SEX AND SOCIETY IN YŪSUF IDRĪS:
‘QĀ‘ AL-MADĪNA’

Yūsuf Idrīs shows his most shrewd understanding of Egyptian society and its changing values through his stories of sexual relationships and his exploration of the nature of love, need, desire, repression, frustration, and masculinity and femininity themselves within these relationships. In his tales of village life, like ‘Hādīthat Sharaf’,¹ he demonstrates with lucid simplicity the workings of the process by which the community forces its members to conform to accepted standards of behaviour. Sex is the touchstone of social intercourse, and the attitude of a community to sexual relationships is most expressive of its culture; in the village masculinity and femininity are prized but, to appearances at least, they must be put to their designated uses in work and marriage. In a city the sexual code is more complex, and it is more difficult to confine the subject of sex within narrative patterns, but in ‘Qā‘ al-Madīna’ ² (and also in ‘al-Naddāhā’ ³ and ‘Ḥalqāt al-Nuḥās al-Nā‘ima’ ⁴) Idrīs describes specific sexual relationships between men and women from different social backgrounds in a way which shows the interrelation of their positions in society with their attitudes to sex, and so imposes a pattern on elusive but crucial aspects of Egyptian life and creates a starting-point for thought and understanding.

Shaykh ‘All in the story ‘Ṭabliyya min al-Samā’ ⁵ and Nā‘isa in ‘Al-Shaykh Shaykha’ ⁶ rebel involuntarily against the laws of behaviour in the village, but these stories do not, as Theodore Prochazka maintains (in his Ph. D. thesis “Treatment of Theme and Characterisation in the Works of Yūsuf Idrīs”, London 1972) “underline the author’s view that life in the country is balanced” and therefore desirable, a life “from which a foreign body must be extruded”.⁷

⁴ Ibid., pp. 160-197 (originally entitled ‘Dustūr yā Sayyida’).
⁵ Al-Mu‘alaffāt al-Kāmilā, pp. 52-65.
⁶ Ibid., pp. 390-405.
⁷ Prochazka, p. 38.
Shaykh ‘Ali and Nā’īsa are protesting at the inappropriateness and inequity of the laws, but themselves lack the perspective and awareness which Idrīs’ stories are able to impose on their actions. In the cities, where it must be assumed that most of Idrīs’ readers live, the laws of behaviour are less clearly defined. Sexual codes of different classes and cultures overlap and conflict, and inevitably those rich enough to afford secrecy and a “private life” are able to escape much external condemnation, while many servants, and other working-class people with whom they come into contact, are emigrants from the countryside and are confused by the varying standards of behaviour and the changes which city life creates in them.

‘Qā‘ al-Madīna’ is the story of the judge ‘Abd Allah who loses his watch, suspects his servant Shuhrat of having stolen it and makes a journey to “the bottom of the city” to catch Shuhrat red-handed with the watch and accuse her face to face. The plot itself is ironic: a judge who sits in court and passes judgment on all kinds of people every day, who has it in his power to adjourn a sitting to suit himself when the defendant pauses “to swallow his saliva”8 rarely leaves the green riverside quarter of Cairo where he lives, but when the crime is committed against himself he is intoxicated by the idea of confronting the criminal in her own house in the poorest area of the city.9 He rejoices at the opportunity to point to guilt in an individual who has personally threatened the ideas with which he protects himself and justifies his way of life.

‘Abd Allah is a skilfully drawn caricature:

“His life was filled with the numbers 3445, 299876, 10031, 66, 8345. They were the numbers of his car, his refrigerator, his life insurance, his flat and his bank account... He was a man of medium estate, and was in fact average in all things. He was not tall, but you could not possibly have called him short. Similarly he was neither thin nor fat, and his skin was neither white nor brown. In brief, if we took the average height, weight and colouring of a hundred men... we would have before us ‘Abd Allah. Even in the sweetness of his tea—Mme. Shanadi would say to him as she put sugar in the cups: ‘How many, ‘Abd Allah bayk?’, then normally she would supply the answer herself and say: ‘Ah, I know. You like it medium... One and a half, isn’t it?’, whereupon he would smile and say, as he prepared to play trumps, for they were in the middle of a game of bridge, ‘You know, Madame, I am a moderate sort of man.’ Everybody would laugh then as if he

9 Ibid., p. 270.