

**TREATMENT OF THEME AND CHARACTERISATION
IN THE WORKS OF YŪSUF IDRĪS**

by

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ABSTRACT

Yūsuf Idrīs is a short story writer, novelist and playwright. On the whole, he uses each genre for different purposes. In his short stories he is the subjective writer concerned with a minute analysis of mental states and moods. In his novels he is the socially aware and politically committed writer, while in his plays he tackles social problems on an abstract level.

While he has succeeded to a great extent as a short story writer and a playwright Yūsuf Idrīs has failed as a novelist. His novels appear to be a string of short stories held together tenuously by a main theme or else they are overblown short stories. Yūsuf Idrīs then is to be seen primarily as a short story writer and a playwright.

In the short stories the author treats his characters as lonely individuals who suffer by being isolated from other human beings, and the solution to their problem lies in a return to the fold of the corporate entity. Here Yūsuf Idrīs contradicts himself, as it is precisely this corporate entity, supposedly ensuring the happiness of the individual which is the source of his unhappiness. The characters are depicted as living either in the city or the country. For Yūsuf Idrīs it is the latter that promises harmonious human relationships while the former is the source of unhappiness. By idealising the country the author distorts the quality of urban living when contrasting town life and city life.

The characters are constantly faced with defeat, mainly through poverty. Sex occupies a central position in his writing and it is treated in terms of its influence on behaviour. Physical and mental suffering are treated in detail and the author's training as a medical man is readily apparent. The author's major contribution, however, lies in his analysis of the obsession, which underlies many of his short stories, and influences his technique of characterisation.

His plays are diametrically opposed to the rest of his work. In them the psychological element is lacking and issues are discussed on an abstract level. It is as if the short stories and the plays had been written by two different men.

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CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION	6
CHAPTER II LIFE IN THE COUNTRY AND IN THE CITY	29
CHAPTER III THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE: DEFEAT AND LONELINESS	60
CHAPTER IV THE INFLUENCE OF SEX ON BEHAVIOUR	93
CHAPTER V PHYSICAL AND MENTAL SUFFERING	168
CHAPTER VI OBSESSION	191
CHAPTER VII POLITICAL COMMITMENT	260
CHAPTER VIII THE EGYPTIAN NATIONAL CHARACTER	294
CHAPTER IX SOCIAL THEMES	309
CHAPTER X CONCLUSION	339
BIBLIOGRAPHY	347

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This study has been written by a non-native speaker of Arabic, and an outsider to the traditions of Arabic culture and literature. During his contact with that literature he has had the opportunity of hearing various views on that field, and they have been to a great degree negative: firstly from Europeans and Americans who would generally put their views in the form of a question, legitimate and innocent enough on the surface: "Can one really understand a literature, such as Arabic, which is the product of a tradition so different from our own?" Secondly the view of the Arabs themselves, who, because of their tact toward this writer, have been implicit rather than explicit. Essentially, they imply that a European (or American) cannot understand Arabic literature, partly because of the matter of a different tradition and partly because of the Arabs' linguistic ethnocentrism, which makes them convinced that no non-Arab, especially a "Westerner", can ever master the subtleties of their language. The two positions, the "Western", European-American, and the "Eastern", Arab, state the same proposition: The "Westerner" cannot understand Arabic culture in general and Arabic literature in particular.

As this writer is a "Westerner" he has been struck by a statement made by another "Westerner" who explicitly states the impossibility of mutual understanding.

This is all the more surprising since this person was foremost a scholar in the field of Arabic culture and literature. He writes concerning modern Arabic literature: "It is not for the outsider to determine the branch of literary endeavor in which the Arab public will recognize itself most readily, nor is it for him to select within that branch the individual works that are being experienced as the most representative and to which therefore the foreigner writer, critic, scholar, and public at large should be exposed."¹

The Arab and European-American positions say the same thing, but is their significance the same? To this writer, the answer is no. The topic of discussion, Arabic literature, is the same, but the speakers are different. On the one hand is an insider (Arab) giving his views to an outsider (European or American), and on the other are outsiders making statements for their own consumption. This distinction is fundamental.

Before the European-American position is tackled, the Arab position should be inspected most closely, as it ultimately has a bearing on the European-American one. It is important to note who the Arabs are that speak out on the subject. Having known Arabs both inside and outside the Middle East, this writer has been struck by the difference in their thinking and attitudes. Many become defensive about their cultural heritage once they are in the "West", and they live it nostalgically. This is especially true of those who

1. G.E. von Grunebaum, in Arabic Writing Today. The Short Story, p.13.

actually settle in the "West". This defensive attitude is very likely reinforced by anti-Western attitudes exemplified by an author such as Tawfiq al-Hakīm who believes in the essential dichotomy between East and West.¹ This attitude is not restricted to the Arab world, but is also found further East.²

These attitudes are part of a given culture at a given point of history. But such ideas may undergo modification since they are part of a living culture. If, however, a member of his culture leaves his milieu the culture ceases to be a living thing but may become a rigid set of unchanging values to which the individual refers in his new environment. This is a universal phenomenon and is by no means restricted to the Arabs. This writer has seen this happen in the case of Europeans who have emigrated to the United States. Such individuals, however, have one advantage over the Arabs in that they are leaving one "Western" culture for another, and in principle should be able to participate in the wider "Western" culture. But in reality not all are able to do so, and the migration warps them in some way or other.

Thus it would be more difficult for an Arab to make the cultural adjustment in the "West", as he comes from a long tradition distinct from the European one. When we go back to the immediate topic under discussion, the understanding of Arab literature, the Arab is not at such a disadvantage as it seems. "Western" literature is now a part of his tradition, and a living

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1. Tawfiq al-Hakīm, Fann al-Adab, at-Ta'āduliyya, Taḥta Shams al-Fikr and ‘Uṣfūr min ash-Sharq.
 2. Rabindranath Tagore, Sādhanā.

tradition at that. Books are translated, and they have an impact on the writers. This last point is crucial to the discussion. If one turns to the Westerner who is interested in Arabic literature, such an individual is at a real disadvantage. The Arab tradition is not part of his active cultural arsenal, and he therefore has to study Arab literature from scratch. The Arab has a glimpse of European mores, through literature, and in many cases he travels as well. The European on the other hand is at a loss as to what to make of modern Arab literature, because his culture does not contain the Arab element. Everything is new to him with the result that he does not know how to approach Arab literature. He is faced with an apparently insurmountable barrier and in many cases it is this situation which makes him retreat and say that cultural understanding is difficult, if not impossible. It is on this level that, despite the reservations stated above, the Arab is more successful in adjusting culturally to the "West" than a "Westerner" to the "East".

The question whether one can understand a foreign culture is in reality a philosophical one, and it touches on the fundamental problem of the "I" and the "Other".¹ The problem, on the cultural level, is never perceived in these terms, but in an argument the protagonists will ultimately speak of themselves, and it is on this level that communication will be most likely to stop. Although

1. On this problem see Karl Jaspers, Reason and Existenz, and Gabriel Marcel, Etre et Avoir.

speaking as individuals, they will not see themselves as such, but as members of their respective cultures, and their cultural values will do their thinking for them. This is the opposite of what usually happens when the protagonists in an argument belong to the same culture: one is required to think individually and adopt a critical attitude towards the values of that culture. By this the individual acquires his distinctiveness and is able to enrich intellectually and artistically not only himself but those around him, and even have an impact on his culture, depending on his achievements. It is axiomatic to this writer that the same attitude should govern the study of other cultures and that the question as to whether one can understand a foreign culture should be avoided, as it is really this question that inhibits such understanding, and not the cultures themselves. Instead, the question that should be asked is "how" to understand a foreign culture because when asked in this form it is positive and stimulates in the individual his curiosity and all his particular abilities. If such an individual deepens his interest in such endeavour, his horizons will inevitably expand to his own enrichment and perhaps also to that of his foreign interlocutor. The spectre of relativism should not be raised, and one must not be afraid to make value judgments, for to be a literary man means making value judgments; this applies to one's own as well as to someone else's culture.

It was in this spirit that this study of Yūsuf Idrīs was undertaken. It was not the purpose to study the author primarily as an Arab phenomenon, although the fact of his belonging to the Arab and Egyptian cultural milieu

determines his outlook on life. It was the unravelling of Yūsuf Idrīs's outlook on life that was the real purpose of this thesis, with an attempt at an assessment.

To study an author requires empathy in order for one to be able to feel the themes and characters. This is especially true of Yūsuf Idrīs, a highly subjective writer whose language is very rich on the affective side.

Yūsuf Idrīs has written short stories, novels and plays. It is as a short story writer and playwright that he is most successful.

In his short stories, Yūsuf Idrīs is primarily a psychological writer whose purpose is a minute analysis of mental states and moods. He is able to succeed in this as the characters are lonely, and therefore self-contained. In actual fact Yūsuf Idrīs's world, as expressed in his works, is dichotomous: on the one hand there is the individual, and on the other, diametrically opposed to him, is the world. A gulf separates the two, with the individual trying to reach out to the world. The striving to reach the world is an agonizing experience, and the process is described in psychological terms.

On the surface it would seem that the author is stressing the suffering of the individual caused by a cruel society which is preventing him from asserting his individuality which requires the abolition of social constraints. This would be the impression produced, taking into account only the psychology of the characters. The picture changes when one views these works, bearing in mind

Yūsuf Idrīs's technique of writing. The more ego conscious the characters, the less pronounced the description of the background becomes, i.e. the world of society, and vice versa. The more isolated the characters are, the more they suffer, the prime example being Shawqi in the story 'al-ʿAskarī al-Aswad' (see below, pp. 239-257), who has retreated into himself to such an extent that he is unable to communicate with anyone. At the other extreme are a number of stories, in particular those in the collection Arkhaṣ Layālī, where the characters are stereotyped, and the background is prominent, with emphasis on social intercourse. These two extremes may very well be the expression on Yūsuf Idrīs's part of an ideology consisting of a duality of individual and collective life which may offer a clue to his value judgment on the subject. In a number of stories, 'Shaykhūkha bidūn Junūn', 'Sirruhu al-Bāṭi', 'Abu al-Hawl', see below, pp. 68-70, 296-303, 43-46 respectively),

✓ Yūsuf Idrīs portrays groups of individuals as one living body. The social quality of his "living body" seems to express social solidarity which to Yūsuf Idrīs is the most commendable quality and the goal of life. This was explicitly borne out by Yūsuf Idrīs himself during a talk that he gave at the University of London in October 1971. His discussion revolved around his dramatic production and he stressed in particular his play al-Farāfir, a dramatic representation of his concept of the theatre. According to him the theatrical play is a collective event, an expression of the collective

milieu from which it springs. To emphasise the point, he has created characters, 'spectators', seated in the audience who participate in the play. This is a restatement of what he said in the preface to the play: "This story has been written on the basis of the participation of the people (jumhūr) with the action enabling a theatrical work to be seen in terms of a simple unity of audience and actor. Thus here the people are considered part of the actors, and the actors are considered part of the people."¹

Although these statements concern dramatic production they are echoed throughout Yūsuf Idrīs's work, and in this light the psychological aspect of his work acquires a new significance. From the point of view of his art, the stress is on the individual, and Yūsuf Idrīs has the gift of being able to analyse the agonies of unhappiness in the lonely person, but the over-all significance of these works shifts on to the collective. Man suffers because he is unable to reach out and become part of human society. He may withdraw because of his refusal to acknowledge a hostile world and therefore suffer all the more for it. Yet these characters are basically gregarious, and there is an effort on the part of the author to show that the characters want to return to the fold of human society: in 'al-Askarī al-Aswad' Shawqī resolves his conflict when he meets his torturer, thereby recovering his ability to be sociable, or in 'Lughat al-Āy Āy' where Dr. Ḥadīdi realises when confronted by a sick childhood friend, that he has cut himself off from the rest of humanity for the sake

1. Al-Farāfir, in Al-Mahzaia al-Ardiyya. Al-Farāfir, p.131.

of success (see below, pp. 225-233). In other works we may not be told the outcome, but we find this desire on the part of the characters to reach out to society.

The lonely characters lead extremely complicated lives and one senses that a return to the fold will give them back the simplicity of living. The simplicity striven for is idyllic. It can be seen in the story 'an-Naddāha' in which members of the porter's family are sitting on the doorstep enjoying themselves, with kindness radiating from them (see below, p. 99).

The story 'Lu'bat al-Bayt' is an even better example. Two children, a boy and a girl 'play house'. They assume the roles of adults and in their game they quarrel. It is an adult quarrel, stemming from their make-believe adult situation, and the two partners stop speaking to each other. The story, however, ends as innocently as it has begun. The little boy goes to the little girl and holds her tenderly by the waist.¹ This, it would seem, is what happiness is to Yūsuf Idrīs: simple, uncomplicated relationships made alive through kindness. In 'Li'anna al-Qiyāma lā Taqūm' a little boy yearns for the unconditional affection of his mother (see below, pp. 125-127), and in 'Ramadān' another little boy craves attention from his parents (see below, p. 203). It is perhaps no coincidence that Yūsuf Idrīs uses children to symbolise ideal relationships. In the stories cited above the children were solitary like the adult characters,

1. 'Lu'bat al-Bayt', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, pp. 270-276.

but they can also be viewed collectively, symbolising the same ideal quality: in the novel al-Haram the children of ^{the} 'izba spontaneously make friends with the children of the despised migrant workers (see below, p. 163).

The roots of loneliness then reside in the individual's inability to be part of the corporate entity. The question arises as to why this is so. Yūsuf Idrīs puts forward several reasons, all of which, except one, are social. It is the social causes which will be considered first, as they are the most prominent ones in the author's work. The first is social injustice as embodied in urban living. On the one hand are found the affluent professional bourgeoisie, and on the other the poor. It is interesting that Yūsuf Idrīs hardly touches on the subject of the rich, with the exception of the play Malik al-Qun which criticises the institution of rich absentee landlords (see below, pp. 335-336).

To Yūsuf Idrīs it is the poor that are the people. He always treats them in a favourable light as the victims of society. Toward professional men he is neutral in this respect, and treats them in terms of their inner problems as they relate to their professions. But again he is sympathetic in his treatment, and if he criticises them for their middle class habits, he does so mockingly in as in 'al-Hāla ar-Rābi'a' where a doctor is concerned with having the best sandwiches brought from Groppi's, the latest magazines showing girls in bathing costumes, and having the door knob sparkling clean (see below, pp. 65-66).

It is easy to know where Yūsuf Idrīs's sympathies lie, namely with the

poor. On the surface this looks like a leftist bias, but such an orientation presupposes an oppressive social class, which in the author's work is non-existent. The true enemy of man is urban living, not class. It would have been easy for Yūsuf Idrīs to make the dehumanizing life of the city directly dependent on the existence of a rich exploiting ruling class, but this he has not done. Instead he sentimentalises and puts forward a solution by praising the countryside (see below, pp. 56-59). The point of criticism concerning Yūsuf Idrīs's failure to exploit the issue of urban misery in terms of an ideology, would not have been raised, had it not been for the fact that he does discuss social issues per se in his plays al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya and al-Farāfir. In the former he discusses the evils of private property, a typically leftist topic, and in the latter the philosophical problem of the master-servant relationship. It is a pity that the author has not been able to weave such topics into his prose work. One might conclude that the intersection of what is expressed in these two genres would give an overall picture of Yūsuf Idrīs's thinking, and shed more light on the ideological content of his stories. That this does not happen is a disappointment. The two genres are not complementary, but separate content wise, with a deep gulf dividing them. The short stories deal with the empirical existence of the characters, while the plays deal with abstractions which shed no light on the rest of Yūsuf Idrīs's work. It goes to show that his vision is not unified and consequently he is unable to see the human

condition globally. Instead he jumps from one aspect of the human condition to another. It is for this reason that the short stories should be studied separately, with an eye however for clues such as the linking of the collective aspect of the theatre to the description of collective scenes in the short stories, to underline the author's preoccupation with the corporate entity. The dichotomy in his work shows that Yūsuf Idrīs is unaware of any deeper social significance in his stories, but that he sees one in his plays, which are philosophical. Thus the main cause of misery is urban living as opposed to the idyllic countryside.

Another cause of the inability of the individual to become part of the corporate entity is poverty, shared by both city and country alike, although in the country it is more bearable, by virtue of the fact that there the inhabitants are allowed a dignity which is lacking to the city dwellers. A third cause, is competitive life, which gives rise to the rat race that is the curse of the middle class, concerned with status, success and money. Middle class characters lead lonely lives because they are wrapped up in their careers at the expense of human relationships. Professionals in stories dealing with this concern themselves with the meaning of authenticity.¹

Thus one finds in Yūsuf Idrīs a dichotomy of the individual and the corporate entity. The corporate entity should not be taken from a political

1. A common topic in twentieth century literature. See R.M. Albérès, L'Aventure intellectuelle du XX^e siècle, pp.183-185.

point of view as motivating the characters. The author's intention is clearly to depict the individual against the background of the corporate entity. If one is to look for ideological or political ideas, they are only to be found in passages which present them explicitly, as in the novel Qisṣat Ḥubb (see below, pp. 276-277) or 'Sirruhu al-Bāṭi', where the corporate entity, i.e. the people, is extolled as the corporate entity in terms of itself. It should be stressed that such passages are political and extol the people as being the real human beings and therefore the cornerstones of the nation. But nowhere does one find any assumption as to what is to be done in order to correct social injustice. Yūsuf Idrīs discusses political events with a clear bias in favour of the Revolution, but does not exploit to the full the potential of the revolutionary ideology with regard to the social conditions of Egypt. Instead of looking at social evils being the product of an oppressive class, a view that one would expect from his insistence on the collective and his support for the Revolution, he only notes the products of such a system: poverty, greed, aggression and violence. Here he is victim of a contradiction. On the one hand the corporate entity is the source of happiness for the tormented individual, but it is in the corporate entity that lie the evils mentioned. On one hand the individual suffers by being cut off, and regains his sense of balance by returning to the fold. On the other hand, it is

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'al-*ʿAskarī* al-*Aswad*' the opposite holds true. Here the focus is on the individual with the entity absent. Thus there seems to be an inverse ratio between the complexity of Yūsuf Idrīs's characters and their psychological distance from the corporate entity.

The concept of the corporate entity can be an oversimplification, however. Yūsuf Idrīs deals with a variety of situations but in most the stress is on one or two main characters who relate to the outside world through those who are nearest to them, and this determines the significance of the corporate entity in relation to them. Thus, in the case of Shawqī in 'al-*ʿAskarī* al-*Aswad*' those closest to him are his colleagues at the hospital who are almost identical with the corporate entity, and the way he reacts to them he reacts to to the world at large. In 'Abu Sayyid', the closest person is the wife from whom Abu Sayyid feels isolated, and beyond her from the world. When he becomes reconciled with his wife, he also becomes reconciled with the world (see below, pp. 236-239). Sometimes the corporate entity in the wider sense of the word is absent, as in 'Li'anna al-*Qiyāma* lā *Taqūm*', in which the isolation of the little boy stems from loss of affection. This would seem to imply that the concept of the corporate entity does not apply in this particular story, but in reality the story fits in logically with the rest. Yūsuf Idrīs's characters are social beings right to the core, in spite of being overly conscious of their distinctness from the rest of humanity. They crave close bonds and harmonious

relationships with society, as in the case of 'Abdalla's in the story 'Qā' al-Madīna' (see below, pp. 100-107). When considering Yūsuf Idrīs's stories as a whole this becomes apparent and he is consistent. The corporate entity is the fundamental point of reference and it is in relation to it that Yūsuf Idrīs analyses his characters.

What gives Yūsuf Idrīs's characters their flavour, however, is their obsessed quality. The characters can be obsessed by practically anything, from trivial concrete objects to the most highly abstract ideas. It is obsession which gives the characters their inward looking quality, and accentuates their separateness from the corporate entity. When a character finds himself in such a state the outside world develops sharp contours which, thanks to Yūsuf Idrīs's sharp eye for detail and contrast, underline a particular obsession. In fact there is a correlation between an obsessed state and the description of objects and people, which stems from the characters projecting their moods on to them.

Sometimes his descriptions of obsession may be humorous, but on the whole they are grim, 'al-'Askarī al-Aswad' being the most perfect example. What makes such obsessions so grim is the inclusion of bloody scenes. This can be easily accounted for by the fact that Yūsuf Idrīs is a medical man by training. His descriptions are at times clinical, as in 'al-'Amaliyya al-Kubrā' which takes place in a hospital (see below, pp. 181-185). Physical suffering

is the non-social cause of human misery, and by making the characters obsessed Yūsuf Idrīs wants to create on the reader's part an abhorrence for physical pain which through indifference of human beings to one another can be made unnecessarily intolerable.

This medical aspect recurs in Yūsuf Idrīs's works in various guises and this may partly explain the obsessional aspect. The author's insistence on the body does not rest primarily with the anatomical descriptions of the suffering flesh for its own sake. The human psyche is involved as well and at times it is difficult to draw a distinction between the two. It is tempting to describe Yūsuf Idrīs's characters as 'psychosomatic' in the sense that man's body and mind are held together through instinct which to a great degree governs his behaviour. An obsession may take a total hold over a man's mind but at the same time he reacts physically to his mental state, or his physical state may be the root of a change in his mental state. Obsession comes irrationally, and depending on its type various instincts come into play, such as fear and hate. Actions born of such instincts in an obsessional state seek extreme forms of gratification in Yūsuf Idrīs's characters: the passionate desire to possess others, whether through forcefulness of character or brute force, such as rape, or the desire to annihilate.¹

1. On cruelty in European literature, see Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony, p.27.

The characters suffer the worst situations and undergo the most complicated agonies as a result. This would seem to show that existence is hopeless in Yūsuf Idrīs's eyes, but this is not the case. Deep down the author is an optimist because in many cases the characters return to normal. It is perhaps because of extreme and complicated suffering that Yūsuf Idrīs envisages happiness in the childlike terms described above. The return to normal is worth examining. Such characters are changed persons, but function as they used to before the crisis. The tripartite division of Yūsuf Idrīs's characters into mind, body and instinct is useful here, and their interplay has a different significance to Yūsuf Idrīs depending on whether a character is in a state of crisis or has overcome it. Under crisis these three elements disrupt the character and make him hypersensitive to the extent of becoming manic depressive. The three elements conspire to destroy the human personality. An external stimulus infects the character like a germ, which in the end will have to be eradicated. Thus after a crisis the elements are at rest, and so is the character. This makes Yūsuf Idrīs's characters very vulnerable to outside pressure, and one way to avoid pressure is to escape, like 'Amm Ḥasan in 'Ṣāḥib Miṣr' who gives up wife and family to roam the Egyptian countryside in apparent happiness, without any responsibilities (see below, pp. 88-91).

Where they are portrayed as victims of purely social evils, such as poverty, such characters, by virtue of their predicament, cannot overcome their

wretchedness, as the solution to poverty lies beyond them. For this reason such works ought to be viewed as pieces of social writing, depicting the wretched conditions which give rise to these specific situations. It should be borne in mind, however, that in view of Yūsuf Idrīs's insistence on describing unhappy situations, and making them one-sided, his picture of Egypt is one-sided. One must turn to a writer like Najīb Maḥfūz to appreciate the difference. In the latter's writings one gets a rich view of Egyptian society through a wealth of varied characters. Yūsuf Idrīs's characters on the other hand look too much alike. It is almost as if they were one character, modified slightly according to the requirements of the specific story.

Chapters two to six of this thesis deal with the topics discussed above. The classification into these particular chapters is based on the elements most prominent in the stories. These elements are present to a greater or lesser extent in the bulk of Yūsuf Idrīs's writings, but this classification has proved to be convenient as it reflects Yūsuf Idrīs's angles of approach to his material. Thus in chapter two, it is the setting, country and city, that distinguishes this group of stories from the rest. In chapter three the themes of defeat and loneliness are most prominent, and in chapter four it is preoccupation with sex. In chapter five physical and mental suffering are the main themes, and chapter six, the most important chapter of this group, deals with obsession. The sequence of the chapters is not arbitrary, but follows a progression. Thus the thesis starts

with the setting in order to show the surroundings in which the characters move, and this serves as an introduction to the next chapter in which the human condition of Yūsuf Idrīs's characters is explored. These two chapters form a unit, to be complemented by the next two chapters which also form a unit. In them are contrasted pleasure and pain in the physical sense with its attendant consequences of unhappiness, discussed in the preceding two chapters.¹ Chapter six is the culminating chapter which explores the mental quality of the characters. Obsession is found in all the preceding chapters, but in this one the focus is on the analysis of the state proper.

This part of the thesis centres on the most important part of Yūsuf Idrīs's work. It has a variety of themes and the heroes are characterised according to the setting and themes involved. Obsession in turn determines the selection of setting, theme and the devices used to characterise the heroes.

Chapters seven to nine point to another side of Yūsuf Idrīs's artistic character, the socially aware thinker. Although, as has been pointed out, the stories dealt with in the first part of the thesis have a social colouring, despite their highly individual character, the works dealt with in the second part are concerned solely with social aspects. Thus chapters seven and eight are

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1. One article interprets Yūsuf Idrīs's work in terms of the Oedipus complex. The attempt is a failure as the critic uses his facts to fit the theory instead of the other way round. The result is an oversimplification and distortion of Yūsuf Idrīs's work. The psychoanalytic approach is deliberately avoided in this thesis. See Ghālīb Halasā, "Masīrat Yūsuf Idrīs ilā al-'Uqda al-Ūdībiyya", Nādī al-Qiṣṣa, August 1970, pp.12-20.

on the political scene. Chapter seven deals with political commitment and this leads to chapter eight in which the Egyptian national character is extolled. But here Yūsuf Idrīs is not purely a political thinker. He may begin with the collective aspect of society, but he returns to the individual. Somehow, despite his awe of the collective the author seems to refuse to let his characters be submerged. This could be an ambivalent attitude on Yūsuf Idrīs's part, or it could be the expression of a human weakness of which Yūsuf Idrīs is the victim and which Eric Hoffer has described: namely that even the most rational of men is momentarily carried away by the sight of military parades with their display of nationalistic pageantry.¹ One is struck by the similarity to the Frenchman, Roger Clément, in 'Sirruhu al-Bātī'.

It is, however, chapter nine that stands apart from the rest of the author's work. It differs in terms of genre, content and technique. It deals with plays, with the exception of 'Jumūriyyat Farḥat' which, however, has been dramatised. The plays deal with social themes, but on a drastically different level. The themes treated are abstract, so that this part of Yūsuf Idrīs's work could confidently be labelled as philosophical. The underlying theme is that of power, which is treated on the level of an argument, without reference to concrete situations, as happens in the greater part of Yūsuf Idrīs's writings. Each character is the embodiment of an idea, and the dialogue is a form of philosophical discussion

1. Eric Hoffer, The True Believer, p. 83.

of society's ills. The technique used is that of the absurd theatre.¹ The dialogue is absurd and the situation is absurd. The absurdity is enhanced by humour. This last element is again a distinguishing feature here. In the rest of his work Yūsuf Idrīs is grim. Here, however, he sparkles with laughter and wit. Perhaps it is because he has become grim to the point of morbidity in his writing that he needs a release and this the plays provide. This could also point to a dichotomy in Yūsuf Idrīs himself. On one hand stands his preoccupation with the mechanism of the predicament of the individual residing in the complexities of his emotions, a thing which needs an in-depth analysis, by its very nature requiring the exclusion of the outside world. On the other hand stand the larger issues which are of a highly abstract nature, and which can be discussed only on their own level, without recourse to human emotion. The play al-Farāfīr is the best example of this. It is ~~only~~ a pity that Yūsuf Idrīs has not been able to synthesise these two aspects of his artistic personality and create characters that are involved on the abstract level, living the issues in the psychological world that he has created elsewhere. This is not to say that one should dictate to an author what he must write, but in this case one cannot help making such an observation.

1 . "Le sujet? Le titre? (...). Tout est dans les répliques, dans le jeu, dans les images scéniques". Eugene Ionesco, quoted in Albérès, op. cit., p.357.

Considering Yūsuf Idrīs's work as a whole, such a synthesis is a logical possibility. If he succeeded in such an endeavour he could come close to the French existentialist writers, notably Jean Paul Sartre.¹

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1. He could become Victor Brombert's "intellectual hero": "Obsessed by the suffering of others, convinced that man's salvation lies in solidarity, he is equally convinced of the walled-in nature of human consciousness and paralyzed by his very lucidity. Dreaming of his high social and spiritual mission, he knows his efforts are doomed to defeat, yet blames himself for his own futility. Concerned with the regeneration of mankind, driven by the urge to speak for and with others, he also flirts with catastrophe and secretly yearns for his own destruction. He is in fact the hero, the victim and the buffoon of a tortured era which has experienced politics as tragedy, freedom as necessity, and where history has assumed the urgent voice of a fatum. [See his study, The Intellectual Hero. Studies in the French Novel 1880-1955, p. 19.]

CHAPTER TWO

LIFE IN THE COUNTRY AND IN THE CITY

An important and recurrent theme in the work of Yūsuf Idrīs is the life of the peasants and many of the stories he has written deal with aspects of life in the countryside. These need to be read in contrast to those dealing with life in the city, and moreover should be treated first, as they throw light on some of the city stories in which the characters have migrated from the country to the urban complex.

One of the main features of rural life as portrayed by Yūsuf Idrīs is its uneventfulness and predictability. It is also hard, with everyone struggling to overcome chronic poverty. It is only at the end of the day that people in a village are able to rest and indulge in simple pleasures, the most important being conversation. There is, however, hardly anything new in their conversations, unless some unexpected event occurs (see below, pp. 153-154). In such cases the whole community is thrown into turmoil and the matter is hotly debated. When the excitement subsides life becomes monotonous again. The stories depicting such situations are rather gloomy, but the country people, despite their grinding way of life, are not empty of humanity. On the contrary, they are able to preserve their laughter and wit. They are also cunning, in a humorous sort of way.

When they come in contact with visitors from the city, they find it difficult at times to cope with their sophistication, but they are not overwhelmed by it. The real difference between the city people and country people begins to appear, however, when a character returns to his village, having spent some time working in the big city, Cairo or Alexandria. Such a person, having suffered the shock of the complex urban surroundings, may find it almost impossible to become part of his old environment again. Sometimes such a readjustment may be an agonizing experience (see below, pp. 52-55).

The country stories differ from the city stories in one important respect. In the former Yūsuf Idrīs lays stress on the collective aspects of life. The individual characters are not well delineated, their motives are largely unknown, and they move in an atmosphere which isolates the aspect of country life that Yūsuf Idrīs intends to make his theme. In the city stories, on the other hand, the situation is reversed: the author concentrates on the psychological make-up of his characters, with ordinary social life serving as a background. One finds that in the country stories one comes across large groups of people the main characters of which are more representative of the quality of life that they all live. One of these features, uneventfulness, is described in 'Ḥādithat Sharaf': "The events are few and known; you know them even before they happen... but sometimes, unknown events happen, which one cannot foresee, like that day when shouts reverberated over the fields, dark shouts which tore the wide expanse of the countryside, suddenly echoing, in a

frightening and imploring way, without you knowing their origin; but you know that something terrible must have happened. Then you must wake up and find yourself running or at least trying to find out what is the matter."¹

Country life is postulated predictable. When in 'Ḥadīthat Sharaf', scandal breaks out concerning the presumed loss of Faṭīma's virginity at the hands of Gharīb, the event had in fact long been assumed to have happened (see below p. 139). Life in the country is hard and monotonous. To relieve boredom after a day's work the men congregate in the evenings. Just as their lives are simple, so even their hours of leisure are monotonous. This is described in the story 'Fī al-Layl' which concerns a typical evening in a village coffee house. After a hard day's work the men gather and rest: "Some stretched their legs in a weary and bored manner, others sat crosslegged, and the remainder rested their backs against the walls in order to relieve in them what was in them of persistent pain."² The only thing that rouses them out of their torpor is the presence of 'Awf, who never fails to enliven their evenings. For that reason he is eagerly awaited every night. 'Awf's secret is that he knows how to make others laugh. He is the kind of man who can elicit laughter even before he does or says anything funny.

1. 'Ḥadīthat Sharaf', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.95.

2. 'Fī al-Layl', in Arkhaṣ Layālī, p.226.

‘Awf finally arrives, and the customers wake up. He is a polite man, and the poorest man in the village, who does all sorts of little jobs, and every evening he too goes to the coffee shop. Everyone loves him, and he enjoys making the others laugh. It is not that he is a comedian. His gift lies in his ability to set off the laughter mechanism, and to make the people laugh for no reason. Their laughter has a therapeutic value and this is needed to make them forget their hard lives: "They all loved him without exception, despite the fact that he was the poorest man in the village, and despite the fact that their lives were barren and difficult, lives in which love could not find a place, nor could they live except to hate, resent and take things from one another. Like everyone in the village, they wanted to live, and there life was only possible through struggle. Survival belonged only to the strongest."¹

‘Awf then shows how to make them forget. Some would laugh while others would begin by only pretending; but they in turn would soon be induced only to laugh in all sincerity. The evening becomes more enjoyable when they pass round the opium, and everyone is relaxed and tolerant. ‘Awf tells them his theory about the causes of the Second World War, a story that he has told countless times, but all want to hear it again.

