

LANGUAGE AND THEME  
IN THE SHORT STORIES OF YŪSUF IDRĪS

I

Yūsuf Idrīs' earliest short stories were published in 1952. Within a few years he established himself as a leading author—probably the most prominent short story writer in modern Egyptian literature, publishing ten volumes of short stories<sup>1</sup> as well as several novels, novellas and plays in a period of less than twenty years.

His works, especially his short stories, met with a considerable body of literary criticism, some of which is undoubtedly illuminating.<sup>2</sup> Very few critics, however, have tried to tackle the question of his style,<sup>3</sup> although Idrīs has displayed an unmistakably personal style—lively, witty and simple—since the earliest stages of his writing.

<sup>1</sup> Idrīs' volumes of short stories are as follows (the list was prepared in 1974):

- I. *Arḳhaṣ layālī* ("The Cheapest Nights"), Cairo, 1954.
- II. *Jumhūrīyyat Farahāt* ("Farahat's Republic"), Cairo, 1956.
- III. *al-Baṭal* ("The Hero"), Cairo, 1957.
- IV. *Alaysa kaḏhālik* ("Ain't That So?"), Cairo, 1957.  
(re-published under the title *Qā' al-Madīna*, 1970.)
- V. *Hādīḥat sharaf* ("A Case of Honour"), Beirut, 1958.
- VI. *Ākḥīr al-dunyā* ("The World's End"), Cairo, 1961.
- VII. *al-ʿAskarī al-aswad* ("The Black Policeman"), Cairo, 1962.
- VIII. *Lughat al-āy āy* ("The Ay-Ay Language"), Cairo, 1965.
- IX. *al-Naddāba* ("The Enchantress"), Cairo, 1969.  
(re-published, with minor variations, in Beirut under the title *Mashūq al-hams* ["Whisper Powder"], 1970).
- X. *Bayt min laḥm* ("A House of Flesh"), Cairo, 1971.

(The stories in vols. V, VI, and VIII can also be found in the first volume of Idrīs' collected works—*al-Muʿallafāt al-kāmīla*, Cairo, 1971.)

<sup>2</sup> Useful discussions of Idrīs' art in general can be found in Ghālī Shukrī's book *Azmat al-jīns fī'l-qīṣṣa al-ʿarabiyya*, Beirut, 1962, pp. 231-255; ʿAbd al-Rahmān Abū ʿAwf's article, "Dalālat al-ruʿyā fī'l-ʿālam al-qīṣṣa li-Yūsuf Idrīs", *al-Majalla*, Sept. 1970, pp. 46-53; Lewis ʿAwaḍ, "Yūsuf Idrīs wa fann al-drāmā", *al-Kātib*, April, 1961, pp. 85-96. Reference should also be made to the interviews given by Idrīs to several literary critics, e.g., to Ghālī Shukrī (*Hīwār*, Nov.-Dec. 1965, pp. 40-53); and to Samīr al-Ṣayīgh (*Mawāqif*, 9/1970, pp. 51-66).

<sup>3</sup> A notable exception is ʿAbd al-Jabbār ʿAbbās' article "al-Lughā ʿinda Yūsuf Idrīs", *al-ʿUlūm*, Jan. 1967, pp. 29-31; also noteworthy is the quantitative analysis of certain linguistic features in one of Idrīs' early short stories, incorporated in Jan Beyerl's book, *The Style of the Modern Arabic Short Story*, Prague, 1971.

Many of those who have appraised his work have dismissed the stylistic aspects by merely noting that his dialogue is lively and is written in his protagonists' natural language, namely spoken Arabic (hereafter 'āmmiyya) as opposed to the narrative parts which are written in formal Arabic (*fushḥā*), a practice common to many modern Arab writers of prose fiction. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, while highly praising Idrīs' talent in his introduction to Idrīs' book *Jumbūriyyat Farahāt*, laments this fact and advises Idrīs to abandon the use of the 'āmmiyya and adhere in future to a pure literary idiom, or subject his literary talent to degeneration.<sup>4</sup>

## II

The diglottal question is surely of major importance, but it is far from being the only noteworthy stylistic matter. Moreover it would be untrue to say that in Idrīs' stories in general the 'āmmiyya is confined to the dialogue, or that the dialogue is always rendered in purely spoken idiom. For one thing, the narrative parts are heavily permeated with elements of 'āmmiyya—both in matters of vocabulary as well as structure. Firstly, there is a variety of straightforward 'āmmiyya words which do not exist in *fushḥā*. Secondly, *fushḥā* words and expressions acquire shades of meaning from the 'āmmiyya. Last but not least, sentences presumably written in *fushḥā* betray a clear syntactic influence of the dialect. (In passing it might be remarked that Idrīs' style shows a greater openness, in comparison to other modern Arabic authors, to the borrowing of syntactic structures from European languages, notably English.)

As far as the dialogue is concerned, here too matters are not as simple as some critics would like them to be. Admittedly the dialogue in Idrīs' early works is predominantly 'āmmiyya. Yet at times we find the author dabbling in a mixed dialogue, in a fashion used in the early stages of modern Arabic literature by such authors as Farah Antūn, Mikhail Naimy<sup>5</sup> and others, namely a dialogue where illiterate or semi-literate protagonists speak 'āmmiyya while educated ones use modified *fushḥā*. This artificial dichotomy can be found in such stories as "al-Nās"<sup>6</sup> (*Alaysa kadhbālik*, 1957, pp. 49-53) in which the students address the villagers by such expressions as:

<sup>4</sup> Yūsuf Idrīs, *Jumbūriyyat Farahāt*, published by Dār Rūz al-Yūsuf, Jan. 1956, p. 7 (Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's introduction).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Naimy's introduction to his play *al-Ābā' wa'l-banūm*, 1917. (Fifth edition, Beirut, 1967, pp. 16-17).

<sup>6</sup> See, S. Somekh, "'al-Nās' wa-dalālatuhā al-ijtimā'iyya", *al-Sharq*, Nov. 1971, pp. 5-10.