

Youssef Idris and His *Gay Leader of Men*

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Most Arabists and literary historians agree that Youssef (Yûsuf) Idris (b. 1927) is one of the most accomplished, if not *the* most accomplished, short-story writer in Arabic literature today. Although he has written six novels and seven plays, Idris's mastery is most evident in the shorter forms. His first collection of short stories, *Arkhas Layâli* (*The Cheapest Nights*), which was published in 1954, established him as one of the leading "realist" writers in Egypt. "Arkhas Layâli," the title story, which appeared earlier in the Cairene newspaper *al-Misri*,¹ and which deals with the sad and depressing life of the downtrodden fellahin, was immediately recognized as a pioneering work. This instant acknowledgment encouraged Y. Idris, who has a medical degree from the University of Cairo, to dedicate most of his time and energy to creative writing. Beside his belletristic works, Mr. Idris has published a great number of essays on literary and social topics; when collected and republished, his non-belletristic writings occupy seven volumes.²

While contributing regularly to *al-Ahrâm*, the leading Egyptian newspaper, and speaking on radio and appearing on television, in November 1987, Mr. Idris, now one of the most-celebrated literary figures in the Arab world, ended a creative lull that had lasted several years, and published his short story *Abû al-Rijâl* in the Cairene magazine *October*.³ Literally translated, "Abû al-Rijâl" means "The Father of Men." However, because the story deals with the latent homosexuality of a strong and virile man who has an exaggerated sense of masculine pride, the title must be understood as an ironic comment on the tragic dilemma of the protagonist. Originally, Y. Idris called his story "al-Kumûn," meaning "latency"; however, because the same word could be also read as "al-Kammûn," which means "cumin," since, in Arabic, both words have the same spelling, Mr. Idris was persuaded by Salâh Muntassir, the magazine's editor, to give his story a new title.⁴

Abû al-Rijâl is the story of a man from a poor and humble family who, after many bitter and heroic fights against poverty and prejudice, succeeds in establishing himself as a scholar, a moral leader, and a social reformer, "the pride and joy of his generation, and of all the following generations."⁵ However, it must be noted now that while he is being praised as a self-made man who

¹ *Al-Misri* 14 March 1953.

² For a complete bibliography of works by, and about, Y. Idris, see H. al-Sakkut and M. Jones, "Bibliographi Yusuf Idris," in *Adab wa Naqd* (Cairo), 34 (Dec. 1987): 125-215.

³ *October* 1 Nov. 1987: 40-45.

⁴ *October* 1 Nov. 1987: 4.

⁵ Youssef Idris, *A Leader of Men / Abû al-Rijâl*, trans. S. Elkhadem (Fredericton, N.B.: York Press, 1988) 10. All references are to this bilingual edition.

overcame poverty and obscurity by his own efforts, some passages of the text depict him as a gangster, a thug, and a ruthless opportunist, "A leader of a gang, but it is a gang of rebellious insurgents, of bloodthirsty murderers and habitual criminals" (3). This striking discrepancy is never cleared up or justified. Some of the critics who unreservedly admire the artistry of Mr. Idrīs would do their best to overlook this obvious inconsistency; but some will feel obliged to point out this unmistakable contradiction, and, in vain, try to find a convincing explanation for it.

Abū al-Rijāl depicts the dilemma which an intelligent, powerful, and aggressively virile man in his early fifties faces when he suddenly discovers that, up until now, his life has been nothing but a sham, and that his extremely masculine attitude is nothing more than a hypocritical imitation of his strong and proud father. In ten short scenes, the author depicts how Sultan, the protagonist, forces himself to analyze, confront, and come to terms with his latent homosexuality. When he discovers that the odd feelings and bizarre sensations that have been tormenting him lately are the symptoms of his suppressed sexual desires, Sultan proceeds to adjust to this ignominious reality. This confrontation between his tormented soul and the sources of its agony is triggered by a meeting that takes place late in the evening between Sultan and Bull, one of the young handsome men who serve him. After summoning Bull to the veranda of his country villa, Sultan orders the young man to sit in silence and wait while he contemplates his next move, and explores how to approach Bull, and how to make it clear to him that his strong and frightful master wants to have sex with him.