‘Awf knows then how to amuse them, but his entertainment is always the same. It is an aspect of the simplicity of their lives, in which nothing new ever happens: "...with each of ‘Awf's stories they would be more and more

1. Ibid., p.233.

convinced that their lives had nothing new or original to them, even death had nothing new in it but only a sad return to an old sadness. People are born, grow up and then die."¹

Another source of laughter is the arrival of 'Awf's bossy wife. But after initial vacillation, he stands up to her, and tells her to go away. She resists, but under the threat of divorce she leaves promptly. He, too, is escaping from something.²

The alleviation of boredom is again shown in the story 'Rihān',³ in which the character and centre of attention is an emaciated Beduin, who stops at a country coffee house. It is a hot summer day, and every one is sitting around lazily. The appearance of the Beduin is a welcome change. They find out from him where he is from and where he is going, but boredom soon sets in again. Then Ṣālīḥ, the fruit vendor, livens things up. He starts praising his figs, and it is not long before every one is challenging the Beduin to eat a basketful. Bets are made on whether the Beduin can eat a hundred of them. To their amazement the Beduin eats them all, and then some more. Eventually he leaves. To the people it had been a simple amusement, but to the Beduin a matter of having eaten well.

1. Ibid., p.237.

2. Jacques Berque mentions this story for its faithful description of village life in the evening. See his Histoire d'un village égyptien au XXème siècle, p.84.

3. 'Rihān', in Arkhaṣ Layālī, pp.84-87.

In these above two stories one notes the close relationship of people to one another, and this is another important theme in Yūsuf Idrīs's stories. To be cut off brings suffering. 'Arkhaş Layālī' depicts such a predicament, brought about by poverty, the scourge of country life. 'Arkhaş Layālī' is a story in which Yūsuf Idrīs portrays the attitude of 'Abd al-Karīm towards his immediate surroundings, and towards the world. Throughout the story 'Abd al-Karīm creates the feeling in the reader that he is a victim of circumstances. Having drunk a cup of strong tea at his friend Ṭantawī's, he does not feel sleepy. He does not want to go home; he would like to stay up and visit more people. But he has no money and cannot even afford to go to Abu al-Is'ād's place to have a cup of coffee and a smoke in the company of people playing cards. In this instance he is financially crowded out. Nor can he visit 'Abd al-Majīd because of an unpleasant disagreement he has had with him.

'Abd al-Karīm feels irritated by everything around him. He hurries out of the mosque, fed up with it, only to be assailed by a host of small children, who "like crumbs"¹ bump into him, crawl between his legs and tug at his clothes. He curses them and the whole world. Because of his having fat legs, he feels discomfort when walking. Darkness descends and he wanders through the village. The place is deserted, and for a moment he experiences a feeling of suffocation, a physical revulsion against his surroundings: the multitude of

1. 'Arkhaş Layālī', in Arkhaş Layālī, p.6.

children reminds him of his own six, bottomless pits, whom he can hardly afford to feed. "He can only use his tongue on them, wishing that God would destroy their houses over their heads, their fathers and grandfathers, cursing the midwife who delivered them, and the evil seed that conceived them. 'Abd al-Karīm shakes with rage as he swears, shaking, and spitting at this wretched land which has all become little children.... He swallows his fury, finding comfort in the thought that tomorrow will take care of them, that hunger will undoubtedly kill them, and that cholera will quickly come and sweep half of them away."¹

He finds himself at the pond in the middle of the village, and is again overcome by suffocation when he thinks about the events of the day. And there is no use going home, to the six children, and the wife whom he can never succeed in waking up in the middle of the night. But he does finally decide to go home, as there is nothing else to do. He climbs into bed, and wakes his wife by cracking her knuckles and tickling her feet. They make love. Some months later a new baby is born. To the woman it is a happy occasion, but to him a sad one.

Because of the closeness of country people to one another, indeed as Yūsuf Idrīs conceives it their corporate entity, there are few secrets to keep. But there are some secrets which must be kept, since divulging them would disrupt the outward harmony of the people's lives and their corporate being.

1. Ibid., p.7.

This situation is described in 'ash-Shaykh Shaykha'. In this story the main character is a human being who is a mystery to all concerned. He has no mother, or father, and no name. Sometimes he is called Shaykh Muḥammad, and sometimes Shaykha Fātima. The reason for this contradiction is that it is difficult to tell whether he is a man or a woman, but by consensus of opinion he is accepted as a man. In addition, this creature is physically deformed: "His neck inclines horizontally over one of his shoulders like a plant which a foot has trod upon, when it was small and grows crawling on the ground following it. One of his eyes was always half closed, the other completely shut."¹ His arms dangle in such a way that they seem not to be a part of his body. He does not speak, but emits high pitched shrieks, and that only when he is in pain. He does not walk, but trots with small steps, and most of the time he just likes to stand for long periods where the fancy takes him. But despite his strange appearance and behaviour, the villagers accept him for what he is: "But the people of the village did not see in him an abnormal being. He was just a different being, and as long as he lived among them, not hurting anyone, obstructing no one in his living, it would have been a shameful act (ḥarām) for someone to obstruct him, stare at him, and make fun of him standing with his funny crooked neck. That was what the Creator wanted, and if that was what the Creator wanted, then there was no escaping from it."²

1. 'Ash-Shaykh Shaykha', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.391. For a similar description of physical deformity, see Guy de Maupassant, 'Clochette', in Le Horla, p.90.

2. 'Ash-Shaykh Shaykha', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.391.

They treat him as one of them. They do not consider him to be possessed like the walīs. Nor do they pity him. He is in this world, one of them. Above all he is innocent, harmless. Men and women do not mind undressing in his presence, or speaking of their most personal matters. He is allowed to enter any house he pleases, and to stay there for as long as he wants. His origin is also a mystery, and interpretations of it differ, including the possibility that his father was an ape. The only thing known about him is the existence of an old woman called Nu'sa, who lives in the kharāb, but no one knows what their relationship is, whether they are lovers, or mother and son.

But one day a child comes running to the villagers, claiming to have heard the Shaykh-Shaykha speaking in the kharāb like a normal human being. No one believes him, but the story is enough to sow doubt in the people's minds. They become afraid. Their secrets may be known to him, and he may divulge them. They had behaved in front of him as if he were a pet, but now when he approaches them, they avoid him.¹ But another event takes place, and this time it is witnessed by adults, namely he is seen by them speaking and walking normally. The old woman Nu'sa is deeply hurt by the new attitude of the villagers, and she consequently faces them accompanied by the Shaykh-Shaykha. She tells everyone that he is her son and that he has been a deaf mute all his life. But the disbelief on the part of the villagers

1. On secrets and pets see Guy de Maupassant's 'Sur les chats', in La Petite Roque, p.130.

is too strong and the body of the Shaykh-Shaykha is eventually discovered, bearing severe wounds.

All these stories underline the author's view that life in the country is balanced, and that it is the life of a corporate organisation from which a foreign body must be extruded. This happens in 'Hādith^{at} Sharaf', where a breach in the sexual code affects everybody, and in al-Harām (see above, pp. where the existence of a dead baby turns community life upside down.

But, despite the collective aspect of rural life which is stressed in these stories, this life produces outstanding characters as in the case of Shaykh 'Alī in 'Ṭabliyya min as-Samā'.¹ The story depicts cunning in a small village. The character, Shaykh 'Alī seeks to get even with his co-villagers by taking advantage of what they fear most, the wrath of God. Shaykh 'Alī is a failure. Because of his stubbornness in al-Azhar, where he talked back to one of the Shaykhs, he was forced to return to his own village. He is not successful there either because of his unwillingness to work, and consequently he lives in constant penury. His stubbornness is coupled with eccentric behaviour which makes him the laughing-stock of the village. As he is quick tempered he curses everybody in sight, which only adds to their amusement. In reality he is a shy person who suffers from

1. 'Ṭabliyya min as-Samā', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, pp.52-65.

their mockery, and this makes him act harshly. On the material side, since he is penniless, he is constantly hungry, and it is in the pangs of hunger that he decides to strike back at the villagers. Since he is not a religious man, having seen the Shaykhs' stupidity at al-Azhar, he takes advantage of the villagers' naive faith and decides to blaspheme in public, with the certainty that he will attract much attention. Thus he bares his head and speaks to the heavens. Predictably the news of his blasphemous action quickly spreads through the village, and everyone comes to listen to him. At the beginning they take the affair in a light vein, but soon they become alarmed. Shaykh 'Ali reproaches God for making him hungry, and he sees no reason to starve on earth only so that he might enjoy the milk and honey of Paradise. He orders God to bring down to him a table covered with food. One of the villagers suggests that a table be brought to him, but he answers proudly that he will not beg for their charity. When someone mentions that he should work, he curses them, saying that it is beneath his dignity to work like a beast of burden. He would rather die of hunger than work. Shaykh 'Ali then goes on to threaten the heavens, that, if by the time he has counted to ten the table has not appeared, he will blaspheme and do unpardonable deeds. The people are terrified. Someone suggests that he should be given a bite to eat. This is the signal for which he has been waiting. This is a firm offer and he has finally broken them down, by playing on their fears. Someone else offers bāmiya, fish and other things, which he turns down as being unfit

to eat. He has succeeded in pushing them into an impasse. Finally they bring him a tray full of delicacies, but he is still not satisfied. He angrily asks for a table and a pack of cigarettes. He has won. He has succeeded not only in getting what he wanted, but in getting the best. He will use it to his advantage in the future. He has only to shake his stick to the heavens for the villagers to serve him again.

The humorous story 'Tahwīd al-ʿArūsa' concerns the collapse of a social custom in the Mudīriyyat ash-Sharqiyya. It can be seen as an example of conflict of two social entities and traditions difficult to reconcile. It was the manner of giving away the bride which created problems for all concerned. If the bridegroom happened to live in a district other than the bride's, it was the custom to take the bride to the bridegroom's district. As the roads were not safe from brigands, a large number of people had to protect her under escort. What made the custom unique was the fact that if the caravan passed by a village or an izba an invitation would by custom be given to them by the inhabitants to a feast and an overnight stay.

Such invitations created problems. The bride's caravan would refuse vehemently because the wedding night could not wait, while the hosts considered such a refusal an affront to their generosity. Sometimes blows were exchanged. Usually it was the bride's caravan that won, because of the nature of their respective roles. The bride's people were the protectors and it was their duty to safeguard her and her honour to the death. With respect

to the host, the matter was secondary, "merely to show the strength of his generosity, and this is a matter which does not necessarily push man to excess and self-destruction."¹

In this story the caravan sets out to take the bride to a town that is rather far off. On the way their road is barred by a huge negro with a club in his hand. He tells them brusquely that they are to be overnight guests at the Bey's house. Shaykh Rajab, who leads the caravan, refuses, but the villagers standing around the negro raise their sticks in a threatening manner, and there is danger of a fight. But Shaykh Rajab notices a serious breach in the etiquette which governs such invitations. At the approach of a caravan, the would-be host slaughters an animal, and meets the caravan with the animal's head stuck on a club. There is no such head in this case. Shaykh Rajab points out the fact to the negro, and claims that because of this they are entitled to refuse the invitation, but instead he accepts, much to the consternation of the negro who was looking forward to a good fight. The caravan is led to the Bey's house. The Bey is thunderstruck because he had not even been told by the negro, who had acted on his own initiative. The Bey is not a rich man, and from the family wealth only the negro has remained. The negro acts as a go-between for the Bey and Shaykh Rajab. When it becomes clear to Shaykh Rajab that they are not wanted, he insists that the invitation stands, otherwise it would

1. 'Tahwīd al-'Arūsa', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.84.

be an insult to the caravan's honour. The Bey is forced to agree, because if he were to refuse under such circumstances he would be the laughing stock of the region.

The feast takes place, and the villagers, who are a heterogeneous collection of paupers and crooks, are overjoyed because they will get food out of the affair. The following day the caravan departs, but with a new outlook on things. As expected, in the next village an invitation is extended and hardly has it been uttered than Shaykh Rajab directs the caravan to the host. They accept every invitation along the way, so that the journey lasts a week. Shaykh Rajab's feat causes the custom to cease, and the Sharaqwa are forced to limit their hospitality.

In another group of stories, the country people are contrasted with the sons of the country who go to the big city to be educated and then return contemptuous of the native ways. Somehow, despite an apparent superiority in education, these characters must bow to the local wisdom which operates according to its own rules, as in 'an-Nās¹ which advances the point that there may be more to folk wisdom than meets the eye.¹ In one of the villages grows an undistinguished looking tree which, however, has an unusual property. Besides having baraka, it is used by the villages to cure eye trouble. Its leaves, soaked with dew, are crushed and the resultant liquid is used as eye drops. The beneficial virtues of the tree are firmly believed by everyone, young and old. But the younger ones, who have studied

1. 'An-Nās', in Qā' al-Madīna, pp.36-39.

the latest scientific theories in the big city find the belief a superstition on which they decide to wage open warfare. They try to dissuade the people from believing the story, but without any success; several years later, the people still believe it. One of the 'scientists', undaunted by his failure to convince the villagers, takes a few leaves to be chemically analysed in a laboratory. To his surprise the tests reveal that the tree contains just those ingredients of which eye drops are made. The 'scientist' announces the good news, having felt as if he had discovered the treasure. The people take it as a matter of course. They now use real eye drops because they feel they are cleaner than the liquid from the tree.

The sophistication of city life runs counter to the directness of the country people. In 'Abu al-Hawl' one finds that misrepresentation may have unpleasant consequences. The story treats the impression and effects made on simple peasants on the one hand by science, and on the other by religion. The narrator is a young man, at the beginning of his medical studies in Cairo, who is on vacation in his village. The scene is a funeral ceremony at which everyone is present. The young man is greeted with respect. He is called 'doctor' although he is only a novice.

The people in the tent are divided into two main groups: the notables and the peasants, who sit apart. It is with the latter that the 'doctor' likes to sit because he feels more at home with them, and yet at the same time feels superior to them. He is joined later by the other educated people who try to

impress the peasants with their knowledge. This they do by deferring to the 'doctor', and asking him questions which they want to appear intelligent. Their presence subdues the peasants who are aware of the gulf that separates them from the educated: "Only we were speaking, and the peasants were silent, listening and laughing. They would look at us, inspecting our words, and how we pronounced them; they would feel with their eyes our gallabiyyas, and look at the tarbush of the tumargi Abu 'Ubayd....We saw in their brown, dusty faces total conviction about what we said; their absolute amazement at us could be seen in their eyes, and they supported us with unheard of fervour. They were always silent; perhaps it was a fear of us, perhaps a chasm that they felt separated them from us. None of them would address any of us; he would lean to his neighbour if something that we said pleased him, and whisper to him or joke with him, but if amazement reached the level of admiration (i'jāz), their comments would rise from them despite themselves, all similar, at about the same time, as if they had originated from one big rough living body."¹

Thus there exists a gulf separating the 'educated' professionals and the 'ignorant' peasants. One of the former, the tumargi, even goes beyond trying to impress the peasants; he wants to embarrass the young doctor by showing that he does not know as much as he appears to. Abu 'Ubayd asks him about the nature of rigor mortis, but as the young man does not really know anything about it, he avoids answering the question by discussing other

1. Ibid., p.169.

things. The ruse works, except in the case of the peasant Ṣāliḥ, nicknamed Abu al-ḥawl, who repeats the question on rigor mortis when the young man has made his bid to divert the issue. But he persists in evading the question by making up grizzly stories about dissected corpses, and what really happens in hospitals. Everyone is spellbound. The young man is so carried away by his own story-telling that he tells them of trafficking in corpses and limbs, and he announces that he would not mind paying five pounds for a good corpse.

At the other end of the funeral tent another group of peasants is also listening about the horrors of death, not in the clinical, materialistic sense, but in the religious sense. The local shaykh, a preacher, tells them of the torments of hell: "Most of those listening to the preacher hardly knew what was al-maqra'a, al-ḥamīm and al-ghusāq, and yet, despite the way in which Shaykh 'Abd al-Ḥamīd delivered his sermon, and despite the strangeness and the terrors of the things about which he was speaking, the emotion of the people reached the point of weeping."¹

Thus science and religion are treated in this story on the same level. Both can be used successfully to mystify the ignorant and sow the terrors of death and the unknown in their hearts. But in science it is more difficult, as the young man finds out later. In the middle of the night he is awakened by Abu al-ḥawl who brings him the stinking corpse of a drowned man. The young man is horrified, but the peasant reminds him of his promise to pay five

1. Ibid., p.176.

pounds. The youth wants to get rid of him, but the peasant becomes menacing. The argument wakes up the youth's father who almost faints at the sight of the corpse. The young man has to explain the whole story to him from the beginning, with Abu al-Hawl listening. The peasant realizes that he has been duped, and departs full of scorn for the young man.

In Yūsuf Idrīs's stories the urban complex stands in direct opposition to the country. It is an evil place, which corrupts the moral fibre of its inhabitants, and undermines their stamina, sometimes to the point of disintegrating their personalities. The description of the city is given greater sharpness when it is contrasted with the country. This is done not only because the two ways of life are so different, but also because in the city stories there are allusions to the countryside which cast a favourable light on rural as opposed to urban life, which is depicted in consistently grim terms. Quite a few of the characters have come to settle in the city and it is through their eyes that the characteristics of urban life are presented. This inevitably influences the view that is put forward and in these stories it is perhaps Yūsuf Idrīs himself speaking. He too comes from the country, and one detects a certain nostalgia for its way of life. Some characters return from the city, Cairo or Alexandria, but they are changed men. Alteration of one's personality is one of the main themes which runs through many of Yūsuf Idrīs's stories, and it is in this perspective that his characters are best understood. In the migrants this phenomenon can be seen happening in progress, while in

those who are true city people it appears as a malaise, the roots of which are difficult to discern.

In the country stories life in the country is represented as hard, with everyone fighting for survival, but nevertheless at the end of the day, the men congregate in the coffee shop and enjoy this collective experience. Life in the country is in equilibrium, and the community protects itself from disequilibrium by enforcing codes of behaviour which guarantee the smooth progress of life. The country people thus form a community in which each individual has a recognised place.

The city on the other hand does not offer such security. The country has problems, but in the city these are multiple and complex. Thus what happens to Fathiyya, the heroine of the story 'an-Naddāha', exemplifies the conflict between city and country. In her native village she has a place, but she is not satisfied and wants to go to Cairo to lead 'a better life'. She dreams of wide clean streets and good food.¹ She and her husband make the decision to go to Cairo but the city proves to be a shock to her, with its cars, noise and huge crowds. The city is strange to her, and she feels disorientated. She knows no one, and spends her time alone in the house. The world outside is incomprehensible and she discovers it only gradually, in a piecemeal fashion: "But shrivelled up behind the half-opened door of the room she was thinking, this

1. On the prospect of good food and good living see Najīb Mahfūz, Zuqāq al-Midaqq, p.199.

time seeing things from a distance. She became aware of the poor in Cairo, the dream city; she saw the utterly destitute, the hungry, the beggars. Even in her own village one could not find such a degree of sordid poverty. And there were lies, insults, bad manners, thieves, pickpockets."¹

The husband Ḥamid also is disorientated. In his village he used to be a guard with a rifle, who commanded respect. Now he is a porter, at the mercy of the owner of the building, who insults him. This creates new situations which alter the relationship between Faṭḥiyya and Ḥamid. Thus, for instance, when the owner wants Faṭḥiyya to work for him in his house, Ḥamid refuses out of pride. Faṭḥiyya, who welcomes the idea of earning a few extra pounds for the family, is disappointed. When she discusses the matter, Ḥamid only shouts at her.

In her case, earning a living is only part of the matter. She wants, above all, to get to know people in Cairo. But now she is truly isolated and lonely when her husband is away. She cannot cope with the outside world which frightens her, and she withdraws into herself. She becomes a prisoner in her room. She notes sadly the change in her husband. Once he used to laugh, but not any more. Ḥamid, however, is her only link with the outside world. He brings home gossip around which she builds a personal image of Cairo, and she slowly begins to realize certain truths about the city: "She began to know

1. 'An-Naddāḥa', in an-Naddāḥa, p.18.

that under the respectable, polite, rich and dignified Cairo, there was another Cairo, filled with scandals and infamies and things which only a porter or someone more knowledgeable in these matters knows."¹

Faṭḥiyya, despite her fears, is a strong woman, and she rebels against this situation. She leaves her husband at the moment they are boarding the train to return to their village. She disappears in the crowds at the railway station, with the firm determination of starting a new life.

Shuhrat of the story 'Qā' al-Madīna' is not so lucky. She is the servant of a lawyer who is pursuing her with advances. As she has to support her husband and children, she becomes a prostitute, and resorts to stealing her master's watch. It is the end of the story which is of interest here, depicting the squalour in which the poor of Cairo live. The surroundings are seen through the eyes of her master 'Abdalla. Since he is a middle-class professional, a man who lives in comfort, the sights affect him. The description of 'Abdalla's approach and penetration into the quarter concentrates on the gradual and increasing over-crowding, which corresponds to the same feeling of gradual psychological constriction. At first the streets are straight, long and wide, and with familiar names. But as he proceeds the streets grow narrower, the houses smaller. The people's clothes become more faded, and rough speech can be heard. As he proceeds further, the windows are only openings in the walls

1. Ibid., p.21.

with bars over them, the shops become fewer, the people's faces are sullen, and their clothes are heterogeneous, sometimes with items of clothing missing. The language of the denizens becomes unintelligible. Even further, on the ground there is nothing but dust, there are no shops, people's clothes are tattered, there are too many children swarming like flies, and there are strong smells everywhere.

Shuhrat lives in the poorest section, in the kharāb, where "the houses lean on each other so that they do not fall down."¹ And the children are everywhere: "Children, and children, and more children collect in front of them, behind them, and at the sides of them, their eyes faded with ophthalmia and rheum..."²

Shuhrat's flat is on top of a decrepit old house. It is untidy with clothes and furniture scattered everywhere.

The migrants discussed above are swallowed up in the city, which is ugly and corrupting. This contrasts with the quietness of the countryside, as described in the story 'ar-Ra's: "I left the town, which was sighing and panting from the heat of the afternoon, with its people snoring in the sleep of the fitful siesta and would go into the fields. In this world of plants, vast in its silence, awe and mystery, I would keep walking, enjoying the hot sun in solitude, and

1. 'Qā' al-Madīna', in Qā' al-Madīna, p.275. On decrepitude, see also Husain Mu'nis, Ahlan wa-Sahlan, p.201.
2. Ibid., p.276.

meditating slowly on those long hours when everything becomes still, when even the leaves on the trees stop rustling; the work in the fields has stopped, the plants turn into stones, subdued, without movement; you even find the water in the ditches about to stop flowing too. And I alone in the midst of all this, I fret and move about without anyone admonishing me or limiting my freedom as a human being."¹

It is this peaceful quality of country life that the migrants miss in their wretched urban surroundings. This is described in the story 'al-Yad al-Kabīra', in which city and country are explicitly contrasted. The death of the hero's father serves to symbolize the loss of roots. The young man, after a long absence returns to his village on a visit. He is always warmly welcomed. He loves to be there, away from the city: "The city in which I live is filled with struggle, and my life there is restricting. Having to defend my existence and that of the others, I stand before powerful forces, and my heart is alone. I do not hate people, I feel sorry for them. My friends are many, but such love I find only here, unmatched and unlimited, a tangible love, which no one hides, nor is avaricious in giving."²

On such occasions his old self returns to him: "In such moments I fall silent, and feel the spirit returning to me. I am lost in the big city, alone,

1. 'Ar-Ra's', in al-'Askarī al-Aswad, p.147.

2. 'Al-Yad al-Kabīra', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.70. On the return to native surroundings, see also Ṭayyib Sālih, Mawṣim al-Hijra ilā ash-Shimāl, p.7.

but here is my father, here is our house, here I am a human being who has a father, and knows his origin, and the earth on which he has grown."¹

It is an opportunity to become a child again: "I always longed for my father's presence, for my childhood, so that I could shed the men's clothes and become a child again, or someone like a child, so that I appear like a son, and feel that I am a son. I loved my father."²

Upon his return he would hug his father and be hugged. The whole family would be overjoyed at his return. It would be a moment when "we would sit, a family facing life, but it was an hour of happiness, an hour in which the sorrows and tribulations evaporated, and only love and yearning remained, with little scattered words and laughs, pure laughs."³

But this time something has happened. The gloomy atmosphere tells him so. The sky is yellow and the geese are silent. His aunt greets him with sadness in her voice. From the neglected house, she directs him to the cemetery. He passes through the cemetery where he sees his father's name on a tombstone. He stops and enters into an imaginary conversation with him, in which he reproaches him for having deserted them. In the evening the family gathers, and weeps. They realize now the full import of their loss.

In 'al-Yad al-Kabīra' the hero is making a short visit to his village. In

1. 'Al-Yad al-Kabīra', op. cit., p.71.

2. Ibid., p.70.

3. Ibid., p.72.

the story 'Mā Khafiya A'zam' the hero returns from the city for good. But he is a changed man, shunning the inhabitants of the village and only a traumatic experience brings him back into the fold of community life. The man, Shaykh Rābiḥ, has left his village for Alexandria to work and returns with a wife, whom he guards jealously, not letting anyone see her face. She is dressed in black from head to toe and walks a few metres behind her husband. She also happens to be very fat: "You find her behind him like his black shadow which has separated itself from him and is inhabited by throbbing life, but she was not exactly his shadow, for she was fat and lumpy, as if four women were fused together."¹

The people in the village are naturally curious, but they do not succeed in catching even a glimpse of her features. Her husband, who used to be known for his joviality, is just as mysterious. He lives apart from the people with whom he used to associate, his company now being composed of people from the upper crust of local society. One night, however, a piercing cry awakens the neighbourhood, and everyone realizes that the woman is giving birth. This is the first sign of her existence as a concrete human being and a woman. Just before dawn the village is amazed to see Shaykh Rābiḥ running from house to house and knocking on doors. He is weeping and imploring everyone for their assistance. His wife was unable to complete the delivery of the baby, as the foetus stopped its progress midway, half inside, half outside.

1. 'Mā Khafiya A'zam', in an-Naddāha, p.60.

At first the villagers find the situation amusing, but they soon rally to help him. Although he has been their laughing stock, they feel that they could not desert him in such a predicament. They must get her to the hospital which is two kilometres away, and the roads are muddy. Since no stretcher can be found a ladder is used instead. Transporting the woman becomes a village project, a means by which we are allowed to glimpse the solidarity and the corporate entity of the villagers faced with a crisis. She has to be held so that she does not fall off, and as her gown keeps slipping Shaykh Rābiḥ is careful to cover her again, but he gives up, and the woman is exposed with her foetus for everyone to see. To him now the safety of mother and child becomes more important than concealing her nudity: "His real fear was that the foetus would die, and his second fear was that the mother would die, a fear that almost made him go mad, a fear that urged him to shout at the top of his voice at the men, asking one to get a firm hold of her thigh so that she would not fall, and another to insert his hand between her thighs in order to keep them apart so that they would not crush the foetus."¹ They finally arrive at their destination where the baby is born under proper medical care. The villagers rejoice and dance. From that day on Shaykh Rābiḥ and his wife walk in the street side by side. Her face is uncovered.

Shaykh Rābiḥ was a man who possessed his woman totally. She was his and no one else had a right to see her face. She was also his inferior in that

1. Ibid., p.67.

she walked behind him. He was so secretive about her that the villagers did not even know about her pregnancy. But when her labour began Shaykh Rābiḥ's self-imposed isolation was shattered, since in an emergency such as this, the help of others was needed. He broke down weeping, thereby revealing his humanity and helplessness. In the end he did not even care if his wife was seen by everybody as she lay naked on the ladder. Worst of all the others touched her body, and at his own insistence. The whole experience forces him to become once more a part of the community, since he has no secrets to hide anymore.

In 'Mā Khafiya A'zam' city life has a stultifying effect on Shaykh Rābiḥ. In 'Lughat al-Āy Āy' the hero, Dr. Ḥadīdi, is stultified by the struggle for success and status. His primary reason for moving to the city was to escape from the narrow-mindedness of the villagers, but when faced, after so many years, by a childhood friend who comes to him in excruciating physical pain, he realizes that by chasing success in Cairo, he has cut himself off from his village roots.

Fahmi, the childhood friend, is part of the environment which the doctor had escaped, indeed against which he had rebelled because of its closed outlook. He particularly resented the fact that if someone was more brilliant than they, they tried to drag him down to their level. He simply had no time for them or their problems: it would take him several lifetimes to solve them. Thus he had decided to stop helping the people in his village

altogether: "Through an irrevocable decision that his private life, projects and aspirations should remain his own, and that he should shake himself free of those many hands which wanted to pull him and drag him down to where they were, as if they could not stand the sight of someone successful and would not be content until he knelt like them and became powerless."¹

As has been seen from the foregoing stories, the quality of life in the country stands in sharp contrast to the quality of life in the city. The portrayal of rural life is positive and of urban life negative. It is necessary, however, to examine the opposition more closely, and see whether this is justified. It was mentioned in the introductory paragraph to this chapter that the two types of stories should be read together, because the characteristics of the one type can best be judged by comparison with the other. This is important, as will be seen presently.

A striking aspect of the first group of stories is the idealization of the country. The people there are poor, lead difficult lives, but in spite of it all, feel secure. Even after unexpected and highly unusual events have taken place life returns to normal. Life in the city on the other hand is constantly denigrated, and it is granted no good points. The poor get poorer, and lose the dignity that people seem to possess in the country. Professionals in the

1. 'Luġhat al-Āy Āy', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.284.

city may be successful as far as money and prestige are concerned, but they too are unhappy, virtually because of their success. Life in the city is competitive and a man is allowed to succeed only at the cost of his humanity.

The idealization of the country and the casting of the city in the role of the destroyer of man clearly stem from bias on Yūsuf Idrīs's part. One may look at his descriptions of the city with its dilapidated buildings, filth strewn in the streets, and decrepit humans. This may well be true of parts of any large town, and should be accepted as an attempt on Yūsuf Idrīs's part to portray a realistic situation. But one looks in vain for descriptions of dwellings in the country. If there is poverty in the country, there must be poor living conditions also, but this the author passes over in silence. If he had done the same for the village, in a realistic manner, his treatment of country and city life would appear less one-sided.

Another aspect he stresses is the loneliness of people in the city, as opposed to the fruitful relationships between people in the country. Here again Idrīs's bias becomes apparent. There is no reason why an individual should be cut off from the rest of humanity in the city, especially an Egyptian city. The feeling may be there because of 'culture shock', but a city like Cairo teems with life and people who are curious about one another. This is well portrayed in Ṭājiḥ Mahfūz's Khān al-Khalīlī. The cut off feeling is not really caused by city life; it is caused by Yūsuf Idrīs. The author believes the city to have in it sources of alienation that are absent in the village, and

the characters he has created fit in with his prejudices. The people in the city are withdrawn. This aspect is characteristic of the great bulk of Yūsuf Idrīs's characters, and the author is more interested in their psychological states than in the material reasons for such states. This will become more apparent in subsequent chapters.

The struggle for life in the village, where success comes only to the strongest, is not by any means overlooked by Idrīs. What is not clear is why life in the city should be represented as so difficult if country life is so bitter and harsh. Clearly the relative difficulty is not the crux of the matter. What distinguishes the two for the author is that country life is natural and self-renewing, whereas urban life is unnatural and destructive of humanity.

In the passages where yearning for the country is shown one senses the feeling of nostalgia, as mentioned previously. This is born of separation, and judgments made under the influence of such an emotion do not really reflect the true nature of life in the country and the city.

Taken individually the stories can be seen in different ways. 'Fī al-Layl' for instance could be analysed as an interesting description of a village evening at the coffee house. The stress is on the atmosphere, but the main personality is without individual characteristics, except for his ability to make other people laugh. Such people are types rather than real people. The same holds for Shaykh Rābiḥ who is negative in personality, recognizable as a type, perhaps with more individual traits than 'Awf in the previous story. Shaykh-Shaykha,

by being deformed, stands out more, because of the author's care to describe his appearance and behaviour, but again this is physical rather than psychological individuality.

In the country stories one finds humour which is their strength:

'Tabliyya min as-Samā', 'Tahwīd al-'Arūsa', and 'Abu al-Hawl'. It is a pity that Idrīs is so humourless when writing about the city, where, because of the much more complex life, the opportunities for laughter are numerous. But this he has not done, presumably because this would be incompatible with a portrayal of urban misery.

Idrīs makes a rational contrast between country and city, based on an attachment to the country and a revulsion from the city. Because his stand is emotional, his contrasts are partial and unrealistic. For this reason, it would be quite wrong to take his stories as a picture of Egyptian life in country and city. It is true that he is writing about his own land, but the value of such a study can be undertaken only by seeing the overall context of such stories. His description of city squalor may be accurate, but if viewed in conjunction with his description of the country, it is possible to detect the author's overall intentions, which may not coincide with the immediate intentions of a specific story.

He is writing about his own land, but the land is not only Egypt but the country of his soul, whose geography is not that of an author who is more of a social realist.

CHAPTER THREE

THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE: DEFEAT AND LONELINESS

In the previous chapter the emphasis was on stories in which the author creates for us rural characters living hard but more rewarding lives in the country than they can in the oppressive and corrupting environment of the city. In this chapter the characters, although they may live in either city or country, will be viewed as human beings, moving through life in general, with all its sorrows.

