation and shows the influence both of traditional Eastern theatre, such as the shadow

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50 Ibid., p. 8, v. 15-126, p. 9, v. 1.

51 Ibid., p. 24,v. 1-4.

52 Ibid., p. 88, v. 1-5.

theatre, *qaragöz* and the village *sāmir* and the theatre of Western trends, such as the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, French symbolic theatre and Brecht's epic theatre.

With *al-Bahlawān* Idrīs brings back to his theatre the personality of Farfūr which we had discovered in the plays of the 1960s. This time Farfūr enters the personality of Zaʿrub, the Clown and Ḥasan al-Muhaylamī, the editor in-chief of *al-Zaman*.

When he speaks from behind the mask of Zaʿrub he reminds us about the Farfūr we already know. He is a clown who combines a sharp tongue with charm, a clown who through laughter seeks to create a new philosophy of life and to reform mankind:

Mīrfat : I swear by my father, I am dreaming of you every night. I love you... You do not believe it?

Zaʿrub : I believe... Only he who never lies knows the truth.

Mīrfat : Did you live all your life lying? Why? Were you an actor first?

Zaʿrub : I am a big liar. I can distinguish very well the one who lies by the first word he utters.[53]

He is also a clown who speaks sarcastically about all the burdens of the bitter Egyptian realities of the 1980s:

Announcer: Now I will examine you in the game called "Poor Indian"...

Zaʿrub: This is old time talk. In our days the "right" game is "Poor Egyptian".[54]

Announcer: How is this?!

Zaʿrub: Enter this box!

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53 Y. Idrīs, *al-Bahlawān*, p. 50, v. 11, 13, 16-21.

54 The idea of the game possibly originated in one of Idrīs's observations from Egyptian every day life (a story of a bus driver's protest against all the burdens of his life). See: Y. Idrīs, *Ahammiyyat an Natathaqqaf.. yā Nās*, p. 108.

The Announcer is afraid to enter. Zaʿrub tells him again:

Enter! I will tell you.

The Announcer enters the box and Zaʿrub describes contemporary Cairo's urban problems as he explains the game of "Poor Egyptian":

Zaʿrub: Here is where we enter the entire sewage system and the metro tunnel. On one side we see the price of an apartment and on the other we meet the train that breaks down in the summer from overheating and in the winter from cold. After this the miracle will be that you get safely out of the box.[55]

The clown Zaʿrub embodies all the best features of the Egyptian man and symbolizes his good will and deep desire for justice, freedom and a better future.

We have mentioned previously that the personality of Farfūr introduced in *al-Bahlawān* is developed and enriched. In this play Idrīs has "assigned" for Farfūr another more dangerous role. The author lets him enter the personality of Ḥasan al-Muhaylamī and brutally uncover the "bad game" of the Egyptian "bad" man:

Ḥasan : All my life I have been writing and following orders, because I believe that on top of each person who knows there is another one who knows better.

Gharbāwī : Whose words are these?

Ḥasan : Mine but the order was from Mahallāwī.

Gharbāwī : Whose point of view was this?

Ḥasan : His.

Gharbāwī : What was yours, then?

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55 Y. Idrīs, *al-Bahlawān*, p. 107, v. 7, 14-16, p. 108, v. 3, 4-9, 17.

Ḥasan : Your honour, this is disbelief and I am only a transmitter of it. The transmitter of disbelief is not a disbeliever.[56]

In *al-Bahlawān* Idrīs made the "good" Farfūr confront the "bad" Farfūr. This literary trick enabled the author to achieve his strongest political and social criticism of the Egyptian and Arab realities. That is possibly why in his book *ʿAzf Munfarid* Idrīs did not hesitate to call *al-Bahlawān* the best of his plays.[57]

When we return to our discussion of the form of Idrīs's plays of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, we see the gradual evolution of his dramatic structure from a simple transformation of a short story through a phase of artistic experiments to the creation of a science-fiction play. Where, then, do we place *al-Bahlawān* in all these formal searches? What kind of dramatic structure does Idrīs's last play represent?

It seems that after the explosion of artistic experiments in the 1960s, Idrīs's dramatic structure has returned to its earlier simple form. However, we must realize that this form is a mature and refined simplicity, and it differs considerably from that of *Malik al-Quṭn* or *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*. In *al-Bahlawān* there is no space for unnecessary empty words. The structure of the play is perspicuous. *Al-Bahlawān* is divided into twenty-nine scenes. The lively and precise dialogues constitute the main form of expression of this dynamic play. Idrīs also employs monologues in which he presents his reflections on complex human matters. An interesting monologue constitutes the whole ninth scene. Here is a fragment of it:

Zaʿrub : (looking at the tightrope)
In our (society) the chairs are tightropes. The houses are tightropes as well. (People) sleep on them and wake up to find that they walk on them (tightropes) a lot, till they die...

