

# The Human Bond: Notes on Youssef Idris's Short Stories

SAAD EL-GABALAWY, *University of Calgary*

Youssef Idris is a major exponent of the radical movement from romantic escapism to committed realism in modern Egyptian literature, particularly in the field of short fiction. His literary humanism emanates in part from a childhood spent among the fellaheens in his native village, which endows him with a keen awareness of prevalent suffering and poverty. Moving to Cairo, Idris graduated as a physician and became a practising psychiatrist in his later life. Like Chekhov's, his scientific training and medical profession may have conditioned him to be a close observer of society, providing the artist with rare insights into human nature.

However, it is mainly his familiarity with the masses in the slums and meandering alleys of the big city that makes him feel at home with the crowd, without a trace of intellectual snobbery or condescension. This element also sharpens and enriches Idris's perception of the absurdities and inconsistencies in a class-conscious society, so that he often manages to ensnare the "truth" of Egyptian life in highly significant moments. But the writer never defects into the cynicism of the absurd or the comfort of bitter acquiescence. For he believes in the essential goodness of humble people who lead simple lives, uncontaminated by the deception of hypocrisy of civilized society.

Idris asserts again and again in his works that, in spite of constant frustrations and conflicts in the struggle for survival, these common people usually represent the human bond of love and express the purest emotions. On this assumption, he elevates the lower class and the colloquial style into the principal subject and medium for literature. Without melodramatic sentimentality, Idris pioneers the democratization of the Egyptian short story, thus creating a parallel between the political and artistic revolutions during the last decades. It should be noted, however, that his aim is not a mere reproductive realism, but to reveal the profound significance of ordinary situations in the seemingly trivial and familiar everyday existence. Thus, deriving his material from the simple incidents of daily life, the artist endows common things with ethical connotations, shocking the reader's mind into awareness through new flashes of vision.

In many of his short stories, Idris dwells on the familial bond among humble people, with recurrent emphasis on the parent-child relationship, normally animated by love but sometimes distorted by poverty. This is manifest, for instance, in "The Wallet,"<sup>1</sup> which describes a moment of epiphany in the life of its child-hero. At the outset, the central character is obsessed by an irresistible desire to go to the cinema with some friends but frustrated by the denial of this wish due to his parents' very limited means. Like most children, he regards his father as both loved protector and unjustly obstructive tyrant. He fails to believe that that huge father of his, who seems capable of everything, cannot provide a

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<sup>1</sup>Saad El-Gabalawy, trans. & ed., "The Wallet" in *Modern Egyptian Short Stories* (Fredericton: York Press, 1977), pp. 37-43.

shilling for the ticket, hence his agonizing decision to steal the money from the old man's wallet. In his approach, Idris consciously avoids any sophisticated adult evocations of distant childhood, which are naturally alien to the boy's mentality. Through childishly naïve descriptions, the artist lives in the mind of the boy, managing with happy accuracy to mimic its vibrations under the pressure of the fixed idea. With remarkable subtlety, he also communicates a haunting sense of the utter discrepancy between desire and realization, between dream and reality.

Step by painful step, the child gropes in the dark at night until he finds the wallet, only to discover that it is almost empty, except for some trivial papers, a pebble, and hardly any money. Overwhelmed by the rage of bitter disappointment, the boy stares incredulously at his sleeping father in a faint gleam of light: "Sami always saw his father by day, laughing or frowning, contented or resentful. But in any case, his features always revealed strength, health and vitality, which made the man look like a tame lion who inspired confidence. But at that moment, with his sliding head, open mouth, unkempt hair and resigned features, he appeared very kind . . . very poor and helpless. Not only that . . . but his huge wallet contained nothing except ten piastres, a pebble and a two-piastre coin" (p. 41).