The Egyptian critic Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ, in order to describe a certain type of character in modern Egyptian literature, has used the phrases al-baṭal al-mahzūm and al-baṭal al-maḡhūr which refer equally to the characters in Yūsuf Idrīs's works.¹ The former phrase means the 'defeated hero', but the latter is difficult to translate; perhaps the closest rendering would be 'the downtrodden hero', that is one whom life has overwhelmed and reduced to helplessness. Yet the phrase offers a glimmer of hope in that the characters may win their way back to life.

A glimpse of the 'defeated' or 'downtrodden hero' is given in the story 'Naẓra' which depicts a little girl drowned in a sea of urban humanity.² The little girl, observed by a passer-by who is also the narrator, is carrying a huge platter on her head, laden with so many things that it seems about to collapse

1. Ḥāfiẓ, Ṣabrī, "Al-Uqṣuṣ al-ʿArabiyya wath-Thawra", Al-Ādāb, XVIII, 5, 1970, pp.82-87.

2. 'Naẓra', in Arkhaṣ Layālī, pp.14-15.

at any moment. Her smallness is in contrast with the incessant traffic that she skillfully circumvents, with the assurance of an adult. She looks insignificant in the anonymous surroundings, but something shines through as she stops for a moment, to look at children playing ball. It is as if she were contemplating something denied to her, symbolizing in her person the hard life, as against other children's normal indulgence in the joys of their young age. Then the crowd again engulfs her.

The little girl is an insignificant entity whose existence has been somehow justified by the mere fact that someone has bothered to look at her and think about her. In the case of a teacher in the story 'ash-Shahāda' this insignificance is tinged with failure.¹ The story describes an encounter on the train between the narrator and a former school teacher of his in Dīmyāṭ. The sight of the man brings the narrator back to his schooldays. The teacher, al-Ḥifni Afandī, was a complex person, whose treatment of students went from cursing them, to confiding his troubles to them. He was a lonely man, whose wife had refused to settle with him in Dīmyāṭ, and he had had to live alone in a hotel room. His appearance was unattractive. He was fat, and his face heavily wrinkled. The students used to make fun of him, as did his colleagues. The inspectors did not mind humiliating him before his students. The narrator's attitude towards him was a mixture of love and hate, but above all he respected him, especially since the teacher had called him the za'īm of chemistry. That had made him study hard.

1. 'Ash-Shahāda', in Arkhaṣ Layālī, pp.18-23.

Now, ten years later, they meet again. The narrator introduces himself, but the teacher does not seem enthusiastic about the encounter. But when the narrator tells him that it is thanks to him that he has succeeded in life by becoming a doctor, the teacher's face lights up. He tells the narrator that he has been unsuccessful in life, while his colleagues have been promoted to good posts. He and his wife have been divorced. But the news that not only the narrator but the whole class has been successful, fills the teacher with happiness.

The teacher, although he is a failure in some ways, has not failed completely, since his pupils have succeeded in life. In the story *al-Marjīḥa*, however, 'Abd al-Laṭīf is bitter about his failure and his life ends tragically. He is a doomed man. 'Al-Marjīḥa's' theme is the futility and tragedy of life. 'Abd al-Laṭīf is a poor man, whose sole pleasure resides in anticipating the īd, but when the day comes, it turns out no differently from the others: "It seemed to 'Abd al-Laṭīf, having waited for it for so long, that the day would come suddenly, great, wide and broad, but once it had come it was not like that at all. Its dawn came, then its morning grew, its forenoon came, big in its simplicity, without exultation, exactly the way he pushes a swing with his hand and it comes back to him afterwards."¹

'Abd al-Laṭīf is a sick man. He used to be a good carpenter, but since he has been stricken with bilharzia he has grown progressively weak.

1. 'Al-Marjīḥa', in Arkhaṣ Layālī, p.130.

His type of carpentry required a strong hand, and now he can do only small jobs. In consequence he cannot afford to feed or clothe his family properly. On top of that his young son is inept at carpentry, injuring himself every time he lifts a hammer. He had expected his son to compensate for his disability, but his hopes had been dashed. He is bitter and not sure whether his wife is pleased with him as a person. His only pleasure is to push the swing. Since his arm is weak he pushes it gently. But he is a man dogged with bad luck. The 'umda's son falls from the swing and injures himself badly. 'Abd al-Laṭīf is thrown into jail and dies there.

'Abd al-Laṭīf is a nonentity and tragedy radiated out from his person. While he lay half-conscious during his illness, an opium salesman courted his sister in the house, and when 'Abd al-Laṭīf asked his mother what was going on, she would blush and change the subject. After his death, rumour speculates whether the salesman will marry the sister of the mother. 'Abd al-Laṭīf was really a victim of circumstance, his health, hopes and honour shattered, unable even to defend himself.

In the story 'Shaghlāna' the main character is again a victim of poverty, which in his case is so degrading that he must sell his own blood in order to survive. The character, 'Abdu, is a poor jack-of-all-trades, unable to hold down a job. He lives with his wife in a neighbourhood where people help each other financially when they are in need. This time he cannot even find another job, and his wife treats him coldly. She nags him, and reminds him of all the

unpleasant things that have happened in their family. But one day he finds rescue in T̄alaba, a tumargi in the hospital, to whom he tells the story of his life. By remembering the past he regains his confidence: "‘Abdu felt peace when he was telling it (his story)... and when he spoke about what had passed, his voice was full, and he felt he was growing bigger, he felt that he was a man, then his talk would grow faint and his voice weary, and he would become bitter about the world, time and space, longing for the good that has been lost, and shuddering at the evil which filled the heart. Then his world would become smaller; his voice would become even weaker and an embarrassed smile would find its way to his face when speaking to T̄alaba about what had happened to him."¹

The tumargi takes him to the hospital. ‘Abdu's work is to give a pint of blood. He gets one pound thirty piastres for it, with a meal thrown in. His first thought on his way home is to buy food. At the sight of the provisions his wife Naf̄isa changes. She would have told him, were it not for her shyness, that she loves him. At night they spend the time chattering like lovers. The following week ‘Abdu returns to the hospital and gives a pint of his blood. This he does several times again, but the blood giving is taking its toll. He becomes emaciated and his wife mentions it to him. She feels motherly towards him, especially after an argument with a woman in the neighbourhood who blamed him for giving blood. ‘Abdu has to spend a

1. 'Shaghlāna', in Arkhaṣ Layālī, p.212.

whole week in bed, while at the beginning he would sleep it off in the streets by the hospital. But one day, the hospital refuses to take his blood, as he has developed anaemia.

‘Abdu in this story is not only defeated but humiliated by having to sell his blood. It is typical of Yūsuf Idrīs to emphasize the physical aspects of unhappiness. It is a recurrent feature of the author's work.

The story ‘al-Hāla ar-Rābi‘a, although grim, is optimistic, since the main character, a sick woman from the dregs of society, nurses ambitions for her little daughter. The woman's situation is contrasted with the smug attitude of the doctor who in the end wakes up to the hard realities of life. The twenty-five year old Dr. Māzin is at peace with the world, because his rich family background has spared him from the unpleasantness of having to struggle in life. His father is an important physician with the Ministry of Health. Dr. Māzin has the best clothes, a nice car, and his everyday life is unexciting and pleasant. His professional life at the hospital is so regular that it is touched with boredom. When on evening duty, which is more relaxing, and does entail the pressures of the daytime, he orders assortments of sandwiches from Groppi's and the Excelsior, and makes certain that he is amply provided with French and American magazines portraying women in bathing costumes. He thrives on gossip and the latest hospital jokes. His office is always clean and he makes sure, by looking at himself in the mirror, that he gives his patients the impression that he wants to give. He is happy with himself to the

point that he finds even the lighting at the hospital poetic. Everyone respects him, but, because of his family background, he maintains the proper distance, knowing that the others are working there only to earn their bread. He greets the nurses properly, but never thinks of getting to know them. He lives in his private world, in harmony with himself, shunning the unpleasant side of the outside world. He is in reality unaware of what others feel, even thinking that they must be like him: "He feels that all the people ought to have his refinement and activity, that existence does not deserve a single milligram of wretchedness, and that if life were so easy and simple, without hatred or complications people would have no problems in this world."¹ Dr. Māzin is aware of problems, but shuns them, and for this reason he prefers night duty because it is easier.

On the evening the story takes place, he prepares himself for a night of predictable cases, for people whose illnesses he knows in advance and whose words he can anticipate. To make the night pleasant he orders his regular cup of coffee, and orders the nurse to polish a dirty door knob, to make his surroundings more agreeable. The first three cases are the usual ones, but the fourth one is unexpected. A sergeant brings him a woman prisoner. He feels a sudden revulsion at her appearance. He goes through the routine check up, but so superficially that he hardly touches her. When he asks her why she is

1. 'Al-Hāla ar-Rābi'a' in Qaṣṣat al-Madīna, p.10. For a similar attitude see Guy de Maupassant's 'La chevelure', in Boule de Suif, p.112.

in jail she answers quietly that it is because of hashish. He finds her reaction unexpected, because he had expected her to deny her guilt loudly and proclaim her innocence.

When he announces that she is ill she asks him quietly what is wrong with her. Again he is perplexed: "He was annoyed at the way she asked the question. These people do not feel. The word 'disease' is a frightening word which sends shudders through the limbs, so how can she receive it with such calm?"¹ He tells her that she has tuberculosis. He is sure that this time she will react and weep, but she simply tells him that that she already knows. He is amazed at her reaction since, although he is a doctor, his fear of the disease and its victims is not less than it is in others. He finds himself before a new type of patient, and this makes him curious. He wants to know how she knew, and he asks her to tell him about her life. Unexcitedly she tells him how she became pregnant by a driver in the country, then migrated to Cairo, and went from one driver to the next, ending up selling hashish. She is completely frank and this has an effect on him: "His face became red and yellow like a virgin's when a daring hand is stretched towards her and plays with her most sacred possessions and values. This woman was confessing everything without bashfulness or shame, as if she were a professor lecturing on psychology."² Despite his embarrassment, which he tries to hide by chuckling, he asks her if she has a daughter.

1. Ibid., p.14.

2. Ibid., p.17.

It is at this stage that she reacts, and the spark of life lights up in her. She speaks in glowing terms about her little daughter's intelligence and the ambitions she has for her. She wants her to become a doctor. After the woman's departure from the office Dr. Māzin is disturbed: "Dr. Māzin sat silently, no longer thinking. There was an anger strangling him, and a feeling of fear, a dumb dead fear creeping on him, he did not know from where. Absentmindedly he fingered his stethoscope and the buttons of his coat."¹

The downtrodden quality of life is most vividly expressed in the story 'Shaykhūkha bidūn Junūn', where it is a characteristic of the protagonist's life from birth to death. The narrator, a health inspector, is responsible for issuing documents relating to births and deaths. In one day he is able to see events from the whole life cycle. First he sees the whimpering babies in their mothers' arms. The mothers are protective towards their offspring, guarding them from the evil eye that the woman standing next to them could cast on them. Then come the children, and adolescents who need documents proving that they have reached the legal age for work, "and with that can begin the battle for the bread with the sweat of the brow."² They are silent, awed by the unknown prospects of their new world. Then would come the men, noisy and harsh, talking about injustice, justice, mankind and the wasted time. They all want the medical certificates that would enable them to take leave from their work: "It is a throng and you glimpse only anguished faces, filled by

1. Ibid., p.20.

2. 'Shaykhūkha bidūn Junūn', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.31.

the mad race of competition to win a loaf of bread and take it from the mouths of others, faces scratched, hardened and wounded by life, and from the wounds blood is still dripping."¹

The last group is the dead, for they too need bureaucratic attention: "The dead also have their world and problems. The dead man's affairs do not end with his death, but he may stir with his death many more problems than those which he stirred up when he was alive. To fail to report a birth costs a pound in penalties, but to fail to report a death and bury the body means imprisonment: the law never asks how one lived, but it shouts at the top of its voice: how did he die?"² A man who has died is assumed to have been killed until the inspector ascertains the opposite. When he reaches this stage of his daily work, his office becomes filled with old 'şibyān', servants whose work it is to take care of funeral arrangements. The şibyān are old, at least sixty-five years of age. They are men who used to be doormen, coffee boys, and other such petty jobs, and when they had outlived their usefulness they would become şibyān in shops, if they were lucky enough to find a vacancy. Their faces are wrinkled, their clothes old, and their eyes afflicted with more than one disease. Whenever a şaby came to him, the inspector would joke and say: "And when are you going to have your own certificate written?" The şibyān would always laugh, but "their laughter is not like ours, for one of them would

1. Ibid., p.32.

2. Loc. cit.

look at the ground, stretch his neck, grit his teeth; his eyes would widen a little, then a 'ha ha' would come out of an old dry throat which has no more strength, not even to laugh."¹ On one occasion a saby does not laugh, because it is his own daughter that has died. The old man's sadness moves the inspector, and from then on he would pay more attention to the şibyān, all of whom he calls 'Amm Muḥammad.

One day an 'Amm Muḥammad comes to him, announcing a death. The saby wants a certificate at once, in order to avoid having the inspector see the corpse. But the rule stipulates that a body must be seen. It is necessary to ascertain that the man died of old age, 'without madness' (shaykhūkha bidūn junūn). It is a legal phrase which means that the deceased has not died under suspicious circumstances. This time, too, the inspector goes to see the body and the death is certified as normal, but the following day the 'Amm Muḥammad himself dies, and his master has to go through the same routine. 'Amm Muḥammad is undressed and his old age appears in full. His arms cannot be stretched, because rheumatism had made them stiff; the skull is like a little ball, "its lower jaw curling upwards, the upper one curling downwards, all his features about to be sucked into the mouth.... (his legs are as thin) as if they had died decades ago."² His whole body is devoid of flesh.

In the story 'al-Waraqqa bi-'Ashra', being downtrodden breeds a cynicism

1. Ibid., p.36.

2. Ibid., p.49. On death, see also Guy de Maupassant, 'Aupres d'un mort', in Boule de Suif, pp.183-187.

which makes a shambles of married life. The husband, who works at a bank, from time to time handles ten pound notes which husbands give to their wives on occasions such as wedding anniversaries. The husband cannot understand how someone could do such a thing. He thinks of his own marriage, a miserable experience. He has lost any hope of marital bliss. Every evening, on his return from work, it is the same story: "Hardly had he opened the door when he was met by the screaming of the children, with Rūhiyya standing in the middle of the hall, her hair on end, trying to hit his youngest son. The child shouts and she shouts.... and the smell of cooking rises like the acid poisonous gases of despair, and the children cling to his legs, and he stumbles over their legs, and a thousand problems, catastrophies and demands must await him. How suffocating is life, and wife!... She is not a woman he desires, not even a friend he feels close to. What is it that ties him to her, since everything that is between them is seething continuous war, and disagreement renews itself every second?"¹

He has thought many times of divorcing her, or of committing suicide, but he never does anything. He has not even betrayed her. Perhaps it was for the sake of the children. If he walks out of the building in anger, she tells him to buy something outside. He does not care even about his wedding anniversary: "The days pass, but he does not feel their passing. Since the day he married he has not felt the passage of time. It is as if he had lost his memory. He does

1. 'Al-Waraqā bi-'Ashra', in al-Mu allafāt al-Kāmila, p.234.

not even remember himself before marriage. It is as if he had regained consciousness and found himself her husband."¹

Whenever he sees a gift note he laughs at the stupidity of such husbands, and he gossips about it in the office. The other workers share his views. But one day he comes across a note, from a wife to her husband. This produces a change in him, and his conscience begins to bother him. Why not try it, at least out of curiosity?

The day of his anniversary comes, and he presents his wife Rūḥiyya with a five pound note. But trouble starts. She lashes out, asking him where he had got the money. Accusations and insults fly. He walks out of the room: "He sits in the hall boiling and fuming; it is no use at all; it is a war from which there is no escape. He is a soldier in the army, not a husband in a home. He has no work but to defend himself. The war has melted and destroyed him; even a soldier is granted a truce and rest, but his is a battle that never stops."² He only wishes for a life without struggle.

Rūḥiyya returns, but the shock reaction has passed and she is a changed person. She is crying and laughing. She gives him both the gift. Under his message she has written: "to my dear husband". He also weeps. They hug and kiss.

1. Ibid., p.236.

2. Ibid., p.239.

This gesture makes him rediscover himself and lets him look again at life. True, they have fought like animals, but he has progressed in life and completed his education. He has three children. All this progress he has achieved with his life-long companion, his wife. It is his life, and they both rediscover tender feelings for each other in what may seem to the reader a disproportionate upsurge of emotion.

In the stories discussed up to this point, the insān maqhūr, or 'defeated' man', has been victimized by 'life' and 'society'. In two stories, however, 'al-Wajh al-Ākhar', and 'at-Tamrīn al-Awwal', where unhappiness is inflicted by specific people. In both stories those responsible are narrow-minded individuals who operate through instilling fear in others.

In the story 'al-Wajh al-Ākhar' is portrayed the extent to which human beings are limited in their outlook on life with the consequent effects of this on others.¹ The narrator, who is an active person, likes variety and never uses the same barber twice. In this instance he recounts his experience with a certain barber, Uṣṭā Zaki, who likes to express his views to his customers. Zaki shows himself to be a man with insight, but an insight limited to what happens in the shop. In fact it is his profession that has formed his opinions. He makes a shrewd comment to the effect that people have two faces, one at the front and one at the back. He has formed a firm value judgment on the subject saying that

1. 'Al-Wajh al-Ākhar', in Qāṣ al-Madīna, pp.42-52.

the two faces are expressions of two mutually exclusive desires in man. The front one wants to look distinctive, by being shaven or having any kind of a moustache. Everyone wants to look prestigious by the way he treats the front face, in order to appear better in social position, but the back of the neck is the same for all, there being only a common desire to look alike. It is the sameness that strikes the barber, and in his mind he lumps all male humanity together in terms of the back of the head; all of them are the same to him and because of this he makes no distinctions between men.

Perhaps Yūsuf Idris is attempting to show by implication that by treating everyone the same the barber feels superior to his customers. He is the only one who sees the backs of their heads and he consequently feels justified in passing judgments. His whole life revolves around heads, and this also shows in the way he treats his apprentice whose sole occupation is chasing flies from the customers. When the narrator points out to the barber the inhumanity of the boy's treatment, the barber replies that this is the best way for him to learn the business. Insults are necessary because he will learn only if he is afraid. The barber's world is rigid, revolving around his profession, and the rigidity of his views on men is coupled with the rigidity of his training of the little boy. It is as if life acquired and lost its meaning only in relation to his own profession.

The theme of a limited outlook resulting from a narrow and inhuman professionalism is taken up again in the story 'at-Tamrīn al-Awwal' where it has far-reaching implications as the story revolves and it has an effect on school

children and their attitude toward learning. In 'al-Wajh al-Ākhar' the barber bases his training of one boy on fear, and because it is a limited environment it concerns the acquisition of one simple skill. In a school, on the other hand, fear pervades the whole student body, and warps all sensitivity and takes away the joy of learning. School thus stands against life: "Hardly has he reached the school when he finds it filled with restless ghosts like himself, searching for the sun, but the sun, unlike them, is not a pupil in school."¹ Everything is awe-inspiring, and the dreaded day begins with the bell. The farrāsh himself is a frightening figure, an old man who controls time. After the bell the whole courtyard becomes still with the pupils forming up in ranks. The most unpleasant experience of the day is the morning appearance of the nāẓir who inspires fear in everyone, including the teachers: "He looks at the students and the students die; (he looks) at the teachers and the teachers shrivel up; he looks at silence and silence shudders."² The nāẓir is fond of little 'surprises' which he precedes by a string of insults. With his one-track mind he begins to speak about order, or about a student accused of stealing, whom he asks to step forward to show himself to all. The students cannot understand the reason for the nāẓir's perennial bad mood: "They do not know the reason for that sudden terror, nor the secret of the deep frown in the nāẓir's face. Has a relative of his died? That is preposterous, since he has a frown every day.

1. 'At-Tamrīn al-Awwal', in Qa' al-Madīna, p.128.

2. Ibid., p.130.

It makes no sense that every day a relative of his should die, or perhaps a relative of his does die every day."¹

The torture continues in the classroom under the teachers' senseless questions which make the students' minds go blank. The teachers throw different insults at the students according to their subject: "With the succession of lessons and the variety of classes, the insults vary and their language varies. There are refined French ones, Classical Arabic ones, chemical ones, structured and mixed-up ones."² As if it were not enough to have their intelligence insulted, their behaviour is not spared either. Their notebooks are filled with the teachers' observations about their manner of walking, eating and sitting, even with comments telling them to take hold of themselves when they get angry.

The result of this frightening approach to learning is that no one learns anything and the pupils fail by the dozen. The students curse the teachers. What baffles them most is why they hate school so much, and why they contradict their teachers. They spend wretched moments, even though they hear people say that the best days in one's life are one's school days. The pupils feel that the only thing that helps is to have luck.

One of the most hateful classes is gymnastics. The teacher in charge of the lesson is an authoritarian type who takes his job too seriously. Gymnastics

1. Ibid., p.131.

2. Ibid., p.132.

exist to make men out of them and the teacher makes them feel it through sarcasm, by saying that in a gymnastics class he needs no women or pampered boys. His motto is mens sana in corpore sano (‘aql salīm jism salīm), which in these circumstances sounds ludicrous in view of the fact that under such treatment the mind will never become healthy, despite a strong body. The pupils, however, are surprised to learn that a new teacher has been assigned to their class, though to them this means just another tyrant.

The new teacher is a young man, who immediately tells them that he sees they are unenthusiastic in what they are doing, and he therefore asks that those who want to exercise should raise their hand. The pupils are dumbfounded, suspecting treachery. Perhaps it was a subtle way to find out who did not want to join in. They have been through this before with the French teacher, who would give a zero with a smile. The gymnastics teacher senses their uneasiness and repeats, this time with insistence, that he wants good relations based on trust. The pupils cannot believe their ears, since no one has ever asked them for their opinions before: "From the day they were born there has been a strong person pushing them somewhere, and nobody had asked them what they liked or what they hated. Everyone says: it is in your own interest, but it does not occur to anyone to ask them their opinions about what interests them."¹ After a moment's silence, all except one or two lower their hands, which pleases the teacher. The pupils experience a mixed feeling of joy and fear, because they do not understand. The event is something so much

1. Ibid., p.136.

out of the ordinary, that they think the teacher mad or deranged.

The teacher openly shows his surprise at their hatred of gymnastics and asks them why they feel like this. He has now gained their confidence, and they speak to him in emotional tones. He dismisses them. In the following session however, as the students are now free not to participate, everyone takes part in the exercises. The students feel now "that no one is forced, that it is in his power to choose."¹ The nāẓir witnesses one of these sessions in his usual bad mood, and wonders angrily about this sudden enthusiasm for gymnastics.

In the story ¹*al-Mihfaza'*, the young boy *Sāmi* thinks that he is unfairly treated by his father. He discovers that his father is not the omnipotent being he had thought, and he begins to feel contempt for him. The source of this lack of respect lies in money. *Sāmi* suffers from the fact that while his friends go to the cinema regularly, his father never gives him the money, and consequently he cannot go. Although his father swears to him that he has no money to spare, *Sāmi* finds this difficult to believe. In his eyes, his father could do everything. He has sent *Sāmi* and his brothers to school, arranging for *Sāmi* to go to school when his acceptance papers did not come through, and he had saved his sister's life by calling in the best of medical help. Since his father could do all these things, it was illogical that he should be without money. What irks him most is that his father always asks him to wait till the first of the month to go to the

1. Ibid., p.138.

cinema. Sāmi feels humiliated and cheated, and considers this an affront to his intelligence. He contrives a plan by which to get the five piastres to go out. He decides to steal them from his father's wallet when he is asleep.

Once the house has retired for the night he enters his father's room stealthily, and removes the wallet from his pocket. His plan is to steal the loose change, since his father never counts it, but to his great surprise there are only two piastres in change, and ten piastres in notes. While exploring the wallet for more money he is overtaken by curiosity about the other contents. He finds a marriage certificate and a reminder to pay the electricity bill. He also finds a piece of cloth from the Ka'ba. Sāmi cannot believe that this is all the money that his father possesses. It must be a trick of some kind, and a mockery of him. Sāmi becomes very angry with his father, and decides to take the notes, which he had initially wanted to leave untouched. He decides to spend half on the cinema and the other half on other things.

As he is about to leave the room in anger he looks at his father sleeping peacefully. He realizes for the first time that he and his father are two separate beings. "Sāmi remained standing in one place looking at his father, as if he were seeing him for the first time, and here he was now looking at him as if he were not his father, as if he had become a human being independent of him, another man, strong, good, defeated, totally separated from him, with a body, head, and a leg not covered by his gown."¹

1. 'Al-Mihfaza', in Qā' al-Madīna, p.31.

The gesture of stealing has made him look at his father and this has brought into being Sāmi's sense of awareness of his father's individuality and consequently of his own. He is forced to evaluate himself and is overwhelmed by pangs of remorse: "And whenever he looked again at his features and at the wallet, he felt hidden voices bursting from his bosom and urging him to do something."¹ He is swept by guilt, realizing that his father is really poor, and that he, Sāmi, should help him overcome his poverty. A warm feeling of filial love fills him and within himself he asks his father for forgiveness. He also realizes that he is a man who should himself work: "Rise, father, rise! I am not a child anymore; I am a man, by God. I am a grown man. Father, be not afraid for me; I shall protect you, and shall not ask for money from you. I shall not deceive you in order to get the piastres; believe me, I shall not do that!"²

In his self-realization he discovers his responsibility towards his little brother. He used to ignore his nightly pleas for a drink of water, so that his father would have to fetch it instead. This time he fetches it himself, and even falls asleep with his brother in his arms.

It is loneliness that colours life in the works of Yūsuf Idris; some characters are more and some less successful in overcoming it. The need for other people, as has been seen from Yūsuf Idris's stories, is a fundamental one.

1. Ibid., p.32.

2. Loc. cit.

In the story 'az-Zuwwār', this need is shown in its most elementary form. The story portrays the fight against loneliness in a hospital. The main character is Sakīna, a frail quiet woman, whom no one visits, unlike her bulky neighbour Maşmaş, who is visited by many people every day. Sakīna is not alone in the world. She has relatives, but none of them come to see her. Even the brother with whom she used to live pays no attention to her and for long months she spends her time alone. She is so lonely that in the end she resigns herself to the situation, and the hospital becomes a prison to her. She naturally wants to leave the hospital but the doctor never gives her a definite answer. The outside world has become unreal to her, so that if she leaves the hospital she would not know what to do with her life outside. She is like a prisoner "who yearns to leave the prison for life and freedom, but when he finds them when he leaves he will not know what to do with them; he resigns himself to the prison."¹ In addition her disease is rare and she becomes an object of curiosity to the doctors and the students. Thus even in the hospital she is an outsider.

Her problem ceases to be leaving the hospital, but rather overcoming loneliness. Her attention turns towards Maşmaş's innumerable visitors, whose features and names she tries to memorize. Little by little she asks Maşmaş about the visitors, and indirectly takes an active interest in them, bringing them chairs, bringing coffee from the buffet and pampering their children. She behaves differently from the days when she would have left her bed and gone

1. 'Az-Zuwwār', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, pp.210-211.

into the corridor filled with rubbish rather than embarrass any of the guests sitting on her bed. Maşmaş herself notices Sakīna's behaviour and is surprised by it. Gradually Sakīna enters into conversation with the guests and ends up by discussing their intimate affairs with them. She also tries to do the same with Maşmaş, who is becoming very annoyed. Sometimes Sakīna monopolizes the guests, and Maşmaş cannot get in a word edgewise. Maşmaş is furious, and decides to put her in her place. She starts to do so, but in a flash she realizes that Sakīna has never meant any harm and that she is completely alone.

'Marsh al-Ghurūb' expresses a man's link with the rest of mankind through his work. The character, who is nameless, is a vendor of 'araqşūs around Kubri Shubra. Physically he is nondescript. He is old like the other street-vendors, wearing the traditional clothes. Like them he would advertise himself by tapping his coins against the container: "He used to tap at regular intervals, two consecutive taps, then a period of silence, followed by two more taps."¹ Since it is winter, the people around him ignore him, not being thirsty. It is beginning to be cold, and darkness is setting in. His shouting and tapping are becoming more aggressive, a last desperate effort to catch a customer. But the populace is thinning out, the people turning into ghosts. Seeing that he has no success, his shouting and tapping become weaker. Actually, it is not only that no one has bought 'araqşūs from him that distresses him. It also means to him that no one cares about him. He keeps on tapping, "but in the taps there

1. 'Marsh al-Ghurūb', in Qā' al-Madīna, pp.74-75.

was a harshness, as if he were imploring people just to look at him...

What harm would it do if only they looked at him?"¹

He is overcome with sadness, which is expressed by the quality of the tapping "but the sharpness of the taps abated, and the intervals became longer, and became like the beats of a heart looking at death; the taps went silent for a long time, then reverberated suddenly, as if to resist annihilation."²

He has reached the point at which the only thing to save him would be a 'miracle', but nothing happens. He sinks into utter despair. His tapping becomes a song of sorrow, "a faint sad dancing song."³ He is not conscious of anything around him and the tapping comes from within his feelings. When the darkness sets in fully he goes home alone: "The world is very, very big, and the darkness very, very heavy."⁴

The wretchedness of life is exploited to some length in the short novel *al-Ayib*, in which a young female graduate is caught up in a vicious bribery racket. She is exposed to an evil bureaucratic system, with crooked people who try to enmesh her in their nets. Her problem is how to keep her moral code unbroken, and her conscience unsullied. The young girl, *Sanā'*, encounters problems, being among men, but the situation is complicated when she discovers that her companions are involved in their lucrative bribe racket.

1. Ibid., p.76.

2. Ibid., p.77.

3. Loc. cit.

4. Ibid., p.78.

Yūsuf Idrīs is trying to show not only how she copes with the situation as the central character of the novel, but also what the fact that she is a woman has to do with it. The novel could be considered a feminist piece of work in that Sanā', despite her final downfall, is depicted as being of strong moral fibre, just because she is a woman.

Five young women have been admitted to the government bureau and each one is assigned to a different office. The news of their appointment causes a great consternation among the employees: "The bureau has turned into a market place, the cheapest thing in it being talk; nay, there was nothing in it but talk... From its creation the bureau had only men in it, all men; when a generation would take its place, little youths with new views, and new blood, yet still men."¹

When Sanā' appears, she is perplexed, since this is her first contact with work and men. The employees are also confused, and there is no contact at first. Her presence has thrown the organization into disarray, with no one doing anything, except shuffling papers. The men leave the office to discuss her, and then wager that she will not last a month.

With respect to her male colleagues, Sanā' 's presence in the office is unnatural, because she interferes with the bribery racket which they are running from their desks. It is an intricate network of which she is not a part. The employees wonder what to do about her, and they debate whether they should let her in on the secret. Jundi takes the matter into his own hands,

1. Al-ʿAyn, pp.5-6.

and arranges it in such a way that when a 'customer' seeking a licence arrives, only he, the customer, and Sana' should be in the office.

When the customer, a rich man, arrives, he is uneasy at the sight of Sana' whom he has not seen before, but Jundi reassures him that she is one of them. It begins to dawn on her what is happening, but the cunning Jundi draws her into his net, when he takes her unawares by asking her advice on the matter. She discovers that she is up to her neck in a situation which requires an immediate decision. She is so thunderstruck by Jundi's comments that she cannot utter a word. She opens her mouth but no sound comes out. Jundi becomes gradually terrified and finally bursts into tears. She feels insulted, but the situation is more serious in her case because she has been insulted by a man. If she were a man herself it would be a different matter: "It is not an insult only to her honour and dignity, but the insult strikes so deep because it had been directed at her by a man...if she were a man and were treated in this manner she would not be wounded so deeply; she would have considered what had happened an insult, or ordinary accusation, to which she would direct her answer doubled, but she is a woman and deeply senses that the insult which has been directed at her honour is in reality an insult to her femininity, to her honour as a woman, not to her honour as a clerk or as a young working girl."¹

Such a situation between men is rather a superficial affair. They may insult each other but the words do not penetrate deeply. She finally

1. Ibid., p.57.

flings a few words of contempt at Jundi and runs out of the office. Her action throws the office into chaos. She is a threat that could bring catastrophe to all of them, and consequently they hold a sort of council to decide what to do about her. Some suggest to write a complaint about her dress, her morals, or to threaten her by putting pressure on her. When she comes back she gathers her belongings to leave, but the head clerk talks to her. She pretends that she is ill, but he immediately touches upon the subject of Jundi. He adopts a paternal attitude, and slowly, and cleverly, tries to bring her to see the matter in his light. But her feelings are strong on the subject, and she refused to agree that they are justified in perpetrating such base deeds. The head clerk, being an older man, experienced in life, knows how to argue with her. He explains to her that they are not stealing from anybody, as she claims. Quite to the contrary, the clients pay on their own initiative, and the government is not robbed. Besides, the salaries are too meagre to support a family. She herself should reconsider, knowing fully well that her brother needs money if he wants to take the university examination. All these arguments fail to shake Sanā', who claims that she and her family would rather die before she would accept any bribes. Finally an agreement is reached whereby she is to keep silent and not interfere in their affairs. Everyone then reads the Fātiḥa to consecrate the occasion. The fact that she has agreed does not convince the others. They think that in the end she will betray them. Only the head clerk has faith in her.