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56 Ibid., p. 71, v. 21-26, p. 72, v.1-5.

57 Y. Idrīs, *ʿAzf Munfarid*, p. 75.

> If you leave the tightrope and walk on the ground they will say you are coward. If your tightrope breaks by itself and you have no money they will say it is your fault. Who has told you to walk on the tightrope?! How many crimes and murders have been committed in the tightrope's name?[58]

The stage directions, although concise, introduce the cast in *al-Bahlawān*, and also provide : (1) a description of the setting:

> A very large office room... in the back an elegant desk... behind it you can see the upper body of al-Gharbāwī... a dictaphone placed in the midst a lot of colourful telephones...: [59]

(2) constitute a source of indirect characterization:

> ʿAlāʾ is opening the letter while Ḥasan is watching him with wide open eyes, almost coming out of their sockets, trying to read the content of the letter.[60]

and sometimes (3) describe part of the action:

> The light is on al-Gharbāwī... then slowly disappears... another light is focussing on Ḥasan.[61]

The play is short; its form and language are simple. There are only a few characters and simple set requirements. All these attributes make *al-Bahlawān* easy to perform by either amateur or professional troupes. The author places his emphasis on the play's powerful message, which the audience may grasp without any problem.

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58 Y. Idrīs, *al-Bahlawān*, p. 58, v. 13-16, 19-23.

59 Ibid., p. 70, v. 1.

60 Ibid., p. 44, v. 2.

61 Ibid., p. 126, v. 19.

Conclusion

In this study we examined the plays of Yūsuf Idrīs, one of the better Egyptian (Arab) writers and intellectuals of our generation. His creative and timeless drama, fiction and journalism have provoked a lot of discussion and controversy. The author was praised by some critics and rejected by others. Many times, his literary honesty brought him into conflict with the Egyptian authorities, from the Ministry of Culture to the President of the Republic. Although all these attacks and assaults exhausted Idrīs and aroused sorrow and embitterment in him, he never abandoned his ideas and persistently continued to deliver his message.

With the death of Idrīs in 1991, Egypt and the Arab World lost a self-appointed spokesman, lost an *engagé* writer who "lived, cried and suffered" with his nation, and fought for a better future.

Our study presented in detail the eight plays which Idrīs wrote over a quarter of a century. The analysis of these plays in the light of the Egyptian (Arab) social, political and cultural realities following the 1952 Revolution enabled us to clarify his ideas and understand why his literary works created so much discussion, polemics and attacks.

In one of his articles Idrīs said:

"The theatre is the place to tell the truth"[1].

We realize that it was not always easy for Idrīs to remain faithful to this statement. However, the content of all his plays reveals to us clearly that despite unfavourable political winds, despite the fact that sometimes he had to move with his pen as if he was a circus

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1 Y. Idrīs. *Ahammiyyat an Natathaqqaf..yā Nās*, Cairo: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-ᶜArabī, 1985, p. 42.

player walking on a tightrope, he continued to build his imaginative social and political "inter-Arab theatre."[2]

His acrobatic mind, and excellent literary skills helped Idrīs to play his often dangerous "literary game" effectively and prevented him from "falling down".

When we recall all Idrīs's plays, visualize the images of Egyptian (Arab) society he created, remember his artistic search and experiments, the question arises: How can we briefly evaluate all this? In other words: How can we portray the relationship: "Idrīs, the playwright, his drama, and his era".

Drama and theatre always fascinated Idrīs; they were his passion from childhood when he used to sneak out to observe religious and folk festivals. By writing plays he finally realized his dream to be an active member of the Egyptian (Arab) theatre. Although, the short story brought Idrīs widespread recognition and fame, we believe that in drama the author found the best way to shape his vision and to portray critically the Egyptian (Arab) society of his days. One may say that Idrīs's drama was like a lens focused on all the burning issues of the Egyptian (Arab) post-revolutionary realities.

Idrīs's portrayal of Egyptian society of the 1950s began with *Malik al-Quṭn*, in which he presented an optimistic and vigorous image of the Egyptian peasant. This simple, realistic slice of life revealed the playwright's enthusiasm and his strong support of the Revolutionary government in Egypt. In *Malik al-Quṭn* Idrīs presented us with a new, original image of the Egyptian peasant whose mentality considerably changed, who was well aware of his right to social justice and equality, who would insist on fair pay for his hard work, and who was capable of fighting and eventually winning in the future.