In this flash of illumination, the boy attains an intuitive perception of the old man's real situation, dawning upon his mind with the force of a dramatic revelation. Crucified by guilt and grief, he experiences a compelling desire to kiss the sleeping man, whose eyes are closed in total resignation. This leads to a mysterious inspiration in the child's bosom, urging him to do something in order to fill his helpless father's wallet with hundreds of pounds. At the end, there is a significant reversal of roles, when the boy acts exactly like the father, fetching a glass of water for his thirsty little brother and tucking him in tenderly before going to sleep. Such a luminous moment of maturity marks the child's coming of age, with a new consciousness of the strong ties of mutual sympathy that hold the family together, transcending individual needs and desires.

Idris plays a striking variation on the parent-child relationship in "The Fourth Case,"<sup>2</sup> where there is almost complete identification of a mother and her daughter, who is born out of wedlock. In the social hierarchy, the woman typifies the lowest of the low: an outcast who has failed to find her spiritual home in society, living with various men as a whore, a shoplifter, and a drug pusher, basically to support her girl. The action in the story takes place in a public hospital, where poor patients are deemed to be worthless creatures, treated with cruel rudeness and contempt. They epitomize the wretchedness of the lower class, drifting silently to death.

In this bleak atmosphere, the writer presents a confrontation between the pivotal character and the intern on call, accentuating the contrast of ethical values and exploring rich possibilities of meaning in their dialogue. The physician is an aristocratic young man, whose life reflects a constant search for sensuous pleasure in order to break the circle of boredom, created by abundance of luxury. Wealthy and snobbish, he appears irritated by the procession of disease and misery passing in his office, so that he can hardly touch the patients for fear of contamination. Then comes "the fourth case" of the harlot, who is constantly spitting obscenities at anyone approaching her. The doctor, sheltered all his life from vulgarity and grossness, is stunned by the violent stream of profanities, which implies rejection of his authority and constitutes a threat to his social status.

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<sup>2</sup>Youssef Idris, "al-Hālah al-Rābi'ah" in *Qā' al-Madīnah* (The Bottom of the City) (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-'Arabi, 1967), pp. 7-20.

The element of surprise and resentment is intensified by the woman's casual response to his pompous declaration, uttered with perverse satisfaction, that she has acute consumption fatally preying on her lungs. This indifference to the possibility of imminent death shocks the soft-living physician out of his complacency, revealing the whore as a human being with great inner strength and resilience. But the vital essence of the story is revealed later in their dialogue, when she tells him about her young daughter, stating with defiance and determination that the girl will receive the best education in order to become a doctor like him. Idris explicitly shows that behind the veil of vulgarity, there is deep love, native wisdom, and stubborn resistance. The woman's vision of her daughter's future is totally beyond the young man's comprehension, conditioned as it is by preconceptions and prejudices of the upper class, so that he reacts with anxiety which verges on fear. Within this context, the writer deftly creates a fascinating dialogue which is simultaneously so intense, so moving, so tragic, and so humorous.

In the organic relation between the whore's present and the girl's future, in the mother's endeavor to identify with her daughter in order to exorcise suffering and focus on a meaningful goal, there is a quest for self-recovery, for rebirth and renewal. This, however, does not imply that oppressed people strive to fabricate a fantasy world, to change the facts of life and defeat misery. Their sad acceptance of injustice should not be taken as blind resignation, for they are always dreaming, within the realm of the possible, of a better life for their children and struggling to find self-realization in the next generation. What appears on the surface to be hopeless stagnation cannot hide the imperceptible forward movement towards fulfilment through their offspring, hence the determined insistence on strong filial bonds.

On a different level, the process of self-recovery plays a central part in "Abu Sayyed" (Sayyed's Father),<sup>3</sup> which deals with the predicament of an aging policeman suddenly facing the dilemma of sexual impotence. For a man who has always regarded his erect organ as a status symbol, the loss of virility is a humiliating and shattering experience. In this crisis, Idris depicts the timeless and universal endeavor of man to avoid the anguish of shocking news by means of initial disbelief and self-deception. Clinging to false hope, the policeman sweats desperately night after night in a futile attempt to revive the dead organ, only to suffer further frustration and defeat, which deepen his sense of nothingness. The writer addresses himself to this tragic struggle with despair, revealing with passionate intensity the slow disintegration of the man's ego.