When a 'customer', 'Ibāda Bey, arrives, Sanā' is alone in the office, 'Ibāda feels at home in the office. He comes straight to the point and asks her for licence forms, and for her to take care of the procedure, to which she answers in the negative. But the man is stubborn, and disregards her refusal. He simply claps his hands for Khafāja, the messenger, who obliges. He orders him around and demands from him the seals and the head clerk's signature. The head clerk is summoned from a meeting and signs. He tells Sanā' to finish the rest. After the head clerk's departure she finds herself in a predicament. 'Ibāda Bey tries the direct approach, by bribing her, but he uses a devious method. He tells her that she will receive a cut larger than that of the others, fifty pounds. He takes a packet of five pound notes out of his pocket and places them into her drawer. It is in a way as if she had accepted the bribe, or at least that is the Bey's intention for her to think of it in these terms. It had taken much planning before he chose this step. Actually, her being alone in the office was done in connivance with the rest of the staff, so that he could break her down, in complete isolation. From his wide experience he knows that women are difficult to break down because of their high moral sense. In female psychology good and evil are clearly separated. There is no double standard by which one thinks something bad at home and good outside. Men in this respect are different. Their double standard is a scale applied according to the situation in hand.

The packet of money proves to be her undoing in the end. She thinks that she is immune to its power, but now that she is alone with the money she

would fight to prevent it from falling into someone else's hands. Thus in a negative way she becomes the possessor of this money, which she takes home. Her refusal to accept the bribe was based on her strict moral code. But now that she has accepted the bribe her code disintegrates completely, and consequently her behaviour changes. When, later, Judi approaches her with his advances, he is stunned to be told that she will meet him of his choice.

Sand' in this novel is defeated by predatory individuals who do their utmost to destroy her values and moral integrity. Her situation is further complicated by the fact that she is a woman living in a society which keeps its women out of the mainstream of life and therefore makes them unprepared to cope with the competitive world of men.

The predatory aspect of society is portrayed also in the story 'Şāhib Mişr'. It may seem strange to see this story included in this chapter as the main character is the antithesis of the 'defeated hero'. The contradiction, however, is only superficial as the story in reality is a critique of the competitive and predatory quality of society.

The character, 'Amm Hasan, escapes from the wretchedness of living in frustrating surroundings by 'dropping out', and offering his services to the world. The story describes an idyllic friendship between the old drifter and a policeman guarding a crossroads in the middle of nowhere on the way to Suez. The setting is important as Yūsuf Idrīs wants it to acquire significance:

"A road such as this one remains a straight (mustaqīm) line, without any use, like the straight man (mustaqīm) with a principle and by mere imitation and tradition has no meaning or value because of its straightness, until something happens to it, when for instance it ends, or twists, or meets another road and intersects it. Only here, at the intersecting point the straight stretching road acquires a meaning."¹

The government senses the importance of such a crossroads and appoints a policeman to guard it. On the human side, there also occurs an intersection and meeting in the policeman's case. An old man decides to settle at the crossroads a few days before and sets up a kiosk from which he would serve tea and coffee to travellers stopping at the policeman's kiosk. A friendly relationship develops between the two men.

‘Amm Ḥasan had married a few times but his wives did not like his carefree life. They wanted a home and children, a secure life, which ‘Amm Ḥasan was unwilling to provide. He chose the free life, his travels taking him where he would be of immediate use to his fellow human beings, like at the crossroads, serving tea and coffee: "Every man chooses his life the way it pleases him. Some choose the successful career, and spend their lives fighting their successful colleagues, scheming against each other. Others choose a career looking for a career, and spend their lifetimes moving from one unsuccessful job to another unsuccessful job."² But ‘Amm Ḥasan has

1. ‘Ṣāḥib Miṣr, in al-Mu’allaḥāt al-Kāmila, p.344.

2. Ibid., p.352.

has given up this type of life and opted for a life of service to mankind where his service would be unexpected. He would stay in a place until he has had a fill of it, from a few days to a couple of years. He has no psychological constraints like many others, "especially if you are educated, chained by a thousand imaginary fetters to your work and job, which deprive you of things; it is a strong fear or more precisely cowardice to think, merely to think of changing the place of your work, or the work itself or even your place of residence."¹

‘Amm Hasan's type of existence is one which many people would envy. The world is his. He owns it. He can move in it at his own pleasure, whenever he wants. A big owner, with many buildings, needs no more than the chair he sits on and the bed he sleeps in. In this sense ‘Amm Hasan is richer and happier than such a man.

Each one in his life develops that part of himself most suited to his job. A bus driver, for instance, acquires his strong voice because his job demands it. ‘Amm Hasan in turn has developed kindness by which he serves his fellow men. He is self-confident and his kindness is therefore genuine: "His extra politeness is not of the artificial lowly kind in which you immediately detect the extent of lowness and seek of gain. It is a deep kind of politeness which does not spring from bowing, ... he would whisper not in order to show you that he is whispering but because he knows that you will be more relaxed if he whispers."²

1. Ibid., pp.353-354.

3. Ibid., p.356.

But the kind 'Amm Ḥasan has an enemy who threatens to do him physical harm. 'Amm Ḥasan asks the policeman to ask one of the passing cars to give him a lift, but the policeman is incredulous and does nothing about it. His refusal to let 'Amm Ḥasan go stems from selfish desire. 'Amm Ḥasan has truly become a friend, and the policeman does not want to lose him. But one day he finds 'Amm Ḥasan moaning in his hut. The enemy has finally caught up with the old man and beaten him up. The policeman stands watch over him, suspicious of all that pass through the intersection. When 'Amm Ḥasan recovers, he leaves without telling.

It is undeniable that life is difficult and that the worst can happen. But the question arises, in Yūsuf Idrīs's case, why the worst happens so often in his stories. It is not enough for him to portray wretchedness, but he portrays it in its extreme forms. Yūsuf Idrīs clearly finds the more bizarre elements in life, the less usual kinds of tragedy, more attractive as subjects. This is partly because these are more dramatic in their essence but partly because tragedy better suits the demands of his temperament.

It is in this light that one understands better the city stories in the previous chapter. When the stories are compared with those in this chapter, one notices a common strain to both kinds, namely human suffering. City people do not really suffer because they live in the city, but because they are people. Seen in this light the country stories appear even more unreal and the descriptions of country life mere wishful thinking on Yūsuf Idrīs's part.

Human suffering is the underlying theme of most of Yūsuf Idrīs's short stories, and this will be seen even more clearly in the subsequent chapters.

The wretchedness of the characters is contrasted with the simple happiness of 'Amm Ḥasan in 'Ṣāḥib Miṣr'. The man possesses all the good qualities which are missing in the other stories. He stands apart so much that he is unreal. But it is Yūsuf Idrīs idealizing again. 'Amm Ḥasan is viewed nostalgically, just like the countryside. Both are so good. The author, however, being so fascinated by the negative aspects of life, does not want 'Amm Ḥasan to enjoy his blissful existence. There has to be someone to hound him and do him physical harm. Yūsuf Idrīs knows what human suffering means, but he does not want his characters to be happy.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INFLUENCE OF SEX ON BEHAVIOUR

Sex is present in many of Yūsuf Idrīs's writings. It is viewed in two aspects. First it is treated as a drive which seeks fulfilment, and this is amply illustrated in the characters' search for partners; secondly it is analysed from the standpoint of its influence on behaviour. It is this aspect that will be discussed in the following chapter. The active characters are for the most part males who have difficulty in obtaining sexual gratification because of the strictness of the Egyptian sexual code. This means that a character must use cunning, and, depending on the make-up of his personality, will either succeed or fail. Those of the characters who are women are portrayed in passive roles and as victims. If a woman shows an active interest in sex she becomes a tortured individual. Some of the stories contain a critique of the double standard of sexual morality, and one feels that Yūsuf Idrīs has some sympathy for the sexual plight of the woman, and the motif of women as an exploited part of humanity and the usual loser in the battle of the sexes is not far below the surface in a number of stories.

The first story, 'ar-Ra's',¹ only indirectly touches on sex, but it should be mentioned, as it deals with adolescence. The hero of the story sets out one afternoon for the countryside, and discovers a school of fish (ra's as-samak)

1. 'Ar-Ra's', in al-ʿAskarī al-Aswad, pp.147-156.

swimming in the canal. He is fascinated by their orderly progress and by their paying no attention to the crumbs he throws. He follows the fish, trying to disturb their order and finally succeeds when he throws them a whole loaf. In this story the boy exemplifies the mental awakening of an adolescent boy, to whom everything is new. He is not yet aware of his body but shows a restlessness which urges him to explore the quiet world of nature, with a feeling of life burgeoning in him, perhaps a foreboding of his sexual awakening.

When, however, sexuality becomes overt, it creates a new awareness of one's self and the world around. While in 'ar-Ra's' the youth is alone, the characters in the story 'Laylat as-Şayf' are several. They are also adolescents but adolescents highly conscious of their bodies. They take notice of every change that takes place: "We were sitting and talking, not like adults who delve into the troubles of the day. We were talking about ourselves. We had just begun to feel something bursting out in our bodies and changing them. We felt the change take place every day. It made us happy and bewildered. We repeated with joy: we have grown up (iḥna balaghna)!"¹

They are discovering their bodies, and this physical self-centredness makes them oblivious to the everyday world of toil. Their relationship with nature is a sensuous one. They bury their bodies in heaps of straw, the pressure of which gives them pleasure. As they seem to meet always at night they develop a sensuous attachment to it: "We were speaking, and night alone listened to us.

1. 'Laylat as-Şayf', in Qā' al-Madīna, p.80.

Without it we would not even have spoken. We loved the night to witness our conversations. We almost directed them to it when we spoke. We almost loved the night. We loved it. It was like seeing in its blackness, silence and tenderness, a beautiful woman, breathing, charming, with an ebony complexion which excited the deepest reaches of us."¹

They compare their bodies with one another and boast about it. The powerful urges stir within them like 'ifrīts who electrify their bodies and prevent them from sleeping. The 'ifrīts are most insistent when the boys are alone and it is for this reason that they like to remain in a group. They get the restlessness out of their systems by talking and the 'ifrīts keep silent. The hero in 'ar-Ra's' is not disturbed by sex. That is perhaps why he feels no need to be part of a group. In the case of the youths of 'Laylat aṣ-Ṣayf', however, the question of women is a pressing matter, and they must speak about them constantly. They have an instinctive need for them, but, except for Muḥammad, a youth slightly older than they, they know nothing about them. He works at a mill nearby, having decided that the plough was not enough for him. His horizons are wider than theirs, and he behaves accordingly. Aware of his sexuality, he grooms his hair with vaseline and wears his tāqīyya in a showy manner on the back of his head. He seems to know women. At least that is what he claims when he tells his friends of his adventures to which they listen enraptured. To them he is a man of the

1. Ibid., p.81.

world, with much experience behind him. They, on the other hand, know no women. They are frightened of them, and terribly shy in their presence.

Muḥammad is therefore obliged to tell them stories. On one particular occasion he tells them of his latest exploit, with a woman from al-Manṣūra, which is not far away, but far enough for it to be a distant town in their minds. Muḥammad describes all sorts of fabulous things, such as cognac and a robe de chambre, things that they have never heard of before. They become so excited by the story that they decide to go to al-Manṣūra, guided by the now reluctant Muḥammad, who will show them the woman. They set out for the town at night. After some time, however, Muḥammad disappears. They search for him in the fields, haunted by Muḥammad's description of bliss: "(She was not) just another of the women that Muḥammad was in the habit of speaking about. She became the woman of each one of us."¹

The youths comb the countryside until they find him. But Muḥammad is now a different man. He becomes aggressive and hits his friends. His blows are returned and Muḥammad is overpowered, thrown to the ground, and his hands tied. He refuses to show them the woman but they force him to walk. Finally he stops only to tell them that he lied to them. He even calls them swine. They pounce on him and force him to go on, still convinced of the woman's existence. A fight breaks out and again he is subdued. One of them fills his

1. Ibid., p.96.

hands with mud, rubs it on Muḥammad's face and stuffs his mouth with it. Then someone suggests that they sear him with burning cotton. Fortunately, the flame does not take. When the paroxysm of anger had passed they realized what had really happened. Their faces are scratched and covered with dust. It is time to return home. But what will their parents say? They will surely beat them.

In the story 'Laylat aṣ-Ṣayf' is portrayed youthful passion in its blindness. The youths are so overwhelmed by excitement that they lose all sense of rationality. They even refuse to face the reality that they have been misled by Muḥammad and persist in the belief that the woman still exists. Their excitement needs fulfilment at any cost, and it is in such a state of mind that they decide to torture Muḥammad. Yūsuf Idrīs implies here that frustrated sexuality leads to violence.

The character of Muḥammad, on the other hand, is quite different from theirs. He is more experienced, and this makes him feel contemptuous of their inexperience. He consequently exploits their gullibility with his fantastic stories. When he is attacked by them, he feels no remorse. Quite on the contrary, he insults them, and coldly faces them in the way he would any enemy in life. Even in defeat he is in full possession of himself while the others vent their impotent rage on him because their selfish urge has been frustrated. In this sense, Muḥammad is already a grown man, whereas the others are still children, which is also

shown in their final reaction: their thoughts turn to their parents who will undoubtedly punish them. As boys they are still bound to the disciplinary codes of their households which they must unfailingly obey. Muḥammad is more independent. He is building his own world, both mentally and physically. He works, while the others do not seem to. He is less innocent than the boys and sexually more cunning because of his wider experience of the world at large.

The loss of sexual innocence and increasing cunning runs through several of Yūsuf Idrīs's stories. The mood of the situation varies, according to the individual motivations of the characters. An extreme example is the person of al-Afandi in the story 'an-Naddāha', a predator who tracks his victims like a wolf: "In every big city such as this (Cairo), full of wolves, there are night wolves, day wolves, bus wolves, coach wolves. Even the pavements and the crowds of the consumer associations have their wolves, and in a building such as this there could be no doubt whatever about the existence of a wolf."¹ The Afandi wears an air of respectability, and is outwardly polite to everyone, but beneath this deceptive exterior is a predator who would do anything to attain his end: "He would be ready to lie, cheat, steal, kill, or use the atom bomb if he had one."² No one knows his true nature better than his victims, some of whom forgive him and even love him for it. As if hypocrisy were not enough, he refines his cunning, choosing his victims deliberately, and this turns him into a

1. 'An-Naddāha', in an-Naddāha, p.22.

2. Loc. cit.

savage beast: "He is not then an ordinary wolf: he is a hyaena. What attracts him most to the victim is precisely the reasons which compel the other wolves to go away."¹ Among his fondest memories is the seduction of a widow on the night of her husband's death, or his first exploit, when he slept with the mother of his schoolmate who had just failed an examination.

The Afandi is a man of resolve. As soon as he decides on a victim his mind starts working methodically on intricate schemes by which to ensnare her and from a smiling and rather slow moving individual he becomes another man, bursting with vital energy. In this story the prey is Fathiyya, the wife of the porter H̄amid. She catches his attention when he sights her bare breast while she is feeding her infant. She appears to him fair game, fitting neatly into his unending and wolflike thirst for conquest. The question now is which approach to use in her case. First he evaluates the family, and his powers of observation are great. In a glance he notices the happy simplicity of their relationship as they sit in front of the door of their flat, and he is not deluded as to the simplicity of his task. To offer her money is out of the question since these people "do not know the value of money. Only those who know how to spend it know its value."² To speak to her about love would not work either since "this kind of people are not concerned with love, especially his type of love...(they) are concerned with love only if it comes from their class, perhaps from a class only slightly higher than theirs."³ In the end he decides on the direct approach by

1. Ibid., pp.23-24.

2. Ibid., p.25.

3. Loc. cit.

using his social status (wasāma) as his best weapon. The Afandi's insight into the situation is shrewd, showing a contempt for his fellow human beings similar to Muḥammad's in 'Laylat aṣ-Ṣayf'. Both characters feel superior and exploit the more ignorant.

The Afandi knocks on the door of the flat. When Faṭḥiyya sees him she begins to tremble, her forces fail her, and she loses her balance. He catches her in his arms as she collapses. There she is, like a ripe fruit, falling without his having had to make the least effort. And for a moment humanity stirs in him. Inexplicably "he feels love, passion and yearning for Faṭḥiyya to such an extent that he is like the great lovers of history whose bodies are ravaged by sleeplessness, doubt, jealousy and torture."¹ These noble feelings do not last long, however, and the beast gets the upper hand of him.

Faṭḥiyya lies limp in his arms like a corpse, at the sight of which the hyaena in him drools. Faṭḥiyya recovers from her faint and struggles, but the Afandi is determined. He smiles at her victoriously, but she begins to sob. He persists in his act, stimulated by her weeping, until he attains his goal. At that moment, Ḥamīd, the husband, enters, but the Afandi, prepared for this eventuality, puts on his trousers and escapes.

The Afandi is a calculating and ruthless character. He is determined, and has presence of mind. What he wants he gets, and a given situation, if it is difficult, is so for tactical reasons. While in the Afandi's case, sexual conquest

1. Ibid., p.30.

is such a straight-forward operation, the character of the story 'Qā' al-Madīna', 'Abdalla, also fond of women, finds great difficulty in seducing them.

'Abdalla, a judge by profession, is a mediocrity. He is self-conscious about his shortcomings, and envious of those who can do things well. He is a poor speaker, unable to express himself in a way to attract the attention of a gathering. As for women, he has no contact with them. There are relatives, whom he cannot stand, and the unmarried ones see him only as a potential bridegroom, a horrible thought to him.

When 'Abdalla tries to establish a relationship with a woman he meets with failure. One woman insults him, and another who has accepted his invitation to the 'Auberge', leaves his company when he makes an attempt to touch her hand. Finally he decides to try Madame Shanadi, a fifty year old lady of status, who does not show any passion for him despite the fact that she offers little resistance. She actually treats him as an unhappy child, which he resents. In the end he does find a girl, Nana, but it takes him six months before he invites her to his flat. He develops amorous feelings towards her, but the idea of marriage does not appeal to him. He therefore uses her in order to learn about women. He is calculating in this respect, with his appetite whetted for further conquests: "...it is enough," he tries to persuade himself, "to know one girl to find out from her many of the secrets of all girls. You become a bit bolder, and when the time comes, you may compliment the taste of a girl-friend of hers,

then you move from girl to girl, and you learn more and your experience grows, and you become an expert with words that girls like."¹ Yet his relationship with Nana turns out to be unsatisfactory because of his deep unease. He tries hard to smile at women, to be polite to them, and to please them in any way, but his efforts are hardly ever requited. If a girl does want to please, he finds it so extraordinary that he suspects her of ulterior motives.

‘Abdalla becomes dissatisfied with the whole situation, and decides to do something different. He asks his porter if he knows about a female servant to do part time cleaning in his flat. The porter sends him Shuhrat, who is originally from a village, married, with three children. She appeals to him and immediately, on the first day, he sets out to seduce her. He orders her to make coffee. While she is in the kitchen, he puts his hand on her shoulder and stands behind her. She tries to slip away but he draws her closer to himself until he is able to feel her body pressed against his. She resists and succeeds in slipping away. She ignores him by asking him the whereabouts of the coffee cups. In order to hide his embarrassment he orders her to clean the flat after coffee. While she is cleaning he is able to admire the uncovered parts of her body as she bends over.² He wants to make one more attempt that day, but he is afraid of failure.

1. 'Qā' al-Madīna', in Qā' al-Madīna, pp.226-227.

2. On seeing a girl bending, cf. also Najīb Mahfūz, Bidāya wa-Nihāya, p.54.

‘Abdalla discovers that Shuhraṭ is a strong woman, and this frightens him. He even has the uneasy feeling that she can see through him. He procrastinates and curses himself for his weakness at the same time. One day he takes her abruptly in his arms. She resists him physically and verbally, and the only recourse for him is to order her to shut up. She obeys and her compliance overwhelms him with happiness, but he is not certain whether she keeps quiet because she is powerless before his forcefulness, or whether she is ignoring him. His uncertainty and inability to reach her makes him decide to leave her alone for a while. When he tries again, she avoids him. His aim now is to break her resistance down completely. He changes his approach by asking her suddenly whether she loves him. This change of approach influences him and he stops being master of his scheme. He is beginning to be jealous of her husband, and his relationship is becoming more and more serious: "Man may start something as a mere amusement, and lo and behold, he becomes passionately involved and the situation reverses itself to a great degree."¹

‘Abdalla knows nothing about Shuhraṭ's husband, yet there is a bond between the two married people which he fails to understand. In order to find out he places himself between her and her husband by asking her whom she loves more. Deep inside he is embarrassed and when she does not answer he

1. 'Qā' al-Madīna', in op. cit., p.248.

is overcome by powerless rage. His treatment of her changes. By behaving coldly and abruptly toward her he succeeds in reducing her to the level of the things that she cleans in the flat.¹ She obeys 'Abdalla's commands automatically, caring no more. When the situation has reached this stage 'Abdalla has a feeling of victory, but as always doubt haunts him and he does not know whether the victory is genuine. In order to test her he takes a pound off her salary. If she is truly his, she will stay. Otherwise she will leave him. This is his last attempt, and a half-hearted one at that, because he does not really care any more. He informs her of his decision and the following day she does not return, but four days later she is forced to show up because her little daughter has entered hospital, and her husband has left work. At this point 'Abdalla learns that her husband is a tanner by profession. 'Abdalla is filled with contempt for that lowly husband, unable to imagine that Shuhraṭ could actually sleep with a man that is filthy and exudes the smell of beasts.

Shuhraṭ begins to complain about her husband. Problems pile one on top of the other: her little girl dies and she herself falls ill. 'Abdalla begins to feel that he must get rid of her, but as he is a shy man he does not know how to go about it. Indeed he feels a sense of humanity stirring in him when he realizes that, if he throws her out, the family will have nothing to eat. He keeps her on, but she changes. She asks him for a loan to buy a blouse. 'Abdalla finds the

1. Mademoiselle Perle is also treated as a piece of furniture in Guy de Maupassant's short story 'Mademoiselle Perle', in La Petite Roque, p.92.

answer to this when he finds her one day standing at a bus stop, not waiting for anybody in particular: she has become a prostitute.¹ At this stage he loses mental contact with Shuhraṭ, who even talks back to him. He truly wants to get rid of her now, but because of his inveterate shyness and indecision he procrastinates again.

For some time 'Abdalla had been suspecting Shuhraṭ of having stolen his watch. After discussing the matter with his best friend Sharīf he decides to go to her home to retrieve the watch. Sharīf will go with him impersonating a police officer. They reach the house in a squalid section behind al-Azhar, to find Shuhraṭ with her husband who is filled with drugs, a complete physical wreck.² Shuhraṭ confesses and returns the watch.

'Abdalla, compared to the Afandi, is a failure. While both are cunning, the latter is so from strength, and his sense of determination crowns his efforts with success. He can appraise a situation with insight, although he is puzzled by the personality of Faṭḥiyya at times. He does not, however, let this interfere with his resolve, and steadfastly proceeds to his goal, even at the risk of scandal. To him the conquest of Faṭḥiyya is a now-or-never type of situation.

// 'Abdalla, on the other hand, is a man full of uncertainties. His sexual frustration stems from his inability to communicate with his fellow human beings.

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1. On prostitution and poverty, see Salwa Khammash, A Study of Social Problems in Egypt as Depicted by Egyptian Novelists from 1919-1960, pp.183-184.
 2. On opiates in Egyptian society, ibid., p.219.

This shortcoming has its roots in shyness which puts him out of touch with the rest of the world except for his male servant and Sharīf with whom he feels at ease. The problem is aggravated when he meets women, of whom he is totally ignorant. Hence his need for one woman from whom he could learn about the female psyche. While the Afandi goes from conquest to conquest, 'Abdalla only dreams about them. While the former uses ruses as a method for ensnaring his victims quickly, the latter makes sure first that she finds herself in surroundings which he thinks cannot but lead her to submission, i.e. his flat. The fundamental difference between the two men lies in the fact that 'Abdalla lures his victims in, while the Afandi goes out to hunt them.

There is a striking difference between 'Abdalla's private and social life. His shyness and fright at the outside world make him compensate by trying to project his best image to others. He has a keen sense of propriety. For instance, he does not like to be seen with women in public, and when Shuhrat comes to his flat he makes sure no one sees her come in. He even makes her work during hours when the building is empty. His world is his flat in which he indulges in his sexual fantasies, but since Shuhrat is still the outside world he does not know how to cope with her, either as a person or a sexual goal. He is so frustrated that he becomes suspicious, especially of women. His suspicions make him into an attractive character who defeats his own purpose. His ultimate triumph is to see Shuhrat break down as she hands him his watch back.

So far in these stories, the characters have been set in the world at large,

whether it be in country, or city, filled with influences and obstacles to which they react in different ways. The actors in 'ar-Ra's' and 'Laylat aṣ-Ṣayf' are not fully a part of the world yet, but in 'an-Nakḥa' and 'Qā' al-Madīna' they are deeply involved in it. In the latter two stories the sexuality of the actors loses its innocence and acquires warped characteristics. The Afandi and 'Abdalla cope with the world sexually, one as wolf and hyaena, and the other as a frustrated weakling. The Afandi, because of his success and despite his depravity, is capable of lofty feelings towards women, even if for a brief moment, but 'Abdalla, because of his lack of success, remains at an elementary stage of sexual fulfilment, and his obsession with the female body has pushed any idea of lofty feelings into the background, if they ever even existed.

But what happens to sexuality in an abnormal setting? The story 'Mushūq al-Hams' takes place in a prison. The inmates, because their freedom has been taken away, have nothing to do in their spare time except to talk about women. Prison has deprived them of freedom of action, but they remain free to imagine. In this area nothing is forbidden: "Women! When you finish recalling all the stories of love and relationships with the women in your life, turning them over and over in your mind; when you have had your fill of day-dreams...when you have endeavoured to defend those treasures of the memories against the enemy, the prison and its influence on the souls, you begin to feel that they are slipping from your grip and leaving you. You then begin to forget that you are a man, since everything that reminds you of your manhood has

disappeared from your consciousness."¹ Thus being deprived of freedom has made the hero aware of something fundamental – the gradual disappearance of his manhood. It is not a specific conquest that is at stake but the ascertainment of his status as a man. His past becomes something to cherish, since by it he retains his individuality, but without women he is nothing.

When the hero finds out that his cell is situated next to the women's block all his raison d'être returns to him. More than that, he is jolted into a new awareness of himself: "True, not more than two hours had passed since the news reached me, but the problem was not that it had stirred or excited any profound sorrows. The problem was that I was not I anymore. Suddenly I found myself standing before another man, who shook himself from within, a terrifying giant demon bearing no resemblance to the man who I had been throughout this day and for many days before that. The man to whom I had been accustomed, and whose limitations, traits and characteristics I knew, I did not realize this man had reached such a degree of deadness except when this demon burst forth."²

The hero thus not only finds himself but more. In his setting, the prison, cut off from the rest of the world, he is faced suddenly with an extreme situation, the presence of women on the other side of the wall. The reaction is consequently extreme, reaching into the depths of his being, below his consciousness, where lay slumbering his potentialities, waiting to be set free through shock. In the story 'al-Mārid' another hero has an encounter which shocks him

1. 'Mashuq al-Hams', in an-Naddāha, p.42.

2. Ibid., p.45.

to the roots of his being. Without thinking he jumps backward about five metres as an army lorry charges at him, out of control. He expresses himself in similar words: "I used to believe that I knew everything about myself, my hidden motives, the reason for my moods, the extent of my courage and of my weakness, what I loved and hated..." After the event he felt that: "...I was another being, that I was not anymore the same person whom I was, that something frightening had befallen me, and that he became me and I him."¹

When the prisoner imagines the woman on the other side of the wall he gives her physical and spiritual attributes: "... (eyes) sending glances which you know are feminine, extracted from the depths of the woman... the tender breast, the compassionate heart, the gentle and sweet word, and the thighs between which man loses his reason, an exploding volcano which cannot be extinguished. Strange and overwhelming forces, millions of electric charges I felt come from a hidden source in my body, exploding like an angry river in flood, and sweeping things away; Jinns, 'afārīt and thoughts of madness in a blaze of lightning; an overpowering desire and passionate dreams are born, multiply until they drown the whole world."²

At the good news he starts hitting and kicking the wall in order to establish contact. For several days he keeps knocking on the wall, waiting for an answer. He becomes so immersed in the operation that when he wakes up in

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1. 'Al-Mārid', in al-'Askarī al-Aswad, p.187.
 2. 'Mashūq al-Hams', in op. cit., p.46. A madman in a cell is obsessed with women in Guy de Maupassant's story 'La chevelure', in Boule de Suif, p.113.

the middle of the night he finds himself still knocking. But no answer comes. He loses hope and is overcome by a feeling of failure, until he returns to his old apathetic state. Yet in the end he hears knocks coming from the other side. He is so overjoyed that he jumps up and down in his cell, shouting. The deprivations of prison life make him experience the event in its sharpest form, and he recovers his hope and physical energy.

The two prisoners knock to each other, and this means of contact develops into a language spoken by the hand. He becomes convinced that he has fallen in love with the woman, whom he calls Firdaws. But his happiness is shattered when he hears other voices besides hers. He becomes jealous and possessive about her: he has even begun to consider her as his wife. Finally the knocking stops and there is complete silence. He now suffers the agony of separation: "Our two existences are finished, and I have become alone, half a thing that does not deserve to survive - a continuous pain which does not want to go.... the painful thing is that I continue... and life continues, and the entire universe is there existing and continuing, and how ugly it is that all this should continue without her, without her existence, talk, spirit and shadow."¹ He finds himself so much alone that he needs someone to speak to. He meets the night guard from whom he learns that the people on the other side are transient prisoners, sometimes women, sometimes men. Thus he never really knew with whom he was communicating, yet Firdaws, whom he had contrived, was more real to

1. Ibid., p.56.

him than any other woman he had really known.

The sexuality of the hero, who is also the narrator of the story, is here presented as a need for human companionship. The need is expressed ultimately in the imagined situation of marital life. It is also a need for physical contact, hence the fantasies of two bodies uniting. Since the goal is in reality unattainable, there is a gulf separating the ideal from the real woman. Because he is a highly sensuous man the hero mixes the two types. She is an ideal woman with physical characteristics capable of arousing a man sexually. Love to the hero is what gives the world its significance. When the woman appears he regains his lost appetite for life, and with every possibility of her being taken away he becomes despondent. When she finally disappears he feels that he is nothing. It is as if love between man and woman was all that mattered. But love must be consummated, and it is this drive which makes him want to overcome the barrier of the wall and reach her body.

In 'Mashūq al-Hams' sex is portrayed as a physical drive causing two people to wish to form a bond. It also gives an individual his appetite for life. In the next story, 'al-'Amaliyya al-Kubrā', sex is shown to be an affirmation of life. Life is not meant here in the metaphorical, but in the physical, clinical sense, and is opposed to death, also in the clinical sense. A young doctor and nurse keep watch over a woman who is dying of an acute abdominal haemorrhage caused accidentally by the chief surgeon. The woman's body is progressively weakening. The doctor is deeply affected by the sight and begins to tremble. He approaches the nurse, puts his hand on her shoulder

to find that she is also trembling. He takes her hand and "...it is cold, dead, no doubt, and its coldness is not of the body's making, but comes from a place far and abysmal, the same place from which death comes forth."¹ They are both terrified by death, and as a reaction they embrace spontaneously: "The amazing thing is that it happened to them together, at the same time, like instruments playing the same tune or as if they had become one body, one complete being."² They undress and climb on to the trolley, which is there to take away the woman's body, and they have sexual intercourse. The woman watches the procedure: "Before he lost the awareness of her existence he felt that the lady's consciousness had returned to her for a moment. It appeared from her look that she saw them for the first time, and truly grasped what was happening, and that hardly had she regained consciousness than she lost it again, but that moment was enough to have her features shaped into something like the smile of a child who is opening her eyes on life for the first time and is amazed by what she sees."³

Sexuality in 'al-'Amaliyya al-Kubrā', by being set before the eyes of a terminal case, takes on the meaning of a defiance of death. Sexual union is portrayed not only as the essence of life, opposed to death, but also as an active striving. One dies alone, but lives in the need of others. The doctor and the nurse are immersed in the sexual act in order to blot the image of death from

1. 'Al-'Amaliyya al-Kubrā', in an-Naddāha, p.122.

2. Ibid., p.123.

3. Ibid., p.124.

their minds. True life then means a need for the other.¹

The aspects of sexuality so far have concerned only single men, and the striking feature is that as persons they have no true encounter with their partners. The Afandi and 'Abdalla are men primarily interested in satisfying themselves. The former, even when feeling lofty feelings for the victim momentarily, does not take her into account as a person. 'Abdalla does not know what love means, thinking of it only as an attraction, necessitating no understanding of the woman. The hero of 'Mashūq al-Hams' does not even see the woman. In 'al-'Amaliyya al-Kubrā' the doctor has full contact with the nurse who also reciprocates. The partners are equal because they are both facing the ultimate issue of life and death, but the union is still only physical.