While sitting there waiting for his master's orders, "the boy began to wonder what . . . Sultan might want of him; he even went as far as to assume that Sultan might want to do to him what men do to women; and he wondered what he should do" (19). After long hours, during which Sultan has reviewed his life, and analyzed several significant incidents that took place during his childhood, puberty, and manhood, he comes to the conclusion that he must submit to his true nature, lift up this hypocritical facade, and disclose his sexual preference. He then decides to "advance towards the boy . . . he advances and advances; and the boy has reconciled himself to compliance, for what else can he do? but he was stunned with what had happened and what is happening, for he was asked to do the opposite of what he had reconciled himself to accept" (19). After this encounter, Sultan, the mighty lord and proud master, the leader of men, realizes that, from now on, none of his followers and admirers will appreciate his manliness and courage, or treat him with the same reverence and devotion as they used to do in the past. However, "not caring anymore about whatever they would say, or whatever they would hide, or suppress, or reveal, because after the veil of masculinity was removed from him, he himself removed the veil of shame" (19).

In one of his earlier stories, Youssef Idrīs dealt with another daring subject matter, namely sexual impotence. The middle-aged protagonist of "Abū Sayyid" is a virile man with a strong sense of masculine pride. When he is suddenly afflicted with sexual impotence, he suffers greatly and is deeply humiliated; however, his loving and understanding wife helps him to overcome this serious psychological crisis. But compared to *Abū al-Rijāl*, "Abū Sayyid" is—in spite of its somewhat daring topic—moderate indeed. For Islamic Egypt, sex is

not a popular subject that can be discussed in the open or treated in literature, let alone homosexual relationships which have been ignored and avoided on grounds of religion, morality, and taste. Remembering that Egypt—as well other Islamic countries of the Middle East—has been lately pressured into conservatism by the new Fundamentalists, one realizes the risk Mr. Idrīs has taken by depicting the emotions and the sexual desires of a homosexual without condemning, or even reprehending them. On the contrary, he even lets his protagonist voice his dissatisfaction with the stringent ethical norms of his society when he says: ". . . indeed, why is it wrong for a human being to be a [homosexual]?" (18). Also considering the fact that in spite of the relatively enlightened periods which some of the Arab countries have experienced during their long history, never before has any author dared to deal seriously with this extremely sensitive subject. Of course, some early Arabic poets may have alluded to homosexuality in their works (e.g., Abū Nuwās), and a few contemporary authors may have referred to it, or dealt with it superficially (e.g., Najīb Mahfūz), but no one before Y. Idrīs has probed so deeply in the mind and soul of a homosexual.

It must also be stated that although Y. Idrīs deals here with the fleshly desires of a homosexual, he never uses a vulgar expression, or depicts an obscene situation. His choice of words and selection of scenes are done with the utmost care and caution, so that no situation in his story could be construed as pornographic or even erotic. Words and phrases that may sound offensive have been rigorously avoided. For instance, when he depicts how Sultan approaches the young man and forces him to have sex with him, Y. Idrīs stops before the sexual act begins, but then resumes his description after it has taken place, in order to record the thoughts and detail the feelings of the protagonist after he has fulfilled his wishes and gratified his desires: "Everything ended; the sticky sweat reeking of the smell of a shattered pride, a torn dignity, and a degradation he relishes and enjoys; nauseous odors when mixed together, but they never made him nauseous" (19). Or, when he introduces the motif of bestiality into his story, Mr. Idrīs does it in such a way that it does not offend the sensibilities of his readers: "No, his mother had never impugned his masculinity, on the contrary, she was always proud of him; he only remembers an infamous day when his mother entered the cattle pen on a summer day when everyone else was resting or having a nap, to find him alone in the pen with the she-ass of his uncle . . . he still remembers the way his mother acted; and he must confess now that her behavior was the epitome of worldly wisdom; as if she were a psychiatrist, because when she opened the door of the pen and saw him, she said, while turning back fast: 'How could you mount your uncle's she-ass without a saddle, you young donkey?'" (12). Also, when Mr. Idrīs incorporates the popular, but vulgar proverb, "ʿIryān al-Tiz wa yuhibb al-Ta'miz" (literally translated it means: "With a naked ass, but likes to prance") in his story, he rewords it so that it does not sound coarse or tasteless: "ʿIryān al-Mu'khkhirah wa yuhibb al-Fashkharah" (meaning, literally, "His posterior is naked, and he is fond of boasting," which was translated in this edition as: "Although he is too poor even to cover his behind / He brags like a man who is wealthy and refined" [7]).

These, and other concessions made by Mr. Idrīs while dealing with this highly controversial subject matter, have enabled him to publish his story in one of the leading magazines in Egypt without arousing the ire of the conservative circles in his country or endangering his reputation as the leading short-

story writer of the Arab World. While there may be some minor reservations regarding the literary and artistic merit of this work, there should be no doubt that, because of its daring topic, *Abû al-Rijâl* will remain one of the most pioneering works in Arabic fiction.