Idris superbly sustains this intensity, never allowing it to decline into bathos or ludicrous melodrama. It is quite touching to see the tough policeman thoroughly humanized by suffering, so that he ultimately releases suppressed emotions and bursts into tears on his wife's bosom, uttering a poignant cry of agony: "What can I do, Naïma? . . . What can I do?" Her sincere empathy and communion with him are condensed in a brief statement of infinite tenderness: "You are the crown of my life . . . I'm worth nothing without you." It would be a misconception to read this as a superficial attempt to console and reassure him; it is a basic affirmation of the human bond of sharing and compassion. Without trying to diminish the sense of loss, the wife transcends it, shoring up light against darkness.

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<sup>3</sup>Youssef Idris, "Abu Sayyed," in *Arkhas Layâli* (The Cheapest Nights), 3rd. ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-'Arabi, 1967), pp. 29-44. This collection, which first appeared in 1953, established Idris's reputation as a major short-story writer in Egypt. Subsequent translations are mine.

It is, however, the denouement that accentuates the regeneration of the defeated spirit. Amidst the turmoil of his emotional crisis, the impotent man suddenly looks at his son as if he had never seen him before. In a moment of clear vision, he realizes that the boy is an embodiment and an extension of his virility. The sense of continuity, the perpetuation of life, confirms, so to speak, that he has not really lost his potency. The story ends on a note of renewal, with the man addressing his son: "Let me kiss you, Sayyed . . . You will soon become a man . . . And I'll find you a beautiful bride. No, I'll find you four pretty women . . . You will be their man, Sayyed. And I will carry your babies with my own hands." Such an experience of reduction and renewal, of negation and affirmation, has a strangely reassuring effect, focusing on positive aspects of the human condition. Idris often suggests that, instead of leading desperate solitary lives, suffering people can always reach out for unity, love, communion, ultimate fusion.

Whereas the stories discussed above explore intimate relationships within the limited circle of the family, there are other pieces which concentrate on the potential of universal sympathy in the family of all men. This can only be attained, the writer maintains, through social equality and justice, for love is a luxury which the poor cannot afford in the daily strife for bare existence. In his radical analyses of the economic basis of Egyptian society, Idris is clearly preoccupied with the factors which engender the suffering of man, twisting his mind, and distorting his vision.

This preoccupation leads him at times to fuse the ideal and the real, the imaginary and everyday experience, in order to visualize a new order which enables men to surmount the barriers separating them. Perhaps the best example in this respect is "Farahat's Republic,"<sup>4</sup> his most remarkable short story, which—for obvious ideological reasons—has been widely acclaimed through translations in Eastern Europe. Idris vividly portrays a scene of immanent hell in a police station, where victims of injustice are huddled up miserably on the floor, their heads drooping with despair. The central figure is an aging sergeant who represents the "might and terror" of police authority. The human tragedy of the poor in Egypt is manifest in the dark and oppressive atmosphere of the station, the tyranny and vulgarity of officers, as well as the grief of persecuted people striving for a ray of light.

A gleam of light there is in the heart of darkness, when the sergeant unconsciously drops his mask and dreams aloud of an ideal society based on a new order of justice and equality: "His face looked old and contented, while the eyes wandered like two dreaming butterflies. His voice became clear, flowing with a sudden sweet ecstasy. The words coming from his mouth were delicious as if sweetened with honey, so that you could not help loving them and loving the melody flowing slowly in the sad silence of the station."