The victims of the Afandi and 'Abdalla are individually depicted as persons reacting to their respective predicaments. The Afandi's prey Fathiyya is a peasant girl, who, lost in the life of the big city, slowly comes to realize the falseness of human relationships in such surroundings and the existence of dangers lurking in every corner. She becomes a wary woman intuitively sensing that something is going to happen to her. She has a hidden voice, hārif, within her warning her incessantly about men. She is therefore determined to resist any seducer, but in her keen awareness of the possible event her attitude is ambivalent. She is afraid, but despite herself she is attracted by the idea:

1. A man is sexually attracted to a woman on a funeral hearse carrying the body of his close friend in Maḥmūd al-Badawī's story, 'Zuhūr Dhābila', in al-'Araba al-Akhīra, pp.50-51.

"...the hidden voice affirms to her that what he is whispering to her shall happen: whether she likes it, or whether she likes it not, it shall happen. She is just about to go mad. Let her go mad, let her die, or let anything happen, but she will resist."¹

She is a passive woman who knows that something is amiss but since the act will come from the outside, by the decision of a male, she can do nothing but wait, and take her stand then and there.

She has noticed the Afandī, from whom she instinctively draws away. She does not fear him because he is the particular individual that he is; rather he represents a type, an embodiment of the things that she fears. He has no name. To her he is just al-Afandī, a city dweller with different customs and money to spend. When the fateful day arrives and the Afandī enters her flat, she knows that this is the fulfilment of the ḥatīf's prophecy. In the past it was a mere eventuality which might not be ever realized, but when the event comes about she faints, because the shock of fulfilment is too much for her. When she recovers she finds herself in his arms, and her struggle begins: "...she was touched by an electrifying current that awakened her to her senses, and although the wakefulness was that of the mind, she resisted with all the energy and power at her command: at the limit of herself she resisted with that tiny amount of energy which the body saves to say its last 'no' in its life."² She is overpowered by the hyaena's strong limbs, but she does not call for outside help, mainly because

1. 'An-Naddāha', in op. cit., p.15.

2. Ibid., pp.30-31.

she wants this to be her fight.

While struggling, she can see the Afandi's clean shaven face, his white teeth and a mouth that any woman would want to kiss. She sees him smile and her strength wavers, but she resists again. She becomes desperate and weeps, which only incites the Afandi. She implores him to stop but to no avail. But she does not weep for long. Despite herself she begins to respond to the Afandi and to accept the act physically. Mentally, however, she is still struggling but, tired and in despair, she stops resisting until finally she submits, finding pleasure in her submission. She could hardly believe that this would ever happen to her.

At this moment her husband Ḥāmid enters and sees her half naked, in a state of collapse, the Afandi quickly fleeing. While Ḥāmid tries stumblingly to pursue the Afandi into the street, Faṭḥiyya realizes what has actually happened. She knows that life after this cannot go on as it used to. Things cannot be set straight anymore. She has been defiled. It was to her as if the Virgin Mary herself had been defiled. She wishes Ḥāmid to kill her, as quickly as possible, in order to be spared further agony. But the ḥātif whispers to her again, saying that it will not happen. And sure enough Ḥāmid does not want to kill her, but they both leave the flat forever. He wants them to go back to their village, but as they are about to board the train she leaves him and vanishes in the crowd in order to start a new life in Cairo.

Faṭḥiyya is deeply aware of her sexual feelings, and the eventualities

which she fears revolve around this. Hers is not an overt sexuality, looking simply for fulfilment, but a veiled one. Beneath her fears lurks a suppressed desire which takes the shape of the hātif who whispers to her constantly to the point that her fear becomes something of an obsession. The hātif is indeed her desire tempting her. One has the impression that in Fathiyya's case final submission and physical pleasure, for Yūsuf Idrīs, exemplifies the prevalent masculine belief that deep down women like to be raped.

Fathiyya's violent encounter is accompanied by an equally violent reaction, a shattering feeling of guilt, the removal of which can only be a quick death at her husband's hand. She has lost her pride and dignity, but she is also a realist. She has betrayed the man whom she had chosen from among several other bachelors in the village, because Ḥāmid, she felt, would provide her with a more secure home than the others. This turned out to be true as long as they lived in the village, but when they migrated to Cairo, they had a difficult time adjusting to the incomprehensible complexities of big city life. They both felt overwhelmed by their surroundings, with which they coped, each in a different way. Ḥāmid found male company in the coffee houses, while Fathiyya remained at home, only cautiously exploring what lay beyond her doorstep. She was the dutiful, submissive wife, and quite alone. The Afandi was the only person from the outside world coming into her life. She was afraid of the Afandi as she was afraid of the world, and when she fought one she fought also the other, and it is on this basis that she finally found herself and decided to make a new life

for herself. She does not so much vanish in the anonymous crowds at the railway station as become a person in her own right.

In 'an-Naddāha' the situation is clear-cut, with both assailant and victim clashing in a straightforward manner. In 'Qā' al-Madīna' the situation on the other hand is opaque. 'Abdalla is an obscure personality and so is his victim Shuhraṭ. Again, as in 'an-Naddāha', one is faced with a man's world, in which the initiative rests with the male. Shuhraṭ is also a passive woman, but with a strong will. Her weapon is her inscrutability which she uses so effectively that 'Abdalla does not know what to make of her. It even frightens him. But she is powerless before his advances because of an economic factor: she cannot leave because she needs the money without which her family cannot survive. At the beginning he is as inscrutable to her as she is to him, but she can find a place in his world, because she is adaptable, from sheer necessity. It is when he shows his jealousy of her husband that she avoids him, until she finally shows open contempt for him, and talks back to him.

At the beginning she gives the impression of being a woman of independent mind, but as time passes her personality is evidently not as strong as it appeared at first. Her stamina seems to be slowly undermined by the subtlety of the situation. When her salary is reduced she is unable to make ends meet and is forced to earn extra money by becoming a prostitute. She could very well have become 'Abdalla's mistress and have reaped considerable material benefits from this association. That she has not done so could be interpreted as a misplaced

sense of honour on her part when she chooses prostitution. This, however, is misleading, since she takes her new role seriously. She begins to admire herself in front of the mirror wearing an untidy looking attire instead of the attractive mulā'a which she used to wear and which her master admired. She also has delusions of grandeur, claiming that some friends of hers had told her that she should become a movie actress. She taunts 'Abdalla and talks back at him, and unabashedly asks him for a loan. This is too much for even the sex-hungry 'Abdalla.

It is at this point that 'Abdalla loses his fear of her and begins to suspect her of stealing his watch. It is a case of a mutual loss of respect. Since he is her employer he can exercise his power. His suspicions are correct and he retrieves his property. He triumphs when she breaks down weeping amidst the squalor of her home and neighbourhood. Unlike Fathiyya, she remains in her predicament without the benefit of a lesson from her encounter with 'Abdalla. She is truly a lost soul.

When contrasting the sexuality of man and woman in Yūsuf Idrīs's stories, one notices that it is covert in the latter, camouflaged by the demands of society which require her to be a passive mate. Fathiyya's extra-marital sexual desire is the whisper of the hātif who disquiets her as it disturbs her role as a good wife. Shuhrat on the other hand is such an obscure person that one has hardly any glimpse into her desires. Sex is to her a means mainly of money, not love and companionship. But sexuality becomes more explicit when

the women are pitted against men in the most fundamental role, namely that of women who procreate, the mothers. It is the maternal instinct in the story 'Dā'ūd' which causes a woman to seek sexual fulfilment, and the male, the husband, is absent as a source of physical pleasure or non-physical union. The urge is purely animal. The similarity is brought about by the description of two parallel conceptions, pregnancies and births, that of the woman and her cat.

The woman becomes irritable and starts to complain to her husband of headaches and pains. At about the same time the cat starts to miaow, in heat, and various assortments of males invade the house to curry favour with her. Soon the female cat stops miaowing and the woman does not menstruate. Both females, human and feline, are pregnant. But the woman, who is a human being with a language, curses her condition, while the cat endures hers silently. The cat gives birth to a litter which is given away to relatives. She becomes pregnant again and has a second litter only a few days before the birth of a son to the woman.

The husband decides to take the kittens from the mother cat who, in order to protect her litter, lashes out at the man and scratches his hand severely. His wife has an identical reaction when he tries to touch the baby. The mother pushes his hand away, talking to her offspring affectionately: "...go away you scarecrow (bu'bu'), come my little love."¹ In both cases the human and the animal mothers love their offspring to the exclusion of the rest of the world.

1. 'Dā'ūd', in Qā' al-Madīna, p.57.

The cat whose litter has been finally taken away, misses her kittens, and plaintive miaowing fills the house. It becomes so heartrending that the woman feels sympathy for her and asks her husband to bring the cat's 'children' back. The cat, however, remains bereft of her kittens, and as a consequence develops a strong affection for the baby, nipping him and rubbing her fur against his face. But the baby is taken ill and dies. The mother grieves and the cat, noticing the baby's absence, 'weeps' with her. The grief here transcends the barriers of species. The mother loses her appetite for food, just as the cat did when her litter was taken away. But appetite returns to her, just as it did in the cat's case. The woman develops headaches again and complains of pains, while the cat starts miaowing, in heat. Finally the cat stops miaowing and the woman does not menstruate.

Sexuality in 'Dā'ūd' is in a way just as blind as that of the males in the other stories, with the difference that here this kind of sexuality is rooted in the mother instinct, and is not pleasure seeking. The female wants to be impregnated and give birth. Once the male has performed his function he fades into the background. It is an animal sexuality whereby the woman and cat feel closer to each other, across the species, by virtue of being mothers, than they feel to their males. The mother instinct is a source of understanding between them: they both grieve and share a desire to conceive which coincides in time. When their offspring are born they are both aggressively protective when danger seems to approach.

Offspring as a factor in a woman's life form a complex situation in the story 'Dustūr , yā Sayyida'. A woman of about fifty and an eighteen year old boy involve themselves in an intricate relationship in an atmosphere of make believe. The woman is a widow with grown children, to whom, she feels, she has become a burden. When the ‘id arrives they visit her with their families, and eat the best food which she prepares for the occasion, but one by one they make excuses so that they can leave her house. She knows full well that, having lost her usefulness as a wife when her husband died, she has now lost her usefulness as a mother, since her children are leading independent lives of their own. She is now only a décor which she refuses to be: "...but the mother in her is not finished yet, she is not dead, she still pulsates in her big heart, and when her late husband died she did not think for a moment to marry or to change her life with her children. They used to be there, little boys and girls, who did not allow her to disappear from their sight because they needed her so much, and she in turn did not allow herself to disappear because it was so important that she quench their thirst from the breast of her motherhood...and her greatest happiness was to give, and it was very natural that there should come a day when they would be in need of her no more, when they have become in their turn fathers and mothers who want to sacrifice themselves for their children and to give. What shall she do while the mother in her is still able, existing and awake? She married young and gave birth young, and she has not reached fifty yet."¹

1. 'Dustūr , yā Sayyida', in an-Naddāha, pp.131-132.

She feels young, but realizes that in the eyes of her children she is becoming old, a shaykha. They are condemning her to loneliness, and she does not want to become a lonely shaykha: "It is true that she was no longer a youthful woman when their father died, but she shall not become a shaykha and with all her power she will refuse to become a shaykha in the very near future. To be a shaykha does not mean that they only impose on her old age (shaykhūkha), but, and that is the most important, that they impose on her loneliness. Now, loneliness, if it is forbidden (ḥarām) to a woman or a young girl, is good (ḥalāl) for the shaykha."¹

It is in Sayyida Zaynab that she meets the young boy, a perfect object on whom to lavish her pent-up affection. The situation is ideal in that the boy has no mother. But the boy is not of the woman's flesh, and when he invites her to his flat, she is instinctively apprehensive. He is a male after all, but, not knowing why, she accepts his invitation. Upon entering the flat her vitality as a human being returns to her; it is something sudden, irrational, as in 'Mashūq al-Hams' and 'al-Mārid': "...a demon capable of everything shook himself up from within, alive, throbbing with life, a demon which she had ignored and tried to kill, and which her sons and all those around her had ignored, and with all the values, sermons, wise utterances and sayings at their disposal they tried to strangle it or imprison it so that it die of hunger, neglect and deprivation; a demon, when it shows up, turns everything upside down."²

1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., p.134.

She finds herself torn between the woman and the mother in her. She knows that "he is but a child", but "she tries to see in the youth all that is not a child in him, all the things that would surreptitiously make her a woman again."¹ But the mother gets the upper hand, prodded by the untidiness of the place. She cleans, cooks and washes. She is happy, but her feeling of motherhood is not pure, having erotic overtones. But she checks these thoughts and returns to the role of mother. When the boy complains that he is cold, having taken a bath, she turns his back to her and hugs him in her arms to warm him with her body. Paradoxically the gesture pushes her motherhood into the foreground and makes the motherly feeling emerge in full. It is only when she has satisfied the mother that the woman returns. She feels attracted to him and he responds. A non-physical attraction becomes physical and overpowering: "...the hunger of skin for skin, the hunger of ribs for ribs, thirst of mouth for mouth, and the desire of legs to wrap themselves around legs was that which conquered and triumphed every time."²

The attraction culminates in incestuous desires: "An attraction the secret of which till now nobody knows, one which draws a woman to a man in order to use him as a means to obtain a replica of this man, a son, how wonderful it would be if this son were like his father, so that she could indulge in his love! If only it were allowed to her to choose this same son in order to produce

1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., p.140.

for herself and from herself another son also, much closer to what she wants and yearns for."¹

The struggle within her continues, and the contradictions develop sharp contours: "Two bodies begotten by unconquerable laws of life, laws more complicated and frightening than all the human striving to get rid of them, strange laws, going forth, transforming the emptiness between them, if emptiness there remained, into a hell of repressed drives, overwhelming, and bursting forth."² She is overcome by shame, reviewing before her eyes her family, ancestors and progeny, who are looking disapprovingly at her behaviour. But the temptation is too strong, and throughout the process of weakening she becomes aware of her womanhood: "The woman sprang forth from her depths, a woman that frightens her, for she is not the one who lived as an obedient girl, raised by a father and mother, taught by them, and married off by them, a woman who gave birth to sons who have brought forth sons of their own, a woman more feminine than all that she had imagined in her life about herself as a woman, an imprisoned woman, devilish, throbbing, threatening to explode so terribly that only God would know."³

The youth, who quickly overcame his temporary filial emotions, has become quite insistent, and the woman finds it difficult to resist his advances. As if to satisfy her conscience she reminds him that she could be his grandmother,

1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., p.141.

3. Ibid., p.143.

but in the end the temptation is too strong, and her passion is consummated.

One day she sees him in the street accompanied by a girl. It is then that she realizes her age and loneliness. The only refuge now is Sayyida Zaynab.

The story 'Li'anna al-Qiyāma la Taqūm' treats the mother-boy relationship again, by taking up the theme of a boy's jealousy of his mother. The boy, about to reach puberty, is confronted with having to accept the fact that his mother has a lover. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the flat has only one room. When his father was alive, he and his little brother and sister had to sleep under the bed. The mother and father would have sexual intercourse while the children were under the bed. The boy did not fully comprehend what was happening; perhaps it was a kind of game: "A long unending laughter would force him to smile, once he had begun to feel happy from the mere thought that his parents were laughing. A thump would be heard, followed by a laughing struggle on the bed, at which he shivered -- then a muted shout, then a return to the struggle for the end of which he waited in vain."¹ The boy would wonder how the father he dreaded could be part of a game. He would become angry that the other partner was his mother and he imagined himself to be the third partner. At times he felt so hurt that he would start crying to attract their attention. Although most of the time he was ignored, in the end he would laugh like his parents.

1. 'Li'anna al-Qiyāma la Taqūm', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.326.

Since his father's death, his mother has been sleeping in her bed alone, although it is big enough to accommodate the whole family. He feels so lonely that he pretends to be ill, and it is consequently a real treat when she lets him come into bed with her. He feels her breasts pressing on his back, and he feels embarrassed. He is becoming aware of his sexuality.

But now she has a lover, 'Amm Ismā'īl, whom he hates passionately. He used to give the little boy money and send him out to buy sweets, even if the boy had no desire for sweets. But one day the boy surprises his mother as she is getting dressed after a bath: "He saw her breasts; for the first time in his life he knew that a mother had breasts...and he found himself not daring to remain, and he shot out, running out to the children."¹ He returns later to find the door locked. He falls asleep but in the morning he finds himself under the bed, but with his mother sleeping next to him. He smells the odour of soap on her, but he feels embarrassed again, not knowing why. He is about to embrace her like a child, wanting to kiss her hand, but whenever he feels the pressure of her breasts, he becomes irritated, to the point of crying. His tears fall on her hands, and to console him she would draw him even closer: "Whenever she pressed him against her he wanted to wrest himself from her and run out to the children."²

But now 'Amm Ismā'īl is his mother's lover. One evening the boy is

1. Ibid., p.319.

2. Ibid., p.320.

under the bed and sees the man enter, and hears them making love. So many men come to visit his mother, why then should it be the execrable 'Amm Ismā'īl that sleeps with her? The boy feels that in this case his bond with his mother is disappearing: "It is only with Abu as-Sibā' i Ismā'īl that he feels as if the hidden current which tied him continuously to her, even when she was absent or travelled or slept, this contact was always there, but when she sits and speaks to Abu as-Sibā' i, he feels suddenly as if this current has been cut off and that she no longer feels for him, but on the other hand, his feeling for her would increase to the limit of madness."¹

Through his intense jealousy he develops a violent hatred for 'Amm Ismā'īl. He even extends his hatred to his mother. He thinks of killing them. But he does nothing. After all she is his mother, and if he did anything he would lose her. He does not want to sever the thread that ties him to her: "He cannot imagine a life without her... if he lost her, he would lose his life. She is now with this strange man, cut off from him, and he feels very deep down that he is lost, almost dead."² What he wants most is to restore the relationship with his mother. He feels, however, that she does not need her family at all.

But as time passes on, the boy's bond weakens little by little. He is growing up.

1. Ibid., p.322.

2. Ibid., p.329.

The next two stories, 'Maḥaṭṭa' and 'as-Sayyida Vienna' are straightforward narratives which depict the tactics of picking up women.

'Maḥaṭṭa' describes the successful attempt on the part of a university undergraduate to make the acquaintance of a young girl on a bus. The bus is crowded, like all Egyptian buses, filled with gentlemen who wear expressions of utmost dignity. The encounter is described by one of the passengers to whom the event is of more than passing interest. The student is standing next to the girl who is accompanied by her little brother. When she gets on the bus, the men turn around "with evil intentions, but they became more at ease when they found that she was the age of their daughters and so too young for bed, but also that it would not be fitting to be seen with her in the street."¹ They lose interest, except for the narrator's neighbour who remarks aloud that her presence is a lack of manners.

The student's behaviour, however imperceptible, shows that he is interested in the girl. The narrator notices this and becomes absorbed in observing them. He is convinced that the youth wants to speak to her.

The student looks at the girl, and her body, and although looking ahead, she is aware of being watched. The bus stops and starts again. As happens in such cases, people collide. The student collides with the girl, and apologizes, and she apologizes in turn. This is his opportunity. He claims that he has seen her in the university, but she keeps an angry silence. He perseveres. The narrator is becoming more and more interested: "I expected his face to become

1. 'Maḥaṭṭa', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.12.

white and immediately inundated in sweat, for in such occasions our shock would last a week, perhaps more...We would not do much for long days except to review the details of what had happened on the first attempt, and we would fall into abysses of shame, and keep reproaching ourselves, and sometimes we would think of suicide."¹

But the youth perseveres until his efforts are crowned with success. He tells her his phone number, which he makes her repeat several times. She promises not to forget. He gets off the bus and she at the next stop. The narrator's neighbour who has been watching everything comments out loud on the incident, and would like to have policemen on buses to prevent such awful things.

'As-Sayyida Vienna' describes an Egyptian's successful attempt at picking up an Austrian woman in Vienna, while passing through the city. The story analyses the Egyptian's motives and reactions to this meeting. The hero Darsh had been told by friends that the best place to pick up women is Vienna. And so Darsh sets out on his adventure, roaming the Viennese streets.

Although he is married, women are in fact his hobby, but he is careful that no one knows about his escapades. He is an expert at seducing women: "With one glance at a woman he knows how to get through to her, and after how many attempts he will succeed, and whether he will make her succumb by ignoring her or by going to her, or by playing before her the role of the bold knight."²

1. Ibid., p.21.

2. 'As-Sayyida Vienna', in al-ʿAskarī al-Aswad, p.75.

He always wants a woman who has never had a man before, and he uses cleverly planned stratagems "with the cunning care of the hunter who enjoys all the patience, preparation and sophistication that is to be found in the operation of hunting."¹ His numerous experiences have given him an unbounded self-confidence. For him the problem is not to find a woman but to get rid of her.

His dream now is to sleep with a European woman. He roams the streets in the evening, on the look-out. First he notices a sixteen year old, whom he asks for the time. She is drunk, and he comes close to her. He asks her to accompany him, but she tells him that she is expecting a friend. Darsh tells her to forget about him. He becomes aggressive. He draws her to himself and his "blood began to become hot."² But her friend appears and that is the end of it.

He goes to a bar, and does not find anyone there. He goes on roaming the streets, but he wants to avoid loose women. Finally toward midnight he sees an attractive woman walking alone in the street. He follows her but deep inside he is convinced that he will fail. Yet he does not despair: "One failure is considered a failure, but two or ten failures could be considered a quarter of a success, if not a half."³ Thus he perseveres and makes a plan. He must tell her that he is a foreigner, one of the respectable kind, and that he is lost and in need of help. He approaches her and she politely directs him to

1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., p.79.

3. Ibid., p.91.

the most expensive hotel where he claims he is living. But he keeps following her. When she sights a policeman she speaks to him, pointing at Darsh whose heart sinks, but the policeman politely directs him to his so-called destination. With Egyptian stubbornness he perseveres.

Darsh keeps following the woman by taking a parallel street, and then by 'accident' meets her again. Then he follows her to a tram stop. This is the moment he has been waiting for. He tells her frankly that he is a foreigner and that he would like to ask her a few questions, but he feels ashamed: "He finished the sentence and felt a torrent of shame draining his spirit from his breast and almost making it fall between his feet."¹

She, in a matter of fact manner, asks him what he wants to know. His hope returns to him. A conversation ensues, but he is disappointed in her lack of surprise when he tells her that he is Egyptian.

When her tram comes he climbs into it and sits beside her. The conversation continues and he finds out that she is married, with children, and that she is not living with her husband. Darsh is now very optimistic: "There she is, real, made of flesh and blood and smiling, next to him. He watches her carefully and closely, the way a cat watches a mouse, confident that it will fall between her teeth."² He feels that he is now the master of the situation, and he is on the offensive. When she gets off the bus he does the same. There is now an unspoken understanding between them that he will go to her home.

1. Ibid., p.97.

2. Ibid., p.109.

He becomes daring and puts his arm around her waist, and to his surprise she does the same. Encouraged he embraces her, and so hard that she jokingly reproaches him: "You will break my back, you African!"¹ These words have an effect on him: "Her words excited him so that his consciousness began to drown in the hot blood which ascended to his head."²

Darsh is a little confused. She is not a woman of loose morals, but a woman of straight morals, used to mixing with men and treating them as equals. The question is "why him?" He kisses her and she kisses him back. He tells her that he wants to kiss her again, to which she replies that she too wants to kiss him.

When he enters the flat he becomes apprehensive as she might be one of those women who lure strangers so that they kill them, as happens in Egypt. But her behaviour is reassuring. Darsh notices her self-assurance inside the house, and to an extent the roles are reversed. She is the one acting freely, while he feels constrained in his strange surroundings. As the woman's little daughter is in the same room, they move the cot next door.

The woman still intrigues him. He wonders what she sees in him and why she has accepted him, a total stranger. He asks her, and she answers him in all frankness. Her action was prompted by her dreams of the mysterious East: "The truth is that here in the West we hear so much about the East, its mystery, its men, and its magic. For a long time, as a girl, a teenager, and

1. Ibid., p.113.

2. Loc. cit.

even as a married woman, I have let my imagination roam free about the bronzed Eastern Prince."¹ Darsh is the embodiment of her dream, and if she had got off the tram she would have gone after him. She had actually lied about her husband who is simply travelling.

Now, what will happen next? To his surprise, she strips naked before him, without any preliminaries. He takes off his jacket so as to show to her that he is no less bold. But the experience is too much for him, and he goes to the toilet to collect his thoughts. There he notices the children's clothes hanging on the line, just like at home. He reflects on his family life and "perhaps for the first time in his life he realizes, at that particular moment, that he too is a father, that he has a house, a wife and a little daughter."²

When he returns he finds her in bed. He joins her and embraces her. She embraces him also, and kisses him passionately, but he remains perplexed: "Why does she not lie submissive and let him do his manly duty? Why does she not enjoy herself a little? It gives woman her femininity and man his masculinity. The positive quality on her part adds masculinity to her femininity, and to his masculinity the negative quality of femininity; but is this not what you wanted in the end, Darsh? Did you not want an active woman who gives herself with all her strength and will?"³ But his mind keeps

1. Ibid., p.125.

2. Ibid., p.128.

3. Ibid., p.130.

wandering to his wife, despite his great desire to shut himself off from these thoughts and concentrate on the naked woman lying next to him. He makes love to her, but his mind is not at rest. Shortly before leaving he has to tell her what is on his mind. He does not have a guilty conscience, but he must tell her that while he was making love to her, he was with his wife in spirit. She takes it with good humour, and tells him that she likewise was with her husband in spirit. This wounds Darsh: "He felt a seething filling his head. He turned on his heels suddenly and left the house, angry, as if he had been insulted."¹

These last two stories are of interest because of several comments on male-female relationships. In 'Maḥaṭṭa' the narrator remembers rather bitterly the tortures that he had to go through as a youth in his attempts to meet girls. Actually his whole generation suffered on this account: "For a boy to look at a girl is an easy matter, to smile at her even easier, but to speak to her, that is the problem, a problem which preoccupied our whole generation in the days when we were students in the colleges, and young men just graduated."² In those days one friend would confide in another, telling him of a third man's problem, namely his difficulty in speaking to a girl. But in the end he would confess that it is really himself that he is speaking about. Young girls face the same problem, "but they do not fill the world with wails and shouts like youths.

1. Ibid., p.143.

2. 'Maḥaṭṭa', in op. cit., p.14.

They keep silent on top of a fire, and the problem confuses them, and their virgin bosoms burn with an inward fire which no tears or sighs can extinguish, bosoms which are inflamed by songs and novels. Each sex wants the other, ... and yet there exists a thin glass wall. No one knows who put it there, and no one dares break it."¹ But the present generation has awakened, and has asserted its manhood.

In 'aṣ-Ṣayyida Vienna', Darsh is also thinking, comparing Eastern women to their Western counterparts. He is so engrossed in the comparison that it really spoils his night: "Blood seethed in his veins. She is the real woman. The women in the East are corpses which you cannot get at except in spite of themselves even if they are melting out of desire for you. They are pleased only if they are taken by force, but the women here, by God, you kiss the woman and she kisses you back. You embrace her and she embraces you; you take her and she takes you. Equality between man and woman is the right thing."²

The story 'Ḥadīthāt Sharaf' is of a different type. When Yūsuf Idrīs uses sex in his stories he lays stress on the psychological reaction of his characters to it, in a more or less limited setting. The crisis begins, unfolds and ends on the psychological plane, with the world at large remaining in the background. 'Ḥadīthāt Sharaf' differs from such stories in that the significance of

1. Ibid., p.16.

2. 'As-Ṣayyida Vienna', in op. cit., p.115.

sex is social, with the usual psychological approach almost lacking. Sex is not meant here in terms of immediate fulfilment, with a stress on the psychology of seduction in a limited set of circumstances. Sex is seen rather as the pivot around which the interpersonal relationships acquire significance within the framework of social relationships. Thus if the other stories in the sexual act bring about a crisis, it affects primarily the people directly involved. In 'an-Naddāha' three people are involved, the Afandi, Fathiyya and her husband Hāmid. The crisis occurs between Fathiyya and Hāmid, while the Afandi fades out of the picture. The situation does not go beyond them. In 'Hādithat Sharaf' the opposite happens. The sexual act is a breach of the code of conduct, which, if broken, affects the whole community. This is brought out clearly in that sex is mentioned by the term 'love' (ḥubb) and accompanied by a concomitant value term 'shame' (ʿayb): 'I believe that they still called it 'the shame'. They must still feel embarrassed to mention it publicly, winking at it, and you see it in the confused looks, and the cheeks of the girls when they blush, go green and lower their eyes."¹

As shown in Chapter Two (see above p.29), life in the village is orderly and predictable. The events are few and expected: they are known almost before they happen. If something unexpected happens, it is so extraordinary that the community is shaken to its roots.

1. 'Hādithat Sharaf', in op. cit., p.94.

In the story 'Ḥādīthāt Sharaf' such a thing has happened in the 'izba when the 'shame' is perpetrated among them. It rocks their way of life, especially family life, with its insistence on reputation before the other families in the 'izba. The loss of feminine 'honour' means disgrace for the girl and the family.

In the story, the culprits involved are Fāṭima and her alleged assailant Gharīb. The villagers are not certain that anything has happened, but there is enough evidence for them to believe that it has, but to establish the fact they must find out by examining the girl physically and ascertaining her virginity.

Fāṭima is the type of girl who exudes sex appeal of a particular kind. Although her physique is enticing, it is her femininity (unūtha) which makes her so attractive: "...a live, ripe femininity always exploding and bursting out; you do not know where it springs from and where it dwells hidden."¹ Her smile and gait excite the virility in men. Her appeal is so strong that even children feel their latent virility stirring in them. Some of them lift their gallabiyyas spontaneously exposing their nakedness to her.

Fāṭima's appeal is only too obvious to her brother Faraj, but it is his wife who makes remarks to him about it. She claims that she shakes her breasts when she walks and puts on too much make up. For this reason Faraj admonishes Fāṭima who does not understand his stern behaviour, since it has never been her intention to perpetrate the 'shame', of the seriousness of which she is fully

1. Ibid., p.97.

aware. Not only that, in outward appearance she is no different from the other girls in the ‘izba, but she has that additional, indefinable appeal, which sets her apart from the rest. She is unaware of the fact, and therefore keeps behaving as she always has.

Since Faraj is the one responsible for his sister, his greatest hope is that she should marry, not only because this is the natural thing to do, but because, in view of the circumstances, he would be rid of responsibility to her. At first glance this would appear to be no problem, since a girl of her kind would be in high demand, but it is precisely because she stands in such high esteem that no one dares make an approach and "appropriate all that femininity for herself, and if they married, what would he do with her, since people in the ‘izba and around do not marry to enjoy beauty and build walls around it. They do not live to enjoy life, they live only to survive and marry so that the wife works, and brings forth children who will work. For this reason Fāṭima has remained without suitors."¹ She is the 'forbidden fruit' that no one dares approach, or let another man approach.

Thus her problem is very complex: even if someone wanted to, he would not be able to take the initial step, because the others would stop him. But if she is caught behind a stable with men, people begin to gossip, not out of malice, but because they think it necessary to protect her from the 'Shame'.

1. Ibid., p.100.

They are convinced that a girl of her beauty should not fall into the 'Shame'.

Gharīb on the other hand is the woman chaser of the 'izba', and he is very much aware of his sexual attraction to women, which he exploits to the fullest. He is also ruthless, not hesitating to seduce a neighbour or an aunt. In this he is reminiscent of the Afandī in 'an-Naddāha', who will seduce any woman, regardless of morality. Gharīb likes to speak charmingly, and he has the demeanour of an adolescent. At night he boasts to his friends about his adventures while lying in the hay, feeling his thighs and chest. This characteristic makes him resemble Muḥammad in the story 'Laylat aṣ-Ṣayf', where the youths also bury themselves in the hay, and speak about women at night. Like Muḥammad he tells lies. In this case Gharīb tells his friends that Fāṭima loves him and sends him letters. But Fāṭima is the only woman in the 'izba' before whom he feels powerless to act. If he meets her and greets her, his heart throbs violently.

When the event occurs no one is surprised because the seduction of Fāṭima was something expected, and Gharīb was the natural seducer. To Faraj the event is a shock, and he shows it by his appearance: his head is uncovered, his gallabiyya open, and his eyes bloodshot. The people are prompted by curiosity and linger at the doorstep of his house, watching him. Even the children are there. It is a matter so central to the life of the 'izba' that the children are aware of what it is all about: "Children have their society also, rumours and young opinions about the grown ups -- even they feel that Fāṭima

has finally perpetrated that forbidden thing about which their mothers and fathers have warned them so often. She has perpetrated the 'Shame'."¹

Faraf finds himself accountable because of his position as a brother. It is his duty to kill both Fāṭima and Gharīb, but there must be proof. He must make certain first, because on such an action depends the future or annihilation of his family. He cannot act rashly, since he must respect the custom of the ‘izba: "Faraj belongs to those living in the ‘izba and these are accused of being more lax in their morality than the village people, but he will show them that they are the mortal enemies of the 'Shame'."²

The ‘izba people argue as to what should be done about Fāṭima. It is agreed that her virginity should be put to a test. The most insistent and the most intolerant are the women themselves. Not even the fact that Fāṭima swears that she has remained unsullied convinces them. Rather on the contrary, if she is afraid to prove anything, something then must have happened. If such a thing had happened in a village, the people would have tried to conceal it from others. But here, in the ‘izba, everyone's life is everybody's property as far as gossip is concerned. Fāṭima finds herself being described openly in her own presence. She begs the women to spare her the humiliation, but they are adamant, and she is forced to yield.