However, the author's optimism did not last long. In his subsequent play, namely, *Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*, Idrīs introduced us to the gloomy atmosphere of one of the Cairene police stations and brutally uncovered the fact that the Revolutionary government did not

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2 Y. Idrīs. *Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Fakr*, Cairo: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-ᶜArabī, 1985, p. 21.

implement its noble ideals. The poor were still poor and treated badly, the rich were getting richer and enjoyed their privileges. This dark, disturbing scenario of Faraḥāt's night on duty was contrasted with Idrīs's imaginative and kind utopian story about an ideal republic which carried a glimpse of hope and a lesson from which to draw a conclusion.

In his portrayal of Egyptian society of the 1950s, Idrīs did not limit himself to description and criticism. As it is presented in *al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*, his aim stretched further than that. In this play Idrīs undertook the task of portraying his society from within, uncovering its weaknesses and hidden ills. An episode from the Suez War of 1956, involving one Egyptian middle-class family led the author to discover that the inherited fear which still rested heavily on the Egyptian people's mind had become a barrier, an obstacle on their path towards true reform and a better future.

In the 1950s, Idrīs spoke in his plays relatively openly and plainly. In the 1960s, when censorship became tight and severe, the author's pen game became difficult conflicting and dangerous. However, even then Idrīs did not cease to be a realist, he still portrayed and criticized his society. He was not allowed to speak openly, but he never refrained from trying. In order to convey his message, Idrīs invented the fool-clown persona of Farfūr and employed literary tricks for his plays.

Idrīs's game between fantasy, irony and reality in the 1960s began in *al-Fārāfīr* where in an apparently funny manner the playwright used the master and his servant to strongly criticize the existing social order. Then, he continued to draw his ironic and bitter picture of Egyptian society in the play *al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*. In this "grotesque" play Idrīs presented a frightening symbolic picture of an Egyptian family and the story of its quarrels, disagreements and problems. In other words Idrīs portrayed for us the muddled realities of Egypt's 1960s and posed a question: Who was the one to blame for the Egyptian (Arab) society's predicament during the 1960s?

ʿAbd al-Nāṣir's death in 1970 left Egypt and the Arab world at the crossroads. The old sayings and values were outdated, the new ones not yet shapen and crystallized. The

Egyptian (Arab) destiny was then open, undefined and unclear. It could turn both ways. In 1971 Idrīs published his new play, *al-Jins al-Thālith*, where in an allegorical and futuristic way he portrayed some of these social and political Egyptian (Arab) anxieties and frustrations. The play was relatively optimistic and revealed the author's strong belief that this time his nation had a new chance to take the right path. As Idrīs suggested in *al-Jins al-Thālith*, in order to be "born again", it was necessary for the Egyptians (Arabs) to finally get over the defeat of 1967, overcome completely all their smaller and bigger conflicts and differences, and look into themselves as if they were no longer enemies but rather friends or brothers.

Unfortunately, the policy of the new Egyptian government proved to be a different one and aimed to establish close ties with other nations and to leave the Arabs in hostility or isolation. Idrīs then, decided to abandon drama for more than a decade and occupied himself with journalism. The newspaper article, which under the political and social circumstances of the 1980s, the author considered the best place to express himself, became another dangerous arena for the author's pen games. Once again Idrīs's literary honesty, open criticism and courageous statements brought him into several conflicts with other writers, scholars and government authorities. In 1980 he was even publicly assaulted by President Anwar Sādāt[3]. Despite all the obstacles and unfavorable winds, Idrīs's critical voice, although frequently muffled, remained loud and uncompromising, always aiming to awaken people's conscience and encourage them to embark on necessary actions.

However, it seems that all the author's efforts and his persistent calls for change, reform and a new way of thinking went unheeded and changed nothing. In the 1980s, the Egyptian (Arab) predicament remained the same. The poor were poor, the rich were getting richer. The old tension became stronger and new ones arose quickly. The Egyptian (Arab) realities of the 1980s were getting more and more complicated. In order to face the

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3 Idrīs recalls this experience in his book *Faqr al-Fikr...*, p. 14.

complexity of his problems, the Egyptian (Arab) man needed to recover from his past and regain his forces. He needed help, clarification and a new guidance. Idrīs had never abandoned the Egyptian man. Therefore, he returned to his theatre, brought back his unique character of Farfūr and let him play in *al-Bahlawān* a new, and this time, very dangerous game between fantasy, irony and reality and deliver his strongest message. Speaking from behind the mask of his new Farfūr, namely, Zaʿrub, the Clown, Idrīs said plainly and decisively that the *masraḥiyya* (play) entitled: "The Egyptian and Arab predicament of the 1980s" should be "banned" immediately and its actors, that is, Egyptian and Arab people "ordered" to take off their masks, asked to "play themselves" and encouraged to "write" a completely new, "true", scenario for the new play called: "The Egyptian and Arab society: justice and freedom".