With its emphasis on education, progress, industrialization, and distribution of land, Farahat's vision seems designed to eliminate the economic sources of abject poverty in contemporary Egypt. Against a gloomy background of distress and suppression, he casually describes his "Utopia," unwittingly illuminating the path to universal love. His "fable" is interrupted again and again by the shouts, complaints, and grievances of different people coming to the station. The tension between the ideal and the real becomes increasingly poignant and effective. The almost total indifference of the sergeant to the problems of actual

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<sup>4</sup>*Modern Egyptian Short Stories*, pp. 45-57.

people appears in sharp contrast with the spirit of harmony and compassion embodied in his "republic." Then, after the melody of this ideal dream, there comes the crash into reality, when Farahat once more wears the mask of the rigid policeman, falling back on his old routine and treating social victims with the usual scorn and rudeness. But the dream lingers in the memory, holding the promise of a flower starting to bloom in the desert. The voice of the old sergeant's better self reverberates, embracing all the hopes of the poor and deprived for a decent life.

It is significant that Idris, without oversimplification, at times suggests the total lack of sympathy among amoral members of the privileged class, who are usually locked up in the prison of the ego and cannot perceive or share the emotions of the less fortunate, though occasionally extending the cold hand of charity as a matter of form. In their preoccupation with status, luxury, and possessions, they become isolated islands of feeling, unable to attain any sense of communion, so that the human bond has no place in their system of thought. Dominated by a spirit of savage competition, they approach people to destroy or be destroyed, never to reach fullness of living through natural and genuine love for other human beings.

Such an attitude is incarnated in the protagonist of Idris's long short story, "The Bottom of the City,"<sup>5</sup> a wealthy judge served by a maid whom he has abused and exploited sexually, after recurrent failure to attract women of his own class. His conquest of the girl reveals the wide gulf between love and lust, between physical consummation and true human fulfillment. Alienated from others by his relentless egotism, the judge finds refuge in the security of his prominent position and satisfies his urgent need for the flesh through cheap moments of casual sex with the hapless servant. As for her, she seems to shape her life secretly from within, allowing her body to be abused for the sake of her familial bond with many children at the center of her existence.

In the midst of this stagnant world, an inciting event disturbs the judge's equilibrium and initiates the conflict. One day he discovers the loss of his expensive watch and the search for it becomes an obsession with him. His suspicion is naturally focused on the maid, who vehemently denies the accusation of theft. In the judge's fixed code of thought, all members of the lower class are unscrupulous scoundrels and robbers who would never hesitate to grab money from the rich. With this belief in mind, he embarks on an odyssey through the slums of the city in search of his invaluable possession. Excited to the point of absurdity by the adventure, he moves from his luxury apartment to the bottom of the city, a journey that looks like a descent into hell. Accompanied by his servile attendant, he plods in the labyrinthine dirt alleys meandering off towards the servant's shack. Several slums of varying ugliness constitute the community of the poor. There is an element of the grotesque when a crowd of filthy starving children follows the judge in deep wonder, as if he were a creature from outer space. Idris deftly underlines the tragic contrast between his fancy clothes and their rags, his ruddy complexion and their pale faces covered with flies, his health and their sickness.

Reaching his destination, the judge thoroughly searches the shack of his "bed-partner," with his face betraying signs of perverse delight. Meanwhile the woman is bristling like a female animal, protecting her little ones from the intruder. It is one thing to let him invade her body out of need, but quite

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<sup>5</sup>*Qā' al-Madīnah*, pp. 215-87.

another to allow him to persecute or even touch her flesh and blood. With her sharp awareness of the familial bond, she appears as a superior human being, looking down upon the petty man, regardless of his position, money and all. As might be expected, he eventually finds the watch and emerges triumphantly from the shack, to start the journey back to the heaven of the rich, followed again along the alleys by the multitude of children, who appear as if they were judges of the judge.

In this masterpiece, Idris shows the upper-class world to be void of love, relentlessly violating the human bond, which is an integral part of the divine law, uniting all men in a spirit of perfect harmony, founded on universal brotherhood and equality. The writer clearly rejects the law of the jungle, based on the survival of the fittest and the strongest. Beyond the social reality and its multiple stratification, he can perceive the potential of a new order, when man can redeem his fellow man by love in order to attain plenitude of being. Though painfully conscious of the irrationality and absurdity of life, of prevalent violence and chaos, the artist visualizes a familial and social bond which epitomizes the supremacy of goodness and reason.