1. Ibid., pp.106-107.

2. Ibid., pp.108-109.

The procedure must be carried out properly. For this reason, the first candidate for the operation, a seamstress, is rejected, as being of dubious reputation, since she is known to lend her dwelling for illicit love affairs. They settle on Umm George, an educated lady, who can read and write. When the operation is about to begin someone tries to put a sheet over Fāṭima's face, but she puts it away: "What is the use of hiding the face if her whole body is naked?"¹ Umm George takes it all seriously, crosses herself, swearing by the living Jesus to discover the truth. To Fāṭima it is paradoxical and shameful that she should be examined by Umm George who told her once that, were it not for their difference in religion, she would have had her engaged to her brother.

Fāṭima is bared to everyone's gaze, and she feels the deadly humiliation, and mercilessness of everyone: "Her eyes were open like the eyes of the blind; her heart was sinking under her feet, and whenever she made a step she felt that she trod upon it, treading on all her virginal shyness, on all the sweet feelings of her childhood days, and the days when she grew up, the days when she sang at festivities, and dreamt that she too would have a magnificent feast and a wedding night. Today they look at her, stare at her, no, thousands, the whole world is eyes, open like saucers which do not look at her but at her most private parts, without shame, savagely, and pierce them, slaughter her honour, and her blood flows, and drips at every step which she

1. Ibid., p.114.

makes, at every stone over which she stumbles, barefooted, naked, humiliated, with no one having mercy on her."¹

Fāṭima suffers, all the more because she is innocent, and it is in this that, since she has no guilt, she perceives the monstrous injustice of the people. She values her purity so much that their treatment of her is equivalent to a loss of honour. She bleeds mentally, the same way she would bleed during deflowering. It is a psychological deflowering. She has become nothing in their eyes.

In Umm George's house she is forcefully pushed on to the table, and she offers her last struggle: "Many hands stretched, dry veined ones, even remnants of mulukhiyya on them were dry; tens of curious eyes stretched in their search of her honour and their preservation of it; they all stretched, penetrated, turned, even when they did not know what they were looking for."² Among the people, only Umm George is dignified, and embarrassed by the situation.

After a moment of silence, Fāṭima is declared to be a virgin. The fact that her virginity has been safeguarded does not mean that she is forgiven, and that life can go back to normal, as if nothing had happened. Upon her return her brother Faraj starts hitting her, revenging himself upon her for the scandal that she has caused. Although she is pure, Faraj is furious for the talk

1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., p.118.

of which she was the cause. Gharīb meets a similar fate at the hands of his father 'Abdūn who tries to push him into a well. But 'Abdūn's reaction is different from that of Faraj because Gharīb is a man. Despite the scandal, 'Abdūn is shown as being, deep down, proud of his son's prowess. Yūsuf Idrīs points subtly to the double standard of sexual morality in Egypt. 'Abdūn's behaviour is thus mostly for the show.

The event has its effect on both Fāṭima and Gharīb. Fāṭima's reaction is human. The night after the ordeal she breaks down and weeps: "It was the weeping of someone who has been inflicted a deep wound."¹ Gharīb on the other hand reacts on a superficial level. He starts to pray and his talk about women ceases. There is no indication of the type of upheaval that shattered Fāṭima. Yūsuf Idrīs seems to hint at the marked difference between man and woman in such an event. It is the woman who must bear the most terrible consequences, while for the man there is an easier way out. But the people in the 'izba do not forget either. They insist that Gharīb become Fāṭima's bridegroom, but Faraj refuses firmly and keeps her locked up in her room.

Life, however, returns slowly to normal. Fāṭima goes out again, as she used to, stirring erotic feelings in men, and Gharīb goes back to his conversations with his friends. But Fāṭima has lost her innocence before the others, and she herself has hardened. She is not submissive to Faraj. Even

1. Ibid., p.121.

when he catches her going out of the disreputable seamstress's house, and catches her by the hair, asking her what she is doing there, she would look him straight in the eye, without feeling any shame.

The novel al-Harām is in the same class as 'Iḥdithat Sharaf'. A sexual scandal happens in an 'izba, and local life is turned upside down. The scandal has its roots in a mystery, which is slowly unravelled in the book. The chief interest of the novel lies in the way in which the characters are affected by the situation. In this sense, the novel is closer to the regular stories rather than to 'Iḥdithat Sharaf'. Al-Harām, although treating a situation as a whole, focuses attention on each individual in turn, a feature which makes the book more like a collection of short stories.

At daybreak, after a swim in the canal and the morning prayer, the guard 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib sets off on his rounds in the fields. He is responsible for the area belonging to the inspectorate, of which the farm settlements form the centre. In the dark he is easily frightened by possible brigands and even jinns. He is therefore startled by a shape lying along the side of the road, not fully visible because of the darkness. When he draws nearer he finds out that it is a dead baby, undoubtedly a bastard. Having recovered from his shock, he is invaded by a feeling of responsibility. The feeling does not stir in him because he has an individual conscience. It is a responsibility which is imposed on him from the outside in accordance with which he must account for his actions to his superiors. As his finding of the baby may cast

suspicion on him, by being involved in the situation, he must divest himself of all responsibility.

‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib feels his predicament so keenly that he begins mentally to prepare ways to defend himself, not only before people in general, but before the Ma’ mūr at Taftīsh, an-Niyāba and the Mahākīm. In the meantime the sun rises, and people begin to appear on the road. He is joined by ‘Aṭiyya and Uṣṭa Muḥammad who has the knack of showing up whenever something happens: "No event takes place in the inspectorate without him being the first one to witness it, and nobody knows how the news reaches him, but you will inevitably find him there."¹ Uṣṭa Muḥammad casts a quick glance at the dead baby and declares that it did not die of natural causes, but was strangl^{ed}. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib denies this, as if to know more about it would mean trouble for him. Uṣṭa Muḥammad points to obvious marks of strangulation: the blue coloration of the baby and the redness around the nose and mouth. Uṣṭa Muḥammad asks ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib to free himself of responsibility by informing the Ma’ mūr az-Zirā’a who is the only person to deal with such a situation. The desire to rid himself of responsibility is in Uṣṭa Muḥammad's mind also.

In a community such as theirs news travels fast. Quickly the people from the ‘izba gather round the original three. Everyone has to see the bastard

1. Al-Haram, p.10.

baby, men, women, and even the children who had been sent to the canal to wash their faces. The sight has a strong impact on them: "As soon as a person saw this he turned his back and went away, his soul and features filled with a gripping mixture of fear and nausea."¹ Soon afterwards arrives the Ma' mūr, Fikri Afandi, who is as curious as the peasants to see something so new to them. Being of superior status he wants to maintain his dignified composure, but at the sight of the baby he cannot remain impartial. He is visibly affected by the sight. He quickly leaves accompanied by al-Khawli, Tāntāwī, Usta Muhammad and a small group of workers.

Like 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the Ma' mūr Fikri Afandi finds himself in a predicament which revolves around the problem of responsibility. Geographically he is responsible for all that happens in the inspectorate, important or unimportant, but finding a dead baby is a matter which does not touch him. Because of his status he appears mentally more open. He also thinks about areas of responsibility but unlike the others, to whom the baby is an object of physical curiosity, Fikri Afandi is beset by questions. First, whose son could it be? Being responsible for the settlements he turns his attention to their inhabitants first. In the 'izba which contains thirty houses, he knows every woman and girl. The culprit could be one of these. Fikri Afandi had heard stories of bastards during his life, but they were always stories of people he did not know. But he was always deeply affected by the news, even if

1. Ibid., p.11.

incredulous that such things could happen. It was too horrible even to imagine the possibility of such things happening. He is deeply troubled when this happens right under his jurisdiction and that he saw the baby with his own eyes.

The affair causes him to think about male-female relationships as he understands them: He had had premarital and extramarital sexual relations, like many other people, but Fikri Afandi embodies the double standard of sexual conduct, which he rationalizes: "It was far from his mind to imagine that there could be women in the world who transgress the way women transgressed with him, as if those women who had transgressed with him were not adulteresses, the adulteresses being only those who transgressed with others."¹

He feels moral revulsion towards sexual wrongdoing, but perhaps because of his double standard he is curious about the wrongdoer, not only as a specific person who has breached the custom, but also as a type, whether she was beautiful, like a dancer for instance. He also thinks about the man who could have done it; perhaps it is Aḥmad Sulṭān al-Kātib who electrifies the older girls with his eyes "so that he made their breasts leap into the air."² Yet Fikri Afandi is not interested in the father but in the mother. Again in his brand of morality he distinguishes between wrongdoing among men and women: "Man's role in the shameful deed (ḥarām) is superficial

1. Ibid., pp.14-15.

2. Loc. cit.

but woman's role is fundamental."¹ He is thorough in his suspicions. Not even the women on the higher levels of the local society escape him. Yet having enumerated them in his mind he finds all these women innocent since, the place being so small, he knows the physical condition of each one of them. None of these women are physically out of the ordinary.

Fikri Afandi, and his small entourage, come into sight of the migrant workers, the Gharabwa: "The eyes and hearts looked to where he (Fikri Afandi) pointed, and the answer came from most of the bystanders, as if it were the joy of innocence: "They... it could not be any one else... Those Gharabwa are sons of bitches."² But Fikri Afandi is not easily swayed, and suspects Nabawiyya, the girl who sells eggs.

The Gharbwa are a convenient scapegoat for the 'izba dwellers, because they are outsiders, with a different way of life. They are not resident in the inspectorate, but people who work in the fields only at harvest time. They are the poorest in the district and it is poverty that forces them to migrate every so often to earn their bread for a few piastres a day, far from home. They wear tatters, and give off a strange offensive smell. They are the embodiment of all that is low and despicable, in contrast to the inhabitants of the inspectorate who are the embodiment of desirable and commendable qualities. Their attitude towards the Gharabwa is reminiscent of any xenophobic group who feels the need to justify its natural superiority:

1. Ibid., pp.14-15.

2. Ibid., p.16.

"No one could imagine people like these to be inhabitants of the inspectorate where all the people are respectable farmers. Each one has his house, children, animals and a clean new gallabiyya which he wears after work to spend an evening in the coffee house, or go to a funeral or a celebration."¹ The inhabitants of the 'izba are proud and conceited about their comfort. Every one has money, good furniture, and sometimes even a sewing machine. Work is not too hard since they have farm machinery at their disposal. Although most of the peasant's money goes to the inspectorate, he has enough to feed and clothe himself, unlike the Gharabwa who have to leave their houses. These outsiders have different names given to them, Gharabwa or Tarhīla. Their speech is an object of ridicule because they change the gim into a kaf.

The Gharabwa know very well how the peasants look at them, but do not care what they are called. What counts is that they have the good luck to work in the inspectorate. It is not everyone, however, that works. It all depends on Fikri Afandi who selects the workers in their villages or origin. For that purpose he travels a long distance by train to visit the villages. He is naturally curious about their way of life which he inspects from the superiority of his own way of life, but he is not devoid of sympathy: "Fikri Afandi knows many villages, and many contractors, villages which he calls ant hills, for there are too many people in them, more than there is adequate or food for, and all are, by God, poor to such a degree that Fikri Afandi himself

1. Ibid., p.17.

would shake his head in distress whenever he was in their region and saw how they lived."¹

When he arrives in a village, he is surrounded by a sea of humanity, through which he makes his way to the contractor's house, where he will pass in review all those able to work in the fields. About five hundred of them are herded into five railway coaches which are normally used to transport rice or cattle. With them the people bring their food, bread and cheese. But many are left behind, because they are ill or too old to work. They eye sadly the lucky ones. Upon arrival, the Gharabwa buy what they need in the store owned by Junaydi Abu al-Khalaf. But in spite of the fact that they are good business he does not like to have them as customers.

Fikri Afandi, prodded by his inquisitive mind, visits the living quarters of the Gharabwa, convinced that a woman who had just given birth would not be able to work that day, and therefore would have to remain behind. But everyone is working; only an old woman who takes care of the children is around. There are two possibilities then. Either the woman forced herself to work or she is not from the Gharabwa. But Fikri Afandi, although prejudiced against the migrant workers, is above the peasants in that he is able to check his negative emotions through a sense of doubt. He wants facts, even if they prove to be unpleasant to the reputation of the 'izba. Fikri Afandi's

1. Ibid., p.18.

doubt is respected, as he occupies a position of authority. No one contradicts him. In fact the villagers seem to surrender their opinions by resorting to religious formulae: "No one knows but God...", or "Satan is clever."¹ Fikri Afandi wants to have a look at Nabawiyya and he finds that her features bear no trace of childbirth. The only recourse now is to pass in review all the women of the Gharabwa.

He decides to see the Gharabwa women in the fields. He rides a donkey, while the others, being of lower rank, follow him on foot. It is Fikri Afandi's first real encounter with them as people, not as hired hands. "It is for the first time that he had to think about something utterly removed from his profession as Ma'mūr az-Zirā'a, a position which was his only object of thought, and none other... (but) what he had to think about were the Tarhila, not as he was used to thinking about them. He used to think about them only as anfar, anfar picking the worm, gathering the cotton and draining the ditches. The old man was a nafar. All of them were anfar ... faces which did not know sadness from joy. Their women were indistinguishable from their men. Even their clothes were the same. There was no difference between the men's gallabiyyas whose colour had changed and which were scattered with patches, and the scant robes of the women from which hung threads on all sides. How many times did it happen that a man borrowed the gallabiyya of his wife, and

1. Ibid., p.24.

the wife that of her husband without anyone noticing any real difference."¹

The Tarhīla look so downtrodden that he finds it difficult to believe that a Tarhīla woman was capable of giving birth to a child, whether he was born in or out of wedlock: "He could not believe it, as if the one who had given birth to the bastard was not a woman, but a man."² He had a difficult time convincing himself that the Gharabwa were like other people, with women who gave birth.

When Fikri Afandi arrives amongst the Gharabwa he orders the supervisor to gather all the workers in front of him. The Gharabwa welcome this break from work. All are counted and he inspects all the women, searching for marks of childbirth on their faces. One of them catches his eye; she is in fact the only face which looks like a woman's. He hits her on the back with his stick, but her face shows no traces of childbirth, either. All of them have to pass before him one by one. The women and the girls find in this the possibility of having their dreams fulfilled, such as living in the 'izba with easy work, and surrounded by beautiful things.

The ultimate resort is to summon the police. There is an investigation but it proves to be inconclusive. The 'izba, following the police verdict, is gripped by bewilderment. It is difficult for the inhabitants to believe that the culprit is not from the Gharabwa. The word of the authorities having been

1. Ibid., pp.27-28.

2. Loc. cit.

accepted, doubts begin to creep into the community. Accusations are made in all directions, and the women are suspicious of the others in the inspectorate. The unease reaches all the way up to the houses of the highest employees. As the suspicion grows, the Bāskātib, Masīha Afandi turns his attention to his daughter Linda, and her secret correspondence with Şafwat, the only son of his rival, Filrī Afandi. It is an open secret that the two young people exchange letters with the help of the local postman Maḥbūb. But after the scandal the situation acquires a new significance, especially when he finds out that Linda has an upset stomach. It is the type of complaint which follows childbirth. He immediately suspects the daughter to be the culprit. He does not say anything, but contemplates her in the light of his new sensation. She appears all of a sudden a stranger, not a daughter. He feels her stomach, but it does not have the flabbiness of a stomach after childbirth. Although he seems to be convinced of her innocence, he is pursued by other thoughts. He finds it inconceivable that she could have a life of her own, unknown to him. The signs of attraction between Şafwat and his daughter are known to everyone. But what if they are doing something of which he has no knowledge? All these thoughts have made a crack in his self-contained world, just as a crack appeared in the self-contained world of the 'izba.

The scandal of the castaway baby becomes the sole topic of conversation in the 'izba. The news spreads to the neighbouring 'izbas, even to the

neighbouring villages. Nothing like it has happened before. The only events that may disturb the placid atmosphere are a sporadic fight or a small theft, but "that they should stumble one morning on a murdered baby, that is a matter for which meetings are held."¹ The people of the inspectorate know how to speak; they even develop speaking into a form of art, in which some become the stars. In this atmosphere then the story of the baby is debated, without anyone agreeing on anything. Even Shaykh 'Abd al-Layth, the great conversationalist and expert on all aspects of peasant life is at a loss for an answer, so bewildering is the case. The eventuality is so far removed from their community life that they are unable to account for it. The event is an extraordinary eruption into their lives which are then undermined through the futile questioning.

Fikri Afandi, like Masīḥa Afandi, is a man who doubts the outside world. While the latter has doubts about his daughter, a child of his, the former shuts the world out from his wife, a partner in marriage. The world outside his door is evil, and he does not want his wife to know it. He keeps her indoors not simply to protect her, but because he is a possessive individual: "He is a man who did not marry a woman to share his life; he married one to serve him; he chose her as a pretty little thing who would know how to cook, and not know anything about that strange world existing beyond the door of the house, teeming with evil doings and crimes."²

1. Ibid., p.60.

2. Ibid., p.67.

For this reason he does not answer his wife's questions about the scandal. About the only outside activity that Umm Saḥwāt indulges in, to the displeasure of her husband, are visits to 'Afīfa, Maṣīḥa Afandī's wife.

An event occurs which sheds light on Fikrī Afandī's mentality. Maḥbūb the postman comes to him in tears, with a letter in his hand. Maḥbūb is illiterate, yet in a mysterious way he knows how to deliver every letter to its address. But this time, while on his round, he is given a letter to post. Intuitively he senses that there is something wrong about it. He goes to Shaykh Ibrāhīm, faqīh of the inspectorate, in whose presence he opens the letter and whom he asks to read it. He is shocked when he hears the contents. It is a passionate missive from his wife's lover in Ṭanta. When he finds out about his wife's treachery he runs to Fikrī Afandī to tell him. But Fikrī Afandī finds the story so hilarious that tears roll down his cheeks. He finds not only the situation comical, but the fact of diminutive Maḥbūb betrayed by a huge wife. Fikrī Afandī can only ask him why he does not hit her, and he tells him that he should divorce her. Fikrī Afandī's cruel reaction points to his indifference to the unhappiness of others. Only his own problems are the ones that count, and what lies beyond his self-centred world is not worth troubling about. The misfortune of his fellow human beings does not arouse his sympathy; it may even be comical. The door of his house is the boundary between his world and the world outside, but the space inside the house is not one in which human beings live in co-operation based on understanding. The space is an extension of his

mental space in which the others move according to his wishes. His wife Umm Şafwat feels imprisoned in such a restrictive atmosphere. She is naturally curious about the scandal of the baby, and her deprivation of the knowledge of the outside world almost makes her curiosity into an obsession. She is a lonely woman living in fear of her husband. She rarely visits anyone and is rarely visited. She finds social occasions boring, since as the wife of a man who enjoys status in the social structure of the village, she has to put on airs and graces before the wives of the employees. Sometimes people see through her mannerisms, and she feels ashamed and hides in order to weep. The stuffy atmosphere touches directly on her relationship with her husband, whom for twenty years of marriage she has been calling formally Fikri Afandi, or Abu Şafwat. She is filled with nostalgia for her childhood, and envy for the more spontaneous life of the peasant women: "Sometimes she yearns for her early childhood in her father's peasant house; sometimes she wishes to be able to do what the peasant women do, bathe in the ditch for instance, or bake bread for herself, and take out the loaf, all round, just as she used to do in her father's house."¹

Fikri Afandi is a Bahri, while she is a Şa'idiyya. He met her on one of his trips and brought her back as his wife. He became so possessive about her, that even her brother's visits were kept hidden from the outsiders to

1. Ibid, p.73.

to whom he would say that he was a man working for her father. She was destined to play the role of the haughty and respectable wife. The only person whom she could see without fear was the village simpleton, Damyān, Masīha Afandi's brother who was not considered as a threat to Fikri Afandi's private world. Damyān was the only true contact with the outside world, in the sense that she could speak freely with him. He in turn would open up to her and tell her of his troubles, two souls in distress; she a prisoner of her house, he deprived of intelligence, and the laughingstock of the 'izba'. The bond of friendship found its most sincere manifestation in their weeping together.

Probably because of the scandal prevailing in the village Umm Şafwat's mind turns to erotic thoughts, and she comes back again to a question which she has been asking herself, whether Damyān is any good with women. She used to consider the mere thought of it shameful, but now she does not seem to care so much anymore: "Do you think that Damyān has what it takes to rouse a woman or not? Whenever it occurred to her she considered this problem a shame and a forbidden thing (ḥarām), which it was not to her advantage to allow herself to delve into but now she did not herself know why she did not consider thinking about it forbidden and a shame."¹ Her curiosity prods her to find out, and she therefore calls him. She will find out at all cost. But a few moments later, Damyān rushes out of her house. What transpired is not known, but it is his habit to escape when the subject of sex is hinted at.

1. Ibid., p.74.

Fikri Afandi then is a very possessive person, not only about his wife whose mistakes he severely punishes, but towards the Gharabwa. He has always wanted to surprise them and find them neglecting their work so that he could punish them, but he always failed because the braying of his donkey would warn everyone of his approach. He knows this, and this time, he decides to go on foot, and take the workers unawares. To his surprise everyone seems to be at work. But there is a little shack in which he finds a sleeping woman.

The woman may be what he has been looking for, but in order to find out he asks the foreman about her in an indirect way, knowing that directness would only cause the rayyis to withhold the information. He asks the routine questions about the woman and finds out that her name is 'Azīza. He asks the questions in such a way that the rayyis knows what the Ma'mūr means, and what disastrous consequences he would have to face if he did not give the correct answers. In this manner of questioning the Ma'mūr gets out of the rayyis the confession that 'Azīza is the mother of the dead baby. But there is an unexpected twist to the story. She is a married woman, and therefore this is not the type of scandal that everyone expected it to be. The Ma'mūr is therefore perplexed. The question to him is why a married woman should kill her son. As she has a high fever, the rayyis begs him to leave her, and let her keep her daily wage. The Ma'mūr does not know what to do. Even he, the man of responsibility does not know the way out of this new situation and he has the ultimate recourse to the formula "la ḥawla walā quwwata illā billāh". He

acquiesces to the rayyis's request and leaves the shack. Perhaps it was the fact that the unfortunate event happened within the bounds of marriage that he does not act.

‘Azīza is the victim of tragic circumstances, which will never become known to either her fellow Gharabwa or the inhabitants of the inspectorate. The only things known are disconnected bits of information revealed in her delirious state, in which she betrayed the fact that she was the mother of the baby. Beyond that her personal life is a mystery known only to herself.

She had married a youth, ‘Abdalla. Their honeymoon lasted only one night, after which it was work in the fields again. Being very poor, ‘Abdalla possessed no land, nor had he a piece he could rent. He was a simple day labourer, not always certain whether he would be able to work every day. His main source of income was as a migrant worker during the season. When he married ‘Azīza, he took her with him, which doubled their wages. They were able to subsist on a meagre diet, and they led their lives in relative tranquility. But two years later ‘Abdalla fell ill from Bilharzia, which sapped his strength. His condition was so bad that the contractor threw him out of the coach which was carrying the migrants to the seasonal harvest. Out of loyalty, ‘Azīza, unsuccessful in her imploring of the contractor, decided to stay behind, in order to be by her husband's side. In order to make a living she engaged in menial tasks around the village. She tried everything to alleviate his condition by complying to his every wish. One day he wanted to eat potatoes. As there

were none in the house, and they could not afford to buy them, she went to the fields in search of potatoes which may have been missed during the harvest. She took a shovel and started digging a hole. During her work she was surprised by Muḥammad b. Qamarēn, a fellow in his twenties and the owner of the land. She told him the story and he took pity on her. He even started digging himself, leaving her sitting and watching. The man found a few small potatoes in the ground. ‘Azīza was so overjoyed that in her eagerness to run to her husband she stumbled and fell backwards into the hole. Muhammad tried to help her out, but stopped and made love to her. She wanted to resist but somehow did not. She wanted to curse him, but the main thing was that no one had seen them. But as the days were always busy she forgot the whole affair, her only preoccupation being how to feed hungry mouths. She did not even notice the fact that her menstruation had stopped. She became aware of it only when she felt her pregnancy, but she could not really believe that she was pregnant. False pregnancies did happen, after all. She had not even slept with ‘Abdalla for a long time. But in the end she realized that she really was pregnant, and by Muḥammad. She decided to get rid of the foetus by attempting abortion, using mulūkhiyya twigs, turning the mill stone over her stomach, and jumping from the roof, but all to no avail. Now she had to hide her pregnancy by tying a ḥizām around her stomach, "as if she wanted to strangle the foetus in her stomach, and kill it before it killed her."¹ All this was painful, and

1. Ibid., p.93.

it was only at night that she would untie the hizām to be able to breathe freely. In this condition she decided to leave 'Abdalla for the season with the other migrant workers, because otherwise they would not have been able to survive financially. The hard work made her forget her recent past, but as the pregnancy progressed, she came to suffer from it, and at the same time she was haunted by the trivial but vital event that had brought her to such straights.

The pains became so severe that she knew that birth would follow soon. When the workers fell asleep she left their compound for the direction of the 'izba where she gave birth to her child. So that no one should hear her she put a stick between her teeth to prevent herself from screaming. The foetus slid out "as if her own spirit slid out with her."¹ But the child began to cry, an eventuality which she had not foreseen. She put her hand over his mouth to silence him.

Despite the fact that he was a bastard, she began to feel tenderness towards him: "A real mouth of a real suckling in which there were no teeth, a mouth, hardly had it felt her finger than it began to move automatically sucking it. The child sucked her finger immediately, a fleeting moment, but which electrified her... this suckling was her son and she was his mother."² From the pressure of her hand she accidentally smothered him. Instinctively she drew away from him, and crawled on her stomach into her bed. The following

1. Ibid., p.97.

2. Loc. cit.

day she returned to work and all was well, but two days later she became feverish and was forced to lie down in the shack. She became delirious and it was in this state that her secret leaked out. The news spread among the Gharabwa who, in a council of elders, decided to keep the matter to themselves, so that she could keep her daily wage.

When the news spreads to the 'izba, even before the Ma'mūr returns to it, everyone is relieved, and happy, since it has all come out as they had wished it to be, confirming their prejudices: "In the news there was not only a solution to the puzzle which had confused them, but also a satisfactory solution exactly as they wanted it and were afraid that it would not be. It was a solution which put their minds and hearts at rest and returned to them confidence in themselves, their women and their values."¹

Each one tells the next person that he knew the outcome all along. The Gharabwa have now become a source of curiosity. The peasants and the farmers, self-righteously condemn them with strings of insults, as being the scum of the earth, a necessary evil which descends on the 'izba once or twice a year. A shame (ḥarām) had been perpetrated amongst them, and in the eyes of the inhabitants of the 'izba all of the Gharabwa are almost ḥarām. The women of the 'izba are the most fanatical in their condemnations: "The peasant women also had opinions like their husbands, and fathers, but most strangely, they were more fanatical and intolerant, as if they were begrudging the Tarḥīla that one

1. Ibid., p.102.

of them should bear a child in the womb as they did, and that she should give birth as they would, even if bearing a child and its birth were the greatest of ḥarām.¹

But while the adults of the ‘izba keep cursing the Gharabwa, their children do not know what to make of them. In the day time, they share the opinions of their elders by making fun of the Gharabwa when they meet them in the road. But at night they have different opinions. They become children again, prodded by the unknown which in their case are their counterparts, the Gharabwa children. The fact that they are forbidden by their parents to mix with them, as this is ḥarām and ‘ayb, they are attracted by the idea even more. They set out therefore to the Gharabwa encampment and stop before it so that they can observe the other children unseen. They see games that they have not seen before, even a little play which they improvise. The ‘izba children cannot resist and come out of their hiding to join the Gharabwa. The two groups meet and spontaneously join in play. It is the first time that the ‘izba children see the Gharabwa children at close range. They learn their names. The following night they return to the Gharabwa, behind their parents' backs.

The Ma'mūr, having agreed to let ‘Azīza rest, another shack is built solely for her. She becomes an object of curiosity to all, including the

1. Ibid., p.103.

children, and visitors stream to see her. But no one really wants to show that it is her that they want to see, but pretend to be on the way to some errand, and that the shack just happens to be on the way. At first they go during the day when the Gharabwa are in the fields, but soon they even visit her in their presence. They do not exchange words with them "as if 'Azīza were no longer from among them but had become a public sight which it was the right of all to see and look at. And the Gharabwa accepted the situation with much forbearance and self-control."¹

Yet as 'Azīza goes into her periodic delirium the ice begins to melt between the people of the two communities. The sight of 'Azīza's pain seems to have stirred something in the people of the inspectorate. 'Azīza ceases being a culprit who has perpetrated an evil act. Consequently, out of delicacy, the inspectorate people gradually refrain from speaking about her and from seeing her. They have even become well disposed towards the Gharabwa. Gestures multiply: the shopkeeper Junaydi, who used to curse even their money, sells a bottle of vinegar to 'Azīza at half-price, and the egg vendor Nabawiyya kills and cooks a rabbit for her.

The inspectorate people make discoveries about the Gharabwa. They find out that they have a country (bilād) of their own and till the earth, have families and discords, and that they have complaints and grievances against

1. Ibid., p.126.

the overseer, the Ma'mūr, the administration and the inspectorate. The children of the inspectorate are left by their parents to play freely with the Gharabwa children, only telling them not to ^{let} ~~to~~ them breathe into their faces because of germs.

While the inspectorate people are fraternizing with the Gharabwa, Fikri Afandi has problems, stemming from the fact that he let 'Azīza rest and keep her wage. He has the feeling that he is in a way responsible for her, but he cannot understand why he feels that way and why he had decided on his course of action. It could have been the mere sight of suffering that was the cause. Since he is the top man in the inspectorate he is in a dilemma. She needs good medical care, but referring her to the medical officer of the markaz would inevitably attract the attention of the authorities, and he would have to answer many questions. The only medical treatment must come from Usta Zaki, the barber of the inspectorate who dabbles in various cures. As a consequence 'Azīza's condition goes from bad to worse, until she becomes a physical wreck.

But there is a hopeful sign and 'Azīza's condition seems to improve. The fever goes down, but this is a false hope. When she regains consciousness, she rises and runs out of the shack, and, screaming, heads for the bank of the canal where she had abandoned the baby. She finds the stick which she had used to stifle her cries, puts it between her teeth, and imitates the motions of

childbirth. At the paroxysm of the delirium she collapses and dies.

The problem now arises, what to do with the body. After deliberations with others, Fikri Afandi decides to have her remains transported to her village on the lorry which is used on bi-weekly runs to fetch provisions for the Gharabwa. Wrapped in a cloth used to gather the cotton worm, she is loaded on to the lorry and departs. Fikri Afandi has succeeded in ridding himself of responsibility by having her village of origin shoulder it. He has even invented a pretext in order to cover himself. It would be understood that 'Aziza had been taken ill on the inspectorate grounds and sent home, where she ultimately died. The reputation and administrative security of the inspectorate have thus remained unimpaired.

When reading the foregoing stories, one notices that the author is dealing with repression in a society where sexual relations outside marriage are forbidden. The characters are therefore sexually tormented. The stories, which are from the artistic point of view the least significant, are in this respect the most realistic and therefore the most interesting. 'Al-Mahatta' and 'as-Sayyida Vienna' are good examples. In both, the author makes valid and shrewd comments on the sexual situation in Egypt. But in the remaining stories Yūsuf Idrīs portrays sexual behaviour in terms of familiar character types.

The cases of deprivation are so extreme that the reader becomes exhausted reading them. 'Washūq al-Hams' is typical in this sense. The

character is doubly deprived, by society and by his being in prison. It is not surprising that Yūsuf Idrīs has created this kind of story. He wants his character to suffer completely to the point of his not wanting to live. The rapist al-Afandi in 'an-Naddāha' is so evil that he is not credible. The incestuous desires of the woman in 'Dustur Yā Sayyida' are also incredible. What the woman really wants is to have sexual intercourse, but since she already has several children of her own, wanting an adopted son for a lover is unreal. The sexuality that Yūsuf Idrīs portrays is unhealthy because he creates unhealthy characters. Sexuality is, after all, only one side of human existence, but Yūsuf Idrīs's characters are overwhelmed by sex, not because their sexual desire is so powerful, but because Egypt's sexual code is so strict. Furthermore because of his temperament he has to exaggerate. His stories on sex are on the whole a form of erotic daydreaming.

An exception to this are the two narratives, 'al-Harām' and 'Ḥadithat Sharaf'. They both treat sex on the social level. The emphasis is not on sexual desire as such, but on the description of the effects of infringing on the sexual mores of a community. 'Ḥadithat Sharaf' is an excellent example, and the story is possibly the best one that Yūsuf Idrīs has so far written.

CHAPTER FIVE

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL SUFFERING

Yūsuf Idrīs, who was trained as a medical doctor and practised for a time, shows his professional past in his works. Many of his stories either take place in a hospital or depict ailments and deformities in one way or another. Quite a few of his characters are connected with the medical profession as surgeons, doctors or nurses.

The author, as has been seen, is concerned in the larger bulk of his work with the mental life of his characters. But these are also of flesh and blood. Yūsuf Idrīs concentrates on this aspect in great detail, by singling out situations in which the human body suffers. The descriptions are clinical, with great stress on blood and physical pain. This type of situation serves on the author's part to bring about a change in the characters who are witnesses to someone else's suffering. They become more human, and aware of what to be truly alive means. Yūsuf Idrīs is also interested in the brain and its relation to madness, which makes him meditate on human intelligence.

The stories 'Khams Sā'āt', 'Intiṣār al-Hazīma', and 'al-ʿAmaliyya al-Kubrā' deal with the suffering of the human body and the effect this has on others.

In 'Khams Sā'āt' a wounded policeman is brought to the hospital,

having been shot by a gang of ruffians. For five hours the doctors attempt to save his life. The doctor in charge is deeply affected by the sight of the man. He feels that in the wounding of the policeman Egypt herself is wounded in all her dignity: "There was Egyptianness in his features... an Egyptianness of the kind which makes you love again. He had a tan in which, if you contemplated it, you would find the glorious sunrays which created civilisation on the banks of the Nile. His thick moustache contrasted with his tan, and brought out in him a manhood which sends shivers into men."¹ There he lies then, dispossessed of his dignity, in fight for life like other men. It is a struggle in which the body fights its own battle against death, disregarding medical attention: "I had just given him the injection which was not able to drug the giant demon which was storming throughout him."²

But the body, despite its physical will to live, is slowly undermined by the wound. Drops of sweat appear on the policeman's forehead, and his hands become cold: "It was not the coldness of the snow, but it was the coldness of a long corridor at the end of which is annihilation and perdition (ḍiyā')."³ 'Abd al-Qādir, the policeman, is lying on a bed in which others have died, persons that the doctor knew by their first names. Death to the doctor is very close, the death of people whom he had tried in vain to save. He is afraid that 'Abd al-Qādir will die, and he feels a bond between them when 'Abd al-Qādir

1. 'Khamṣ Sā'āt', in Arkhaṣ Layālī, p.91.

2. Ibid., p.90.

3. Ibid., p.91.

smiles at him, but "little by little the smile began to vanish behind clouds, then disappeared. His features grew dark, drawn together, and from the blackness of his eyes lighting flashed."¹

The patient's condition is worsening, and the doctor finds the atmosphere weighing heavily upon him: "I felt first of all that many things around me were panting. Then I felt that the whole room sighed as if it were a feverish lung."² The crisis begins when 'Abd al-Qādir starts to haemorrhage. Death is near with the advent of blood: "My eyes fell on my hands which I found all covered with dry blood which always filled my nose since I began to work in reception, the smell which had its warmth, the gripping, strangling warmth, and through which you catch a glimpse of something like the rotteness of death, the smell of which reminds you of the slaughtered buried, and those in whose bosoms dwell tuberculosis."³

'Abd al-Qādir bleeds profusely. The blood which flows in, flows out again, and the blood reserves at the hospital are dwindling fast. His strength is waning and the physical will is undermined. The fear of death is creeping into him and the doctor senses it. He begins to fear himself that the man will die: "I see his youthfulness (futuwwa) shrinking more and more, along with

1. Ibid., pp.95-96.

2. Ibid., p.97.

3. Ibid., p.99.

the giant within him, and his body which used to swallow wounds without trace; everything in him has become wounds."¹ As 'Abd al-Qādir's condition goes from bad to worse the relationship between him and the doctor becomes more intimate. They call each other by their first names as if they were friends. To the doctor the tragedy lies in the fact that he is oppressed like the rest, i.e. 'Abd al-Qādir's predicament is that of society as a whole, The tragedy is everyone's in the room together, till all become like one big family "with one single wound."²

The last litre of blood available in Cairo is injected into him. It is his last chance and all are united to save him. They are professionals no more, but a group of human beings struggling to save another human being who has become dear to them. At one point the body seems to relax, and hope returns for a while: "The body became quiet after a while, and the subdued moaning persisted uninterrupted, a moaning which stirred in you the deepest of your sorrows and reminded you of all the sad things that occurred in your life, and made you weep over all that have died."³

Life is slowly oozing out of him, but the body's jerky movements are a sign that it is still struggling. The losing battle is echoed in his breathing which sounds like "a saw penetrating wood."⁴ He spits blood, and his breathing

1. Ibid., p.100.

2. Ibid., p.101.

3. Loc. cit.

4. Ibid., p.102.

becomes weak. The wound has become the size of a mouth. It is a war in which "we fought a strong enemy whom we did not see."¹ Everyone is trying to convince himself that by his supreme effort to save 'Abd al-Qādir it is possible to deceive the truth which nevertheless dogs the stall at every step.

In the end 'Abd al-Qādir dies. A sensation of the absurdity of the situation invades the doctor: "There crept into my mind that moment which we all know and in which we sense that we are weaker than weakness and more trivial than failure ('ajz) and that we are lost... that moment in which we cannot weep, and weeping leads us to more weeping."² The sense of being lost makes the doctor wish to be able to hug his colleague in order to keep from his mind the feeling of shame at their failure before death. Both he and his friends have such a strong faith in life that they cannot bring themselves to believe that 'Abd al-Qādir is really dead.

In the story 'Khams Sa'āt' physical suffering creates certain changes in those who face someone else's death. The doctor sees in the situation first of all the injustice that an oppressive society has perpetrated on someone who is there to protect it. It is not society in general, but specifically Egyptian society of which 'Abd al-Qādir is a specimen. When the patient lies stricken on the bed, the doctor sees that Egypt and its manhood have been wounded, a

1. Ibid., p.103.

2. Ibid., p.104.

manhood which was the source of the country's greatness. When the patient's condition worsens, he is no more a patient but a human being, like others whose life must be saved at all cost. The result of the effort is the closing of ranks among the medical staff. They all must discharge their professional duty, but this close cooperation in the face of death draws them together as human beings, beyond professionalism. This is shown by the kind of treatment given to him. 'Abd al-Qādir himself responds to their feelings, and a bond of friendship develops between him and the doctor. The underlying emotion is that of hope before an unseen enemy, death. It is the expression of the affirmation of life which persists even after 'Abd al-Qādir's death.

A very similar situation is portrayed in the story 'Intiṣār al-Hazīma', which also takes place in a hospital. The hero, Ismā'īl, has been felled unexpectedly, like 'Abd al-Qādir, but from natural causes, namely a brain haemorrhage. Unlike 'Abd al-Qādir, he is in a coma, which means that there is no contact between him and the others. He causes a friend of his to meditate on the questions of life and death, man and the world, ideas which he records after Ismā'īl's death in the form of a story.

The narrative begins at the funeral ceremony, with all the trappings: a tent, a shaykh reciting from the Qur'ān, and people uttering formulas of condolence. The narrator feels oppressed by the lugubrious atmosphere and decides to leave the tent. He is sad, and in order to change his ideas he forces himself to laugh. It is just a physical motion which fails to produce results and

he sinks into sadness even more. He understands that the loss of a friend causes sadness, but he cannot understand why he is sad to such an extent: "Why am I so sad? My sadness over him cannot be more than that of his wife, mother or child. Despite the catastrophe, they are collected; even in their collapse they are collected. Perhaps in his family, and among his friends are those who loved him more than I, so why do I sense alone this vast amount of sadness, a sadness which is not just personal sadness but which carries on its shoulders the sadness of all the people, of all the people."¹

He feels more than personal grief. It is a burden which he bears for the others also. By elevating the feeling to the level of a suffering for mankind, he is gnawed at by questions born of a feeling which makes him touch on a fundamental issue, life and its tragic aspect, and his own life in particular: "Questions with which I kept assailing myself by answering them, but they only inflamed me more and more, that strangling sensation which I knew immediately to be no mere sadness. Sadness, joy, the sense of being lost, intoxication, are sensations with which I am familiar, which pursued me in the past, and are pursuing me now, and which we know how to describe. But this sensation which I am experiencing now is strange, savage, primitive, unfamiliar, which I have neither known or experienced before, and I do not know how to name it. Do you know a sensation in which mix all the elements

1. 'Intiṣār al-Hazīma', in al-ʿAskari al-Aswad, pp.161-162.

of blackness, sadness, despair, the sense of being lost, failure, anxiety, pessimism, apathy, fear, egoism, and pain; all these which mix together may beget that broken sensation which causes you to believe for certain that you have perished under its inevitable happening? "¹

What the man senses is so vague and overpowering that he needs to write about it in order to clarify the issue and free himself from his mood. It is not only its suddenness that underlies the tragedy but also the fact that Ismā'īl was such a cheerful person. Now he lies unconscious, panting and moaning. Ismā'īl's predicament is so difficult to believe that the narrator feels that it is all a mistake which must be rectified at once. But it is not a mistake, and fear, which he has been resisting by deriding, slowly creeps into him: "A strange obscure fear, fear of an eventuality, a slight eventuality, but through experience I have become used to take account most seriously of these slight eventualities, after I had taken them lightly and despised their importance. It often became clear to me that it is they that overcome the situation in the end, and become the victors."²

The atmosphere in the room is very oppressive, so that when the patient revives, it is like "the first cry of life from a foetus blue from the strangulations of birth."³ The good turn of events gives back to everyone their naturalness.

1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., pp.164-165.

3. Loc. cit.

They smile and move about relaxed. But the narrator feels that this cannot last: "It was assumed at that time that I should rejoice, and feel relaxed in this new atmosphere that was prevailing, but, how strange is the nature of man, I did not do so. When I came and found everyone confident, I remained alone the one who did not believe, and when optimism began to burst forth, I began to fear that slight eventuality which began to creep into my soul in bigger drops."¹

Isma'īl is the centre of everyone's attention, the doctors' and the visitors'. To the former he is the object of professional inquiry and treatment, and they keep silent, not divulging any of their secrets. To the latter he is a friend, and yet, like the doctors, they are interested in the patient's progress, and for this reason they assail the doctors with questions until some information is filtered through to them. In some ways they are imagining that they are doctors themselves: "The wife needed no questions or interpretations, for in herself and with her instinct she grasped the situation. We went with her to follow the beating of the heart, beat by beat, counting Isma'īl's every breath, as he inhaled and exhaled, and out of every ear and eye extended stethoscopes across the bed and the walls, tracking the progress of the living consciousness as it returned to our unconscious sleeper."²

1. Ibid., pp.167.

2. Loc. cit.

Isma'īl falls asleep, and his breathing is that of natural sleep. But the situation is only temporary, and the breathing becomes erratic and strained. He is now in the final stage of haemorrhaging. Death seems inevitable. What is now needed is a miracle: "Nothing remained to a gathering such as this but the miracle, to open their hearts and bosoms, to knock imploringly on the gates of heaven. Nothing remained for them but to ask of God for the Great Sign, in order to receive the miracle. By asking for the miracle they created it, and made it real, and I was not the only one who was touched by it and saw it with my own eyes, the miracle of human life as it should be, the miracle of human society as dreamed by the philosophers, and called for by the prophets and apostles and angels in human garb. The strains on people, when the catastrophe strikes, disappear one by one, and the people's hidden humanity shows itself, a reality so pure, wonderful, so deeply effective."¹

What Isma'īl's tragedy has thus achieved in Yūsuf Idrīs's view, is the miracle of human love which is superior to the discoveries of science and to medical knowledge. The catastrophe of death, being the ultimate human issue, has succeeded in drawing out of the group surrounding Isma'īl the best that there is in a human being: a proper perspective on the individual, and his relationship to others, and vice versa. Death has shocked them into this awareness the way many of Idrīs's characters are shocked into a new vision of

1. Ibid., pp.172-173.

themselves and the world around them. The ultimateness of death has two aspects here: the dying man facing his fate alone, and the others who on moral grounds want to prevent him from dying. One person's dying is everybody's business, a closing of the ranks before an enemy: "It was like being on a stage in which a group of people were forced to battle the enemy of mankind, death. And if each one knows that by himself he is incapable, and that there is no road to victory except in a group, then the only weapon of the individual is to shake off himself the filth of the trivial earthly struggle for a bite of bread, and to shine with what is noble and most truthful in human attributes."¹ It is a tragedy which has united people of all walks of life in a bond of friendship. Enmities have vanished: "Everything has gone, only remaining the relationship of man to man, love of man for man... the miracle that human beings... should acquire the purity of angels and the redemption of saints."²

Thus the change, by being a miracle, causes the people not only to become aware of their essence as human beings, it also makes them transcend their humanity and reach the divine quality in them.

The doctors hold a conference and recommend treatment, but this in the narrator's view is just a form of self-deception, since everyone knows well

1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., p.174.

that a haemorrhage of this kind cannot be stopped. What makes matters worse is when the patient is a friend, and the doctor knows that he cannot deceive himself. Knowledge seems only to make him realize his impotence in the face of the tragedy. It is better to be ignorant, since ignorance is more merciful than knowledge. It is a dilemma: "What is the use of knowing that this man will die and that you are ignorant at the same time of the way by which to save him. How silly science is at that moment and how merciful ignorance is."¹ The situation is a joke perpetrated on all. It is as if death were mocking them, as if it wanted them on purpose to be witnesses.

But the narrator, because he is aware of this tragi-comedy makes an intellectual stand before it, born of an emotional revolt against death. A small vein in the brain has defied the expertise of the doctors. Whose fault is it? It is the fault of civilisation. Man has not changed since he was a cave man. What is happening in the hospital is the indictment of a civilisation bent on destruction. Among the visitors is an old woman who divines by sand. Despite the fact that her art is superstition she has at least an answer to the superficiality and emptiness of our civilisation: "It is not a disbelief in civilisation, but a disbelief in our ways of becoming civilised."²

Man is the accomplice of death with his invention of lethal weapons, instead of being the promotor of life. But what may be even more painful is

1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., p.176.

the fact that in the not too distant future a way to treat haemorrhage may be discovered. What counts however is the present moment.

Isma'īl's condition grows progressively worse, as is witnessed by his breathing: "The body is speaking in an uncomplicated language, a language based on two words: "urīd al-ḥayāt (I want to live.)"¹ Ultimately the physical part of Isma'īl must face the battle alone. He never wanted to fight, but in his battle with death he has proven to be a hero. It is a struggle which defies science and knowledge, but the end is near. The narrator knows intuitively that "the signs of death were beginning to show, the signs of death which I did not grasp through my knowledge for I had thrown knowledge aside; I grasped them with my senses."²

Yet despite all the evidence, of the narrator cannot bring himself to believe that Isma'īl will die. He is torn between the evidence and hope. In order to convince himself of the positive side, he tries to find on the faces of the others signs of their hope. But ultimately Isma'īl dies. The narrator hears the weeping of the others, but himself does not weep. He only covers his face in shame.

In this story the narrator who is witnessing Isma'īl's dying is unable to comprehend the full import of what is happening before his eyes. He experiences a sensation in which are mixed bewildering emotions. He is incapable

1. Ibid., p.178.

2. Ibid., p.182.

of giving a reasoned argument. That is perhaps why he is presenting his experiences in the form of a narrative, composed after Ismā'īl's death, when he is no longer under the direct spell of the situation. In the story 'al-Mārid' Yūsuf Idrīs uses the same device. The hero experiences such an overwhelming event that it becomes comprehensible to him only after several months have elapsed, and he must then put it down in writing.

In 'Intiṣār al-Haẓīma', Ismā'īl causes the narrator to examine what genuine life means. The prospect of death brings out in all concerned what is best in them, i.e. their love for one another. It puts into perspective the priorities in this world, the propagation and saving of life instead of destroying it as happens nowadays. The narrator feels that as a member of mankind he is responsible, along with the others, for the state of the world. On reflection he feels ashamed of the world and himself. Life is the supreme aim of man. Life is love, while death is the enemy to be fought. Although this enemy will vanquish all in the end, it is in the struggle against death that a man like Ismā'īl can prove his heroism. Paradoxically that is victory in ultimate defeat, hence the title, 'Intiṣār al-Haẓīma'.

In a third story, 'al-Amaliyya al-Kubrā', dying as a corrective factor is exploited again, with life trying to overcome death. It is important, while reading these stories on physical suffering, to distinguish between dying and death. Yūsuf Idrīs is not so much interested in death as a source of metaphysical

or theological speculation, as in the process by which man becomes no more. Dying raises ethical questions. In witnessing the declining life process the characters of the stories develop an unfolding insight into the meaning of being alive.

In 'al-'Amaliyya al-Kubrā', the centre of attention is a lady who came first to the hospital with an abdominal tumor, which must be operated on. By accident the chief surgeon cuts a vein and she bleeds to death. The incident has deep repercussions on one of the doctors who witnesses her last moments. The doctor is about to be called to stand watch over the dying lady with his nurse Inshirāh. He is beginning to be overcome by fear, enhanced by the slow passage of time at the prospect of an imminent death: "In your sensing their (minutes) slowness it seemed every time as if they surprised you by their occurrence. In the afternoon he was afraid that this would last and last until the evening came, and who knows, the night also. As long as she was not really dead, why then this torture?"¹

The operation begins with great precision, proceeding according to schedule under the chief surgeon Adham's expert hand. The incision is made and the swelling uncovered, but it still remains a mystery. Adham sends a specimen to be analysed under a microscope, but the examination proves inconclusive. Adham is thus faced by the unexpected. Despite his long practice he does not know what he is up against, and consequently loses control of

1. 'Al-'Amaliyya al-Kubrā', in an-Naddāha, p.104.

himself. He hurls insults at everybody, and the atmosphere becomes charged. Adham must make a decision about the operation. The atmosphere has an adverse effect on all concerned. The calm having been shattered by Adham's outburst, the subordinates lose their sense of orderliness and prepare the instruments in a hurry without regard for proper handling. Adham operates, but an accident occurs: "Suddenly from the aperture in the stomach, exploded a powerful bloody column, and the blood clashed with the glass of the examining light, a sudden, never expected column of blood to which the faces of all darkened, the news that a vein had been cut... could the aorta have been cut?"¹

A grave error has been committed, but the surgeon collects himself and stops the bleeding by pressing gauze on the wound. One of the assistants sets to sew up the aorta, but again the haemorrhaging starts. The scene becomes gory: "A sea of blood this time gushed out in all directions, drowning the side of the room and slapping faces, filling eyes and blinding those who were wearing spectacles, and making the white masks red, much blood, as if ten men were haemorrhaging together; you are amazed how it is possible that its sole source should be this thin unconscious lady."²

It is now pandemonium in the operating room, but again the surgeon asserts his authority. He decides on taking out the swelling, including a piece

1. Ibid., pp.115-116.

2. Ibid., pp.118-119.

of the aorta, and making a transplant from the thigh. She bleeds but everyone tries his best, prodded by hope: "Despite all this, she did not die, although they all knew for certain that she had to die. Yet she, as if out of mockery at them, did not die."¹ The surgeon blames the failure on poor equipment, but that to the doctor is a poor excuse. It was the fundamental way of thinking that had caused the tragedy, and a terrible injustice: "The method was wrong and the idea from the beginning was wrong, and the error stretches all the way to the first instant in which the professor decided to turn the examination into a major operation of extraction. The error, that's how the doctor sees it now, goes back even further to the day when in his professor's mind surgery came to be practised for the sake of surgery, and his guinea-pigs came from among the poor who were a powerless arena in which he could assert his capability and professorhood."²

The situation is so complicated and nerve-racking that the doctor feels drained of emotion. He is no longer capable of reacting. All things become equal to him: "Instead of anger, he was suddenly overcome by a wave of levity. He felt that sacredness was leaving everything, and that the operating room was stripping itself of that bewitching and sterilised obscurity with which everything used to be tainted. More than that, his levity went on to include that totally silly thing, very ludicrous thing, death, which may

1. Ibid., p.120.

2. Ibid., p.121.

appear frightening and tragic when we hear of it the moment it happens, and we grasp in a glimpse that someone who was alive has died and ended. But when death becomes an event that happens before you, and when you wait for it to be all over, then there seems to be no end to it. When it becomes a moment that repeats itself, its frightfulness departs completely and becomes something like life which has no meaning and the most that you feel at that moment is the feeling of boredom."¹ But the sight of dying dispels his sense of boredom and once again the ultimate faces him, inescapable in its immediacy: "This is not the first time that he sees someone dying or hears this continuous rattle, but it is the first time that he lives death. It is not the reaction of an onlooker, but a reaction of someone meditating, observing in order to see when and how this will come about, or more precisely, the end of the end. And whenever he meditated, observed and waited, whenever he felt that he was plunging deeper and deeper into the experience, it appeared that he himself was in the throes of death."²

In the story 'al-Mustahīl' a doctor meditates on insanity while examining a patient in a hospital. To him, seeing a madman in the street is different from dealing with one in a hospital: "To see a madman in the street may be something disquieting, but the fact that it is someone's job to examine the madmen and make them enter the hospital for mental diseases is

1. Ibid., p.116.

2. Ibid., p.121.

something which makes him lose his curiosity, and for him the matter becomes nothing more than play repeated over and over again until there is nothing new or original in it.¹

The patient in the story is escorted by a relative and a policeman. When asked his name, the patient pours out an unintelligible stream of sentences about being the owner of buildings which he must sell, and about thieves who want to rob him and do him harm. He does not look at anything in particular, and keeps talking in a monotone. If he is asked a question he singles out a word around which he spins a story which has no relation to the question. But sometimes his eyes would light up as if on fire. It is a look with which the doctor is thoroughly familiar and which he has had to become accustomed to in his practice: "The first look of madness in the eyes of the sick used to frighten me. There was in them that sudden frightening flash, as if their minds were burning up inside their heads and their eyes were blowing sparks of fire, looks that would make a man fear the madmen. Seldom does one man fear another, but a single one of these looks is sufficient to make him experience the most horrible fear of all man's fear of man."²

The doctor used to be afraid of the mental patients at the beginning, and because he was guarded, he let them behave freely. He felt that each time

1. 'Al-Mustahīl', in Qā' al-Madīna, p.114.

2. Ibid., pp.116-117.

he was in the presence of a "dangerous unpredictable instrument, like a loaded rifle which would shoot by itself at any moment and kill."¹ But with the passage of time the doctor becomes used to those looks and his relationship with them changes. This kind of familiarity erases fear. He treats them now as normal human beings, and since that time none of them have tried to harm him. He has even come to understand the meaning of these looks: "I became convinced in the end that the fiery looks which the madman lets loose out of his eyes, which frighten others, were in reality nothing more than the looks of someone who was frightened... He hurts others because of his fear that someone might hurt him. He becomes a beast because of his belief that people have turned into beasts... If we see abnormality in a man's behaviour we do not forgive him, but treat him harshly as if we were punishing him for his abnormality and thus our own behaviour becomes abnormal in his eyes."²

To demand that someone who has a physical deformity overcome his handicap is hard enough, but to demand that a madman think rationally is even harder. The social circumstances of a patient bring the disease into sharper focus. If the patient is poor, the tragedy is even more terrible, because he is subjected to the humiliation of being committed by his family, and of being shuffled through the maze of red tape which makes a patient lose his mind

1. Ibid., p.117.

2. Loc. cit.

completely, and moreover, "if poverty in itself destroys a man's dignity and humanity, then what happens if a poor man then goes mad?"¹

The doctor used to consider madness a death in which all become equal. To him the madmen used to be indistinguishable from one another, but through experience he found that even in their madness they were individual. Although they were mad, they each had their own way of showing their madness, and of expressing themselves. Each had a life story behind him. This has led the doctor to meditate on the nature of the uniqueness of the human mind and the tragedy of its disintegration through madness.

In contrast to a sane person, who has a most complex mind, a madman's mind is very simple, and his thoughts are predictable: "It is as if he spoke to other beings which we cannot see... in his head he grinds out words and sentences like fine continuous flour in which there is neither emotion nor reason."²

The fact that Yūsuf Idrīs is a medical man by training shows in the clinical descriptions of physical suffering. The author suffers greatly at the sight of people fatally stricken by physical misfortune, and rightly sets out to meditate on the meaninglessness of death and the meaningfulness of life.

1. Ibid., p.119.

2. Ibid., p.121.

His descriptions are realistic and the reader reacts to them as if the events were happening before his eyes, and is appalled in the way Yūsuf Idrīs wants him to be. The tremendous efforts of doctors to save lives underlines the ethical nature of their work and the author is hard on those who make a travesty of medicine, like the surgeon Adham in 'al-ʿAmaliyya al-Kubrā'. The frantic effort to save life is enhanced by the frantic rhythm of Yūsuf Idrīs's prose which forces the reader's attention. Unfortunately the author abuses the style of frantic pace and this at times makes him lose perspective. In 'Intisār al-Hazīma' the author is carried away by his feverish thinking, which is justifiable in the framework of the story, but overshoots the mark when from a meditation on life and death he jumps to the indictment of contemporary civilization (see above, p.179). Firstly, there is no transition to his tirade, which, secondly, is out of place.

What shines through in these stories is Yūsuf Idrīs's faith in life. In this sense, despite the morbid descriptions, the author refuses to accept that people can die. It is perhaps by means of these descriptions that he brings out his own desperate clinging to life. In this respect, Yūsuf Idrīs is an optimist, although he is not so in his stories as a whole. His writings on physical suffering share with the others the fact that only the worse can be expected, in this case death, which is the ultimate annihilation of a human being, but the characters acquire in this predicament a dignity lacking in the other stories.

The straightforwardness of these stories must certainly be attributed to the fact that Yūsuf Idrīs as a doctor must have had to witness many bloody scenes, and the impact of them has been such as to exclude any other areas of human experience. That is why his observations on civilization in 'Intiṣār al-Hasīma', and his comments on Egypt being wounded in 'Khamṣ Sā'āt', sound so much out of place.

CHAPTER SIX

OBSESSION

When surveying the characters created by Yūsuf Idrīs one finds that many of them are obsessed, some of them to such a degree that they lose their rationality, and become demented. In other cases they may be obsessed only with small things, and for short periods of time. Obsession in Yūsuf Idrīs's writing is represented as the persistent hold of an idea over an individual. The idea may be a tangible goal to be attained, or an abstraction. Obsession is the most interesting part of Yūsuf Idrīs's work, because it is there that the author is at his best, analyzing the phenomenon in a wealth of detail in many varied characters and individuals. Despite the numerous and minute descriptions, which overlap in quite a few stories, so as to form a continuum of obsession, obsession in Yūsuf Idrīs's characters can be divided into two main categories, positive, self-assertive obsession, and negative, self-destructive obsession. This chapter is divided into two parts covering each aspect.

The story 'Rub' Hawd' illustrates the power of an obsessive idea over a man's brain: "The idea is an amazing thing, for it always demands work and effort. Sometimes an idea occurs to a man who keeps belittling it and neglecting it, as he hates the work that lies behind it, until he kills it.

And sometimes an idea comes to him, which is pleasurable and it upsets his tranquility and inspires him with intense activity."¹

Ismā'īl Bey was struck by such a thought, when unable to fall asleep. The idea is trivial, to dig a pond by the *jasmine* in his garden. Ismā'īl Bey appears to be a well-to-do man, who can afford to sleep until eleven in the morning. He starts digging but the work is too much for him. His soft hands get covered with blisters, and finally he collapses. He thinks he has had a heart attack, and he summons his family doctor. But he recovers, and sinks his spade into the ground again, driven on by his trivial obsession.

The main characteristic of obsession is thus the upsetting of ordered existence. In this story the obsession is a simple one, the digging of a hole, but it has a destructive quality, which makes Ismā'īl Bey persist in his activity to his great detriment. The two characteristics of an obsessional state, the upsetting of ordered existence and the harm, recur in Yūsuf Idrīs's heroes, with varying degrees of intensity.

Another feature of obsession is the desire to possess something or somebody. Quite a few of the protagonists are obsessed with property. A prime example is the story 'Ālḥir ad-Dunyā' which tells of a little boy's obsession with a two piastre coin. The boy leads a very lonely existence among his relatives under the aegis of his grandmother. His moments of happiness

1. 'Rub' Hawd', in Arkhaṣ Layālī', p.148.

are all in the sporadic visits of his father, who brings him little gifts. The little boy feels an outcast. At the dinner table he has difficulty getting enough to eat because of the rapacity of the adults; even the cat is quicker than he. At school he is the poorest of the students. While others ride to school he has to cover the four kilometres on foot. In the mornings he arrives panting, but in the evenings he takes his time, because on the return journey he can give free range to his dreams. His only true possession in this world was a two piastre coin. He would touch it many times in a single day, just to make certain that it was there. It was so valuable to him that he would not exchange it for a hundred pounds. But one day he loses the coin and his world is turned upside down: "He does not even enjoy playing games any more. He becomes a different person, a person who neither rejoices nor is sad, who does not find pain in pain, nor happiness in his dreams of going home. But the coin remains with him; it is always with him, as if it owned him, and when it went away it assumed control over his whole attention and feelings. Whenever he opens his mouth and says something, he stops speaking, and looks grave; whenever he feels that he wants to think, he begins to laugh."¹ Yet he is convinced that the coin must be waiting somewhere for him.

But one day he remembers that he once went by the railway bridge, where his father had forbidden him to go. He goes there and finds the coin on the tracks without difficulty, although many months have passed since he

1. 'Ākhir ad-Danyā', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila.

lost it. He is overjoyed, of course, but he wants to prolong his happiness. He throws the coin away, in order to find it again, an operation which he repeats several times.

To the little boy the two piastre coin represents wealth, but it has also acquired a symbolic meaning in that it is the tangible representation of his individuality, the safeguarding of which obsesses him.

In 'Ākhir ad-Dunyā' the thing possessed and which obsesses is inanimate. In other stories it may be a human being. The interest of the story 'as-Sitāra' lies in that the obsession is with a person. The story describes the genesis of obsession in the hero Bahīj, and the effects of this obsession on his wife. Bahīj has a beautiful wife Sanā' whom he married out of love, and whom he trusts. He is a progressive man who knows something about women's rights, and of their equality with men. Yet he does not trust her completely. After their marriage he is nagged by the feeling that she might betray him: "His mortal fear was the day on which he would be the last to know."¹ Despite his egalitarian spirit he feels that women are weak, and easily led astray. It is therefore his duty as a husband to protect her from the "wolves and dogs of society."² It is . the instinct which makes him carry her luggage or let her sit down on a bus. He is convinced that a woman is

1. 'As-Sitāra', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.473.

2. Ibid., p.472.

incapable of protecting herself and thus it is his role to be a wary guardian . He knows from experience the predatory nature of males, and the idea that the others are a potential threat begins to haunt him. In the cinema he makes her sit next to the aisle so that he himself could be between her and the other men . On a train he would occupy a compartment that was empty, or occupied by old men and women .

The most dangerous situation, however, is the flat because of eyes that might infringe their privacy, even though it has been his secret wish to have a window with a beautiful girl in it opposite his flat, showing a double standard on his part .

Bahīj and his wife move to another flat, and to his consternation the flat opposite is occupied by a youth . The tables have thus been turned, and observing the youth he projects every evil characteristic on to him: "He saw...a youth with no one with him, no child, wife or mother, and it was clear from his bold expression and the way he looked at the opposite side and at the passers-by in the street, that it was the way of a free man who was not afraid to face the consequences that his looking might bring, who did not bear any responsibility on his shoulders, nor took any account of any man behind him."¹ The young man is a threat, and Bahīj feels hostility towards him when "he finds him singing, with his ugly voice coming across the street, bachelor and challenging."²

1. Ibid., p.474.

2. Ibid., p.475.

His main problem becomes what to do about the situation. He broaches the subject with his wife, by saying that, because of the balcony opposite, they are unable to do what they want in their flat, such as going around naked, or simply doing silly things. He proposes a solution: to hang a curtain on the balcony and thus their privacy will be safeguarded. She mocks him at first, but gives in in the end.

But the existence of the curtain creates a change in the atmosphere of the household. Bahīj takes care that the curtain is closed at all times, and consequently orders his wife not to open it under any circumstances. Sanā' is surprised at the harsh tone of his voice when giving the order. At this point the relationship between them changes drastically. Before the curtain was put up, their behaviour was outwardly egalitarian. She would argue with his opinions, and sometimes annoy him. But now, where the husband has become the giver of orders, her role has become that of the submissive spouse. The situation has a profound effect on Bahīj to whom the enforced closing of the curtain has meant the assertion of his authority. Both are stubborn, refusing to yield.

In one of his outbursts he confesses to her that the reason for his decision to put up the curtain is because of the awful young man across the street, and that it is his duty to protect his house and wife. She accepts this without protest. But now that the matter is out in the open she becomes curious, and surveys the street and the neighbours from behind the curtain without being

seen. Very soon it becomes such an ingrained habit that she is more interested in the other people's flats than in her own. She even becomes curious about the young male neighbour, the root of all the trouble.

Matters come to a head for all concerned one evening when Bahīj returns home from work. He sees the curtain move and he immediately jumps to the conclusion that his wife has been exhibiting herself on the balcony. In a fit of rage he takes hold of her, opens the curtain and beats her in full view of the young man. A heated argument ensues in which he speaks of his honour, while at the same time completely upsetting her by comparing her to banāt al-hawā'. When the quarrel becomes known to the rest of the family, they try to reconcile them. They do make up and Bahīj makes amends, telling her that the curtain will be taken down and that she is free to be seen on the balcony in any clothes she cares to wear and for as long as she wants. But Sanā' is hurt and her concern is to defend her pride. She feels humiliated before both her husband and the young man and wants to soothe the wounds to her pride through the young man. She stands on the balcony, waiting for him to appear, but in vain. The young man remains locked inside, and when he finally appears he pays no attention to her. She really only wants him to look at her so that she can spit at him or throw something at him. That would be revenge enough. But when he looks at her, she is unable to act this out and withdraws inside in anger, again closing the curtain, and giving her husband

the same reasons he had given her.

Bahīj's obsession resides in his possessiveness which stems from his fear of losing his wife to a predatory outside world. A similar situation exists in the story 'Hādhi al-Marra' which explores the psychology of a meeting between a prisoner and his wife. Like Bahīj the prisoner is also obsessed with the idea of losing his wife. The man's life revolves around waiting for her: "Waiting in prison is not painful; it is work, long work which is uninterrupted and unending, which the prisoner takes up from the moment he puts his feet in the corridor, since from that moment, even if the sentence is for life, he must await the moment of pardon."¹ The days pass, with the prisoner waiting for the coming of sunrise and sunset, breakfast and dinner. The big event for him is his wife's visit. She always visits him, with few exceptions, and these mean an interference with his sense of time: "He waited for her every month, and a month would pass by only if she came. If she was a day or a week late the month would stop for a day or a week and the new month would not move. It would begin only if she came."² Having been in jail for three years, his desire for his wife, because of the separation, is like that for a Layla or a Juliet. Sometimes he would desire her the way he would a belly dancer. Sometimes he would be overcome by the mad idea of possessing her right there

1. 'Hādhihi al-Marra', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, pp.262-263.

2. Ibid., p.264.

and then, in the prison. He desires her so strongly that "he did not feel that she was separated from him, or that she was a being independent of him, as she had become a feminine part of him or as if he had become her masculine part. She was with him, in him, inside him; and he felt that he was there himself, in her spirit, in the depths of her eyes, inside every fold and stretch of her delicate ribs as they draw their breath."¹ Going to her was like "going out to meet life...He felt that he had been joined to the sea of life, that he had become consciously optimistic in the face of dead and stupid existence."²

His fear has always been that he would forget her features, as every time she comes, her face looks changed. When she smiles at him, it is as if she smiled deliberately, not spontaneously. He always wants to make certain that he is himself, and that he has not changed. When she comes he looks at her intently until she becomes his sole world, and then his "anxiety begins to fill him, threatening to become tension, and he does not want any tension."³ But outwardly she appears to be the same as ever: "Her spirit was the same, or almost, no noticeable difference. If there had been any difference it would have meant a breakdown of the world (*ixtilāl fī al-kawn.*)"⁴

1. Ibid., pp.165-266.

2. Ibid., p.266.

3. Loc. cit.

4. Ibid., p.269.

This time she is late and he worries a great deal: "The moment became long and drawn out until her lateness became a clearcut thing which brought greater amounts of anguish, his anguish, and her anguish about his anguish, and his anguish about her anguish about him."¹

He asks her what has happened, to which she replies "Nothing". To him the relationship between lovers and spouses is the all-encompassing deep understanding, which does not even need words, a relationship which is like the intertwining branches of a tree: "Whenever the two sides draw apart, they become closer and more intertwined."²

But this time he is unable to understand her. He tries to convince himself that he has not changed: "I am stable, and you are moving, you are free, you are the changed one."³ But she feels that her prison, which is life, is worse than his prison.

Deprivation is the core of the plot of 'Hādhihi al-Marra'. The prisoner is obsessed with the unknown outside world in which his wife is moving, and he consequently feels that they are drifting apart since they cannot share the same activities. But obsessively he tries to maintain the illusion that they are still together, the same husband and wife. The situation is very much like the one described in 'Mashūq al-Hams' where the prisoner is obsessed with the existence of women prisoners on the other side of the wall.

1. Ibid., p.271.

2. Ibid., p.273.

3. Ibid., p.274.

Being sexually deprived he develops erotic fantasies which culminate in an idealized obsessive image.

He imagines a dialogue between himself and the woman on the other side of the wall. He convinces himself that he is in love with her. He has loved before, but this time it is sublime love, "the kind of love which is the source of the great love stories, when Qays became mad, Werther committed suicide and Juliet died."¹ The woman on the other side becomes the woman of his life. Theirs is a "shy conversation between lovers, halting, always leading to words about the self, and to confession."² She also seems to him to be physically present, and he feels their bodies embrace. Love has changed his outlook completely: "...and I feel, being in the ugliest place in the universe, that there is beauty to the world, and I feel an appetite for life that no man has tasted. I feel that I have become stronger than my prison and those who (have) jailed me. All the moments of weakness and shaken confidence have gone and evaporated. The man inside me has returned to life completely, and life has regained its magic and meaning. The man is in love; it is a love no one in love stories had tasted, since they were experiences of a feverish struggle, suppression of the self, a feeling of shyness and the prodding of conscience. I realize only here that it is love, when everything ends, and life returns to its dullness."³

1. 'Mashūq al-Hams', in op. cit., p.49.

2. Ibid., p.51.

3. Ibid., pp.52-53.

Deprivation as a cause of obsession is again shown in the case of the young man who is the source of the commotion in the story 'as-Sitara'. Far from being the lout described by Bahīj he is serious, too busy with his work to look into other people's windows, but when the curtain is installed on the balcony opposite he changes. The barrier makes him suspect that something mysterious and attractive is hidden behind it, and this fires his imagination. But this is not enough: he wants more, he wants to see what lies behind the curtain and thus for hours on end he stares at it obsessively waiting for a beautiful woman to appear to him. Sana' sees him during one of his waits, and concedes that the young man is exactly as her husband had described him - a brash, ill-bred young man. Having satisfied her curiosity she stops looking at his balcony, but not so the young man. He keeps staring at the curtain, imagining that the woman on the other side may even love him.

The case of Fathī in the story 'Ramadān' is one of deprivation in this same context.

Fathī, a ten year old boy, is bitter because his father does not let him fast during Ramadān. He had been told that he would have to wait until he was eight, but now he is ten, and his father still keeps postponing his fasting. He mentions it to his father this time, and again he is opposed to it, giving as an excuse that there is no fasting for someone who does not pray. This only prompts Fathī in order to earn his right to fast. And so he takes his

father's prayer rug and performs the necessary ablutions. But his father takes away the rug, telling him that he is not sure that he is clean enough. Having been stopped from praying at home, the boy goes to the mosque. The architecture and light effects awe him. But inside the mosque too he is in for a disappointment. Nobody wants him next to him and he finds himself relegated to the last row, with the children. Like his father, the men make comments on his cleanliness, and whenever a man arrives late at the mosque, he chases him and the other children outside.

Fathī's desire to fast only increases as a result. When he is in bed he can hear his parents' conversation over the sahūr. He wants to join them, and on the pretext of wanting to go to the toilet, makes several appearances. Sometimes he even cries. He tries all sorts of things to attract their attention, but no one tries to discover the reason for his behaviour.

One morning, he decides to stay in bed late like the adults, and not to drink. But he soon becomes thirsty, and as the day progresses the thirst becomes an obsession. The sound of running water makes things worse: "The water kept running from the tap with force, entering his ear until it seems to him that he was drinking the sound through his ear."¹ One way around the problem of thirst is to wet his mouth without drinking the water, as this is not forbidden (ḥarām), but this only has the effect of increasing his thirst.

1. 'Ramādān', in Arkhaṣ Layālī, p.289.

The thirst becomes now so unbearable that he begins to think of having a drink in secret. In this way he would not lose face. But his conscience bothers him, because someone will know, namely Ramaḍān himself, who to Faṭḥī is a supernatural being sitting on a throne beyond the sun and stars. He fears punishment from him: but he reflects. Perhaps Ramaḍān is a lie. If Ramaḍān is so powerful, he could prevent him from moving his arm. He moves his arm without trouble. Then he continues the experiment by walking. If Ramaḍān does not prevent him from reaching his goal, he can do nothing to stop him from drinking. He drinks the water, but he is immediately assailed by fear. Maybe Ramaḍān waits until after a crime has been perpetrated, and then strikes. But nothing happens. In the end Faṭḥī fasts with his father's permission. But this time he cannot break his fast because of his father's threat of punishment. His father has thus taken the place of Ramaḍān the supernatural being.

The obsession is made even more acute here as it involves a fundamental human instinct, - fear. In the story 'al-Gharīb' obsessive fear is linked with the obsessional desire to kill. The characters are a fourteen-year old boy Shurbagi, and his fifty year old cut-throat companion Gharīb. Shurbagi is fascinated by the tales of brigands, and cut-throats to the extent that he wants to become one of them, a 'son of the night' (ibn layl). In his youthful imagination he comes to the conclusion that in order to become a man,

one must achieve an extraordinary feat by which to prove one's manhood. Shurbagi does not choose any of the usual ways of proving his prowess, such as by leaving home and working. His view is that he will prove his manhood only by killing a man. His obsession with murder is rooted in his childhood fears. He remembers his fear of cats, and even as a child he wanted to conquer his fear by reversing the process and frightening them. Once he trapped a cat in a room with the intention of killing it, but as the animal felt cornered it gathered all its strength ready to claw him. He was so terrified that he ran away wishing he could seek comfort in his mother's bosom.

Thus his problem is now to conquer fear in his desire to kill. That, however, was not all: "The killing was not what attracted me. They were the killers, those people called in our district the sons of the night, who killed those who obstructed their paths. At that age I was fascinated by those sons of the night... Manhood in my mind was tied up with extraordinary feats and extraordinary men."¹ He had always wanted to become a hero and when he reaches the age of fourteen, no one knows that "there was a volcano in my bosom ready to explode."²

His problem now is how to get in touch with the sons of the night, and he therefore seeks the help of 'Amm Khatīb, who guards the tomatoes in

1. 'Al-Gharīb', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, pp.496-497.

2. Ibid., p.497.

'izba. The old man was once himself a son of the night, but now he only reminisces, and Shurbagi listens avidly. He finds out that the sons of the night are not what they used to be, with the exception of Gharīb, the terror of the district. When Shurbagi asks to be put in touch with the criminal, 'Amm Khatīb tells him to keep away from wrong-doing.

In the end the meeting occurs accidentally one dark evening on his return home from a session with his friends in the fields. He hears noises and someone telling him to stop. Shurbagi is frightened, but the man, Gharīb, tells him to sit down, and asks him questions about himself and his family. They meet regularly after that and Shurbagi brings him food. He now dares to ask Gharīb why he leads the kind of life he does, and the conversation ends with Shurbagi's confession that he would like to kill, which Gharīb finds amusing. But when he sees that Shurbagi is serious he tells him that he will kill, but that he must first go on an errand. He sends him with a message to his second wife, telling her to come and see him. Shurbagi delivers the message, but the wife, Warda, a beautiful young woman, refuses to see Gharīb and instead tries to seduce the fourteen year old boy. But he does not succumb, because of his loyalty to Gharīb. On his return he is afraid to tell the truth to Gharīb, but Gharīb gets every detail out of the boy anyway. Shurbagi is asked what he would do if Warda were his wife. Shurbagi, without any hesitation, states that he would kill her.

Gharīb's reply is a surprise to Shurbagi: "So killing is that easy? ...

Killing people is one thing, and killing your wife is another. Who knows?

I suppose the idea of killing one's wife occurs to everyone sometimes.

Sometimes you say she is finished, there is no hope for her, I will kill her.

And another time you say to yourself she might reform, and you keep on hesitating, between the two alternatives until the end of your days."¹

Shurbagi does not understand and tells Gharīb that he had not thought that he was like this, to which Gharīb answers: "Tomorrow you will grow up, you will know now and appreciate it."²

This conversation gives the first explicit insight into the difference between the two people: the immature Shurbagi and the experienced Gharīb. Shurbagi who has seen nothing of life, judges everything in terms of black and white. To him Gharīb is the embodiment of everything that he wants to be, and does not understand that even people like Gharīb have their own scale of values, according to which there are different kinds of murder, some reprehensible, if not downright despicable. This difference will become more apparent as the story unfolds.

One night Gharīb asks Shurbagi to bring his revolver, because he wants to settle a score with a friend of his, Shalabi, who he is certain betrayed him once to the police. He was caught as a result, but managed to escape.

1. Ibid., p.537.

2. Loc. cit.

Not only that, but Shalabi has been courting Gharīb's wife, Warda. Shurbagi's mission to her was only a way for Gharīb to confirm that she was only too willing to play around behind her husband's back.

Shalabi meets regularly with a guard in one of the fields, and the plan is that as a joke Shurbagi is to sneak up on them and scare them with his revolver, upon which Gharīb would kill Shalabi. This is what happens and Shurbagi experiences for the first time in his life the true meaning of terror. Shalabi is killed and the guard faints. Gharīb is transformed into a being unknown to Shurbagi. He becomes possessed and the demonic quality of his behaviour lies in the fear which overcomes everyone involved: "We were four beings ruled by the most extreme degrees of terror. The terror of the killer is no less than the terror of the victim. The terror of the unconscious guard is no less than the terror of Gharīb. The terror of the experienced killer is no less than the fear of the raw adventurous boy. We were in a state of self-defence. I held fast to my revolver, Gharīb to his axe and the guard to his faint by which he was protecting himself, not wanting to come round, and if the victim had been able to choose, he would have held to his death, preferring a thousand times to die only once, and not come back to life to face the death by axe once more."¹

Terror is more powerful than life to the extent that it is better

1. Ibid., pp.538-539.

to be dead than to have to experience terror. Terror is primordial to the human being, the demon which pits life against death.

During the assault on Shalabi Gharīb is wounded in the thigh. So for long days he stays under a bridge, attended by Shurbagi. When Gharīb gets well again the obsession with killing once more returns to Shurbagi and he tells Gharīb that he wants to murder a man. Gharīb sees that he cannot dissuade him any longer, and so he agrees that Shurbagi should kill the first man he meets, after dark. They post themselves behind a tree waiting. The victim finally appears, singing happily to himself. This is the supreme test for Shurbagi who must now face himself. Gharīb advises him that if he feels hesitation he should convince himself that the victim had killed his father: "Perhaps if the victim had become frightened; perhaps if he had stopped singing, and sensed the danger; perhaps if I had truly believed that he had killed my father; perhaps if something had happened outside my will... perhaps if something like that happened, everything would have changed and the course of my life itself would have changed, since I cannot till now know why my finger did not make that small gentle movement, and squeeze the trigger. What is the secret of this call which arose from the innermost depths of my being, from my feet, from my stomach, my fingers, from the very ends of my hair, a call I had not heard before, the existence of which I had neither imagined nor taken into account. I do not believe that at

the last moment, a secret voice from the inside of me will say to me 'Shame! (ḥarām)."¹

As the man approaches the shout of 'ḥarām' becomes more and more insistent. He sees them and greets them. They return the greeting. Shurbagi is unable to shoot. The picture changes: "I began to visualise the fate that was awaiting me. The surprising thing was that I did it without fear; I was ready to die with total indifference, but I was also ready to resist Gharīb if he tried to kill the man."²

Gharīb tells Shurbagi that had he killed the man, Shurbagi would have killed him too, because he would have become a true criminal, an who could not be trusted. The relationship between the two would have changed completely. Shurbagi would have become another Shalabi, and Gharīb could not risk that Shurbagi would have turned into "a she-wolf who eats her young".³ Gharīb confesses that he wanted to see himself as a father to Shurbagi, but because of the type of life that he was leading he made him suffer. On this note Gharīb ends the relationship, by chasing him away. He tells him to run, and shoots past him to scare him away from him for ever.

Obsession with violence finds its clearest description in the two stories, 'al-Lu'ba' and 'al-Awṣā', where it is violence for its own sake, springing from bestial hatred, that is indulged in.

1. Ibid., p.566.

2. Ibid., p.568.

3. Ibid., p.570.

'Al-Lu'ba' concentrates on violence, which, if motivated by an obsession, turns into savagery. The scene takes place at a party. The newcomer moves in a silent crowd which he finds repulsive. He feels a kind of conspiracy of silence in the group. Aman steps up to him with a box in his hand and asks him: "Do you want to shoot (= hit, taḡrib), Bey?"¹ The man wears a smile which has an air of insolence about it. The guest feels repugnance towards him, and slaps him. As the man keeps smiling, the guest's annoyance turns into anger, but he is still in control of himself. The unchanging expression on the man's face infuriates the guest who hits him with his fists, and kicks him in the stomach. The man, however, shows no signs of suffering. The smile disappears but the insolence remains. The man's power not to show suffering infuriates the guest even more: "His anger turned into a demented fury through which he could no longer distinguish in what direction he was striking out."² His emotion reaches such a pitch that he could not have stopped even if he wanted to: "From out of the deep recesses of his being there exploded a seething and flaming lava of hate finding terrifying expression through his hands, legs and teeth. He was biting with his teeth as if he had turned into a beast... with all his might he summons back his hate and bites and bites."³ Then he becomes so physically exhausted that he is unable to move.

1. 'Al-Lu'ba', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.309.

2. Ibid., p.313.

3. Ibid., p.314.

But the victim is still there with his box, and the wicked smile on his face.

'Al-Awrja' is another story portraying the same kind of obsession.

'Abdu is known for stealing money. Those whom he has robbed become obsessed by the idea of regaining their property and they do this with such savagery that in the end 'Abdu dies. The narrator, who is the instigator of the action, hates 'Abdu - the man is a weakling who is, however, successful at petty thefts, but when caught he becomes hysterical and weeps. Thus the narrator's hate is of a peculiar kind; it is contempt for the weakling who must be eradicated. As 'Abdu is a smooth, rather shifty character, the victims experience a special kind of joy, mixed with savage anger. "We humans simply bite out impotence and hate. We are unable to vent our hate in the natural way, and so our hate returns like poisoned fangs inside ourselves, and tears us to pieces, and strikes us down. That is exactly how I felt when I caught up with 'Abdu, and I wished that my emotions had been able to spring free and tear him to pieces, break him, and chew him, and that I could feel my teeth munching his flesh and limbs..."¹

'Abdu is apprehended by the group who want to regain their lost possessions. Nobody believes 'Abdu's story that he has been operated on. He claims that his aorta had been cut. They think it just another trick on his part, and start to undress him, having first hung him from a meat hook. They

1. Ibid., p.335.

discover bandages under his gallabiyya, the perfect place to hide coins.

They strip him naked and the man's aorta escapes from his chest and dangles outside.

Obsession with violence is again the theme of the story 'an-Naddāha' where Ḥāmid is faced with his wife's adultery. His rage reaches such a pitch that he wants to destroy her. His whole attitude towards her changes. His wife Faḥiyya has turned in his eyes into a dangerous beast who is out to destroy him and tear him to pieces. His first thought therefore is to kill her: "Had he killed her at that very moment, he would have done it not because she had betrayed him, or out of revenge for his ruined honour, never, not under the impulse of anger, madness orrancour, but he would have done it above all else under the impulse of his great fear of her, as if she had changed in his eyes into a ghoul or a spotted snake which you must kill before it kills you, not in defence of your honour, but in defence of yourself first, in order to smother the breath of that beast which takes you unawares, hits you and betrays you; and he who betrays you kills you, and there is no other way but to kill the one who is going to kill you."¹

Ḥāmid's whole existence is at stake and he must strike back if he is to survive. But in the end Ḥāmid does not kill Faḥiyya. He is so drained of energy that he is incapable of killing anything, not even a mosquito.

1. 'An-Naddāha', in op. cit., p.10.

To Ḥamid sexuality is the bond that makes man and woman one. She is to him "his feminine half", and her betrayal splits this entity assunder. This tearing apart, besides having such a devastating psychological impact, has a physical one also. He suffers from the physical disintegration of his world and he is terrified of being swallowed up in the process: "He was truly terrified, till he even began to tremble, and his teeth began to chatter, and he felt the deadly thrust more and more. There was a knife directed by a hand that knew perfectly where his hidden places and secrets were, and this hand struck at what was dearest inside him."¹

Similarly in the story 'Li'anna al-Qiyāma lā Taqūm', there is obsession with violence, and with the desire to kill. As in the previous story, it is sexual in content, but with the additional element of jealousy. What is unusual, however, is that the main character, a boy just about to reach puberty, should experience such emotions.

The boy becomes dispirited by the relationship between his mother and her lover, and he finds no pleasure in his usual activities. Songs and games lose their meaning. He cannot stand the man's harsh voice as he speaks to his mother. They both turn into beasts in his eyes; especially his mother: "His mother is a tigress with blood on her mouth who has just finished swallowing

1. Ibid., p.11.

up his little brother and she hungers for more. And the bestiality is demented, baring its sharp teeth, as in a fight between mad dogs."¹

The weight of the bed on which the couple have intercourse presses hard on the boy underneath who is seething with rage: "He cannot bear it. He will die, not from the pressure (of the bed), but from insanity. His brain is electrified; it waxes hot and cold and sends out sparks, and his fear of exploding paralyses his voice so much that he cannot even shout. He holds fast to the reins of his mind so that he does not lose control, and shake all this from and explode angrily, and, shouting, throw the old brown shoe at them and tear them to pieces or smash their heads with the pestle."²

The previous stories dealt with obsession that had tangible goals, money, the possession of a thing or a human being, or the destruction of a human being. There is another group of stories in which the characters become so engrossed in their abstractions that these become "idées fixées". The physical aspect of such obsessions is present to a greater or lesser degree, as in the previous group of stories, but as a background to the non-physical aspect of the psychological state.

'Alif ah-Aḥrār' is the story of such an obsession. Aḥmad Rashwān is an educated man. He is proud to be a graduate of the Faculty of Commerce at the University of Cairo. Yet he is only a typist with a company. He considers

1. 'Li'anna al-Qiyāma lā Taqūm', in op. cit., p.327.

2. Ibid., p.328.

himself superior to the job and to his fellow workers who do not match up to his educational level. He dresses well, and bears himself with dignity, which makes him the object of slight ridicule behind his back. He is very polite, especially to his boss, 'Abd al-Laṭīf, whom he addresses politely in Classical Arabic. Being thrifty, he lives within his means. He is also a conservative, not believing in the equality of the sexes. In the office he ignores the women because to him they are only fit to be nurses and teachers. Once he even wrote an essay for the school journal demonstrating that a woman's place is in the home. He is a man of principles from which he does not deviate.

Yet he is a man nagged by doubt. One night he cannot fall asleep as he is tormented and obsessed by a flea which he cannot catch:

"Finally the flea disappeared and did not show up again, but it caused Ahmad to experience that worrying sensation, the sensation of light hidden bites, and the crawling of unseen little legs, that sensation which pushes a man to vacillating between certainty and doubt about the existence of these beings, and suddenly, without previous warning, Aḥmad was struck by a thought that almost made him jump out of bed. He had realised that he was not someone writing at a typewriter as he and others had thought, but that he himself was a typewriter."¹

His obsession with the flea is replaced by the obsession with his newly discovered thought. There is no difference between him and the typewriter.

1. 'Alif al-Aḥrār', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.413.

The machine obeys his fingertips, but with one finger the company orders Ahmad to write. He is a machine himself; he is not a human being any more. But being a man of principle, especially where his honour is involved, he will not yield, out of stubbornness. Thus he decides to show everybody that there is a world of difference between him and the machine. The following day an opportunity to do this arises and he seizes it.

He types a sentence containing the phrase "we shall be free", but he decides to misspell it, by leaving out the final alif in 'free' (nakūnu ahrār instead of ahrāran). The misspelling makes him happy: "He went on to write the letter with enthusiasm, feeling exhilarated because he was writing something that he wanted, and because he was in total command of his own behaviour."¹

He types the letter, and as expected his boss wants him to correct the error. This is his opportunity. He stands up to 'Abd al-Latīf, and refuses. The boss is flabbergasted, and on several counts he urges him to make the correction. Ahmad refuses each time. He wants to express his opinion but his boss cuts him short: "Your opinion is there, with Mummy and Daddy, but here there is no place for your opinion. This is a company with orders and rules."²

Ahmad does not retreat, because "the matter has become one of dignity

1. Ibid., p.420.

2. Ibid., p.422.

and honour, and he did not believe that he should be slighted in this manner, and treated as a typewriter that neither feels nor gets angry."¹

To give in would mean to give up his dignity, honour and manhood. "If the people in the Ṣa' id killed one another to defend their honour and manhood, why can he not stand fast, whatever the consequences?"² Seeing Aḥmad's attitude, 'Abd al-Latīf writes a memorandum to the director-general. Aḥmad returns to his office and the employees stream past him out of curiosity. They try to persuade him to give in, but he sees this as crawling before the master. They even offer to mediate. In the end he is summoned by the director-general, to whom he explains that he is a human being. The director-general finds the story amusing, and suggests that he go back to 'Abd al-Latīf and apologize to him. His punishment would be the loss of one day's pay. But as Aḥmad does not give in, the director-general fires him. Aḥmad finds himself in the street, reading the company's name on the plate.

The story 'Alif al-Aḥrār' illustrates obsession with one's self-esteem, which must be upheld at all costs, a case of cutting of your nose to spite your face. The obsession in 'Alif al-Aḥrār' brings the hero into an intransigent position which in the end proves to be his undoing.

The hero of the story 'al-'Amaliyya al-Kubrā' also finds himself in an

1. Ibid., p.423.

2. Loc. cit.

intransigent position. He is obsessed with perfection, until he discovers that this is an illusion, which triggers off another obsession, namely an obsession with authentic life. The doctor in the story witnesses a disastrous operation performed on a woman and this experience unhinges him. He senses that there is something terribly wrong. He is beginning to question his relationship with surgery, to which he has devoted his life. He feels that he has been in a dream from which he is only now beginning to awaken. The operating theatre seems to him a horrible place: "No, this is not an operating theatre at all. It is a frightening place, wretched, one he has not seen before."¹ He still remembers vividly the blood splattered all over the walls and ceiling, that gushed out of the wound.

He now feels that somewhere there is treachery, but where? He tries to see where it all began, by going to the root of the problem. He thinks back to his student days when his ambition was to achieve excellence in his field. His driving force was the instinct to surpass his colleagues, but after graduation, once he found himself in the real world, he was faced with problems: "His problem being after he had graduated and become a doctor, and after he had tasted to the full, for a few weeks, all the pleasures of being a graduate, an overpowering sensation that he was free from the fetters of student life. He had not yet drunk the bitter pleasures of life which had been denied him for such a long time. He was faced at that time with the problem of

1. 'Al-'Amaliyya al-kubrā', in op. cit., p.105.

what he wanted to be... After graduation he mentally examined all the branches of medicine without finding in himself the least desire for any of them. Quite on the contrary, after he had graduated and had begun to practise the profession, he did not find any liking for it. The matter was on the point of becoming a catastrophe. It is a joke that after reaching a goal you begin, having spent long years in reaching it, to discover that it is not your goal, and that you must look for another one."¹

But the doctor avoids the catastrophe by discovering his true vocation, surgery. His first contact with his new work is the atmosphere surrounding the place of work: doctors going through the ritual of washing themselves and putting on the appropriate clothes and white caps, all this in the midst of a sterilised atmosphere, filled with the smell of ether and iodine. The place is bathed in soft light. His discovery changes his outlook on life and his goals: "Here where through your will you are alone and where through your ability healing is achieved, here where the sick man writhes in the agony of pain or despair, and an hour later leaves, completely cured, his pain over, here where the role of the surgeon is mixed with the role of sorcerer, and where science becomes a vocation rising to the level of art... he discovered that it is here that his hope is to be found and that from now on it will be his goal in life."²

1. Ibid., pp.106-107.

2. Ibid., p.108.

His work becomes so important to him that his involvement in it becomes something of a madness. It supersedes everything else. He has practically sacrificed himself to surgery, a thing which his colleagues cannot understand and mistakenly consider as a means by which he is trying to please the chief surgeon, which he resents. He does not need encouragement from anyone, because he is driven by a force independent of the others and their pleasure or displeasure. He is simply driven by the urge to satisfy himself. The others even make fun of him by calling him 'deputy surgeon', just because he has not got the proper qualifications. The others work out of self-interest, unable to understand how anyone can work disinterestedly purely for the pleasure of working.

What counts in the doctor's mind is the perfection that one can achieve in surgery, a perfection that he is doing the utmost to attain. The chief surgeon is the one person who has succeeded, and he is the embodiment of this perfection, someone above the rank and file of the other mortals. The doctor worships him despite the fact that he is often insulted: "The chief surgeon is not simply the head of the section but is the greatest professor of surgery in the whole hospital. In the hospital the surgeon occupies a place quite unlike that of his colleagues, the doctor of internal medicine or the paediatrician, for instance. He is not merely a scientist who performs science in front of you, and in front of you makes people live and die...

It is not by accident that the operating room is called the operating theatre, for in this theatre he is the great will and the thinking mind, and all those present human beings, instruments and drugs, are nothing but tools in the hands of that will which manipulates them to achieve its aim. And the feeling of others is unimportant to the surgeon, since his craft forces him to abolish his awareness of their sensitivity, for if he allowed himself to feel that his wounding is painful, his hand would tremble, and perhaps his patient would die. For this reason he does not care about what he says to others even though his words might be insults and curses. His one responsibility is the success of the operation and cursed be any movement or error that would prevent this success."¹

Thus the doctor is dazzled not only by the perfection to be attained in surgery, but also by the surgeon who is its embodiment. The fact is that the surgeon and his perfection are indistinguishable. Even though the surgeon treats his inferiors harshly, especially the lowest ones on the scale, the rewards awaiting the doctor are great compared with these humiliations. The only approval that matters to the doctor must come from the surgeon, not because he wants to please, but because it is the only thing that really counts in terms of his worth and career. To incur the wrath of the surgeon can have fatal consequences as his influence on appointments extends very far, all the

1. Ibid., p.108.

way to the Ministry of Health. This awesome and godlike stature is precisely what makes the doctor strive even more. He finds in this his greatest happiness.

His attitude starts to bring rewards. The surgeon begins to consider him as his best student, tangible evidence of this being the fact that his insults become more and more infrequent until they finally cease. The ultimate approval comes when the doctor is called by his first name. The doctor now becomes so subservient to his master that he even picks up his mannerisms: "He found himself starting sentences from the end just as his professor did, with the first words starting out in whispers, difficult to distinguish, and in the same way as Adham did, he would let his interlocutor speak and scrutinise him, in the middle of his utterance, with a long and piercing stare from his wide eyes by which the interlocutor would shake and collapse if he were lying."¹

Although the doctor knows that the others consider him haughty, his behaviour has an effect on them. By acting in a superior manner, he receives their respect, as if he were really superior, and therefore justly deserved it. But the case of the woman brought to a head what had been troubling him for a long time. She had been brought to the hospital with a relatively simple ailment, but she was not really a patient. Rather she became

1. Ibid., p.110.

upon which medicine could be practised, with all the subtleties of the trade. Thus while diagnosis is the first step towards a cure, it acquires in Adham's hands a meaning which goes beyond the immediate relevance of the procedure. He looks on diagnosis not as an empirical procedure but only as a confirmation of his superior insight. He could dispense with it altogether. It is really for the others, the pedestrians of the profession, to indulge in such trivial work. By examining the patient in this manner the doctor also exercises the prerogative of his status, a goal aspired to by everyone in the room. But the tests and X-rays fail to throw light on the woman's tumour, despite its apparent simplicity, and consequently she must be operated on.

The situation of the dying woman in the story 'al-'Amaliyya al-Kubra' has caused the doctor to reflect on the relationship of man to his life's activities, here the relationship being to his profession. The problem posed here is what it is to live an authentic life. Both the doctor and the chief surgeon are victims of an obsession with their craft which has become an end in itself, with the true object, to save lives, lost from sight. It is the aesthetic perfection of surgery that counts, which in turn creates the illusion that the practitioner of the craft, having become an artist, is in himself perfect. But since life is full of unexpected things, this perfection is illusory. The surgeon made the wrong diagnosis, and as a consequence caused the woman's death.

The story *Lughat al-Āy al-Āy* is closely related to the previous one. The hero is again a doctor, whose lifetime obsession has been to excel in his work. He is not so much interested in perfection as in proving his superiority through the social status that his excellence brings.

While in his office Dr. Al-Ḥadīdī is visited by a childhood friend, Fahmī, and his family. They are reluctant to speak because they are overawed by his social position. Through questions the doctor finds out that Fahmī is suffering from a cancer of the bladder, caused by bilharzia. The man needs to be treated by a specialist, and consequently al-Ḥadīdī decides to take him to his house overnight, before any further arrangements are made.

Fahmī's reappearance in al-Ḥadīdī's life after so many years creates a 'crise de conscience', the culmination of half-conscious doubts that have been pursuing him for a long time. Unlike the patients in the previous stories, Fahmī is not dying, so that this type of situation has different implications for the onlooker, Dr. al-Ḥadīdī. The doctor is a man of high achievements. He has a lucrative practice and is the president of an administrative committee in a large foundation, several times a representative to the Ministry and a member of numerous professional organisations both in the East and the West.

In the East he is the supreme authority on organic chemistry. He

owes his excellence to Fahmi, in the days of their childhood. At that time Fahmi struck Al-Ḥadīdī by his intelligence and facility in solving class problems. Al-Ḥadīdī