Through his drama Idrīs presented himself not only as a committed playwright but also as a sensitive and original playwright-artist. On several occasions he pointed out that his stories or plays always resulted from his *ruʾyā*, that is, his imaginary vision. What kind of images could we visualize while reading Idrīs's plays?

The playwright began his portrayal of Egyptian society of the 1950s with photographic precision, using a complete range of colours. His picture was vigorous, his heroes lively and real. Then, he presented us with a gloomy, dark image created with dirty, shady and disturbing colours (*Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*). This sad vision truly reflected the society's embitterment and lost hope. However, on his dark scene, Idrīs left a light spot, a glimpse of hope, that is, his beautiful, fresh, bright and clean image of an ideal society. By the end of the 1950s the playwright's vision had changed. His picture became unclear, it was painted with rather old, dark or shady colours and expressed the society's anxieties, frustrations and fears (*al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*).

In the 1960s, Idrīs's photographic vision adopted grotesque images, in other words dramatic cartoons. First, the playwright created for us an artistic event in a form similar to that of a happening (*al-Fārāfīr*). Subsequently, he drew a surrealistic grotesque image in *al-*

Mahzala al-Arḍiyya. Then, he presented his "geometric black and white" vision of a happy society in which everything was categorized according to straight "black and white" lines (*al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn).*

In the 1970s, Idrīs's picture of Egyptian (Arab) society had changed again. This time, inspired by the new achievements of science and technology, Idrīs presented us with an imaginary, science-fiction vision of the search to re-discover the true human values.

The series of Idrīs's artistic images closed in the 1980s with an expressive symbolic picture of Egyptian (Arab) society created in *al-Bahlawān*. This last dramatic result of Idrīs's imaginary vision synthesized all the best artistic features of his previous plays. In *al-Bahlawān* the playwright harmoniously combined two different pictures, i.e. the ironic portrait of the press office and an idealistic image of the circus.

As we mentioned previously Idrīs's drama mirrors the post-revolutionary Egyptian (Arab) realities. His plays also reflect the artistic search for an origianl Egyptian (Arab) drama form, the search the playwright himself provoked. Furthermore, we may also say that Idrīs's plays contain the Egyptian (Arab) story of his era.

In one of his articles Idrīs discussed the role of narration in human's life[4]. According to the author, the art of narration is the first of all arts, the art to which the child responds, the art which stays with a human being all his life.

When we write down the titles of all Idrīs's plays in a chronological order, read them and try to think about their hidden meaning, it looks as if from behind these titles the author speaks to us:

"The era of kings is gone (*Malik al-Quṭn*). We have won our future. Our future is the Republic but we are not working for its cause as we should, we make too many mistakes (*Jumhūriyyat Faraḥāt*). We have to look inside ourselves and find out what is wrong, we

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4 Y. Idrīs. *ʿAzf Munfarid*, Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1987, p. 9.

have to overcome our fears and weaknesses because the critical moment may approach us soon (*al-Laḥẓa al-Ḥarija*).

We have lost our hopes. We are not allowed to speak openly. So, we have to find another way. We put on our masks and speak from behind them (*al-Fārāfīr*). Our life has become like a theatre. We now perform an ugly, disturbing and bitter play called *The Terrestial Comedy* (*al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya*). The authorities want us to be controlled and limited in everything. They do not realize that we are individuals. They want to make our life only "black and white" while we know that it should be full of "flying colours" (*al-Mukhaṭṭaṭīn*).

We need a new and different regime. We are brothers and sisters. We have to be together. This is our strength. Maybe we can do it?! (*al-Jins al-Thālith*).

We have lost our hopes again. Let us put on our masks and play again. This time we are not in a theatre. It is a circus, an open arena (*al-Bahlawān*). We survived ᶜAbd al-Nāṣir and Sādāt. How will we manage with Mubārak? Let us work hard, so that "our efforts will not be wasted"[5]. "

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5 Y. Idrīs. *al-Bahlawān*, Maktabat Miṣr, 1983, p. 127, v. 18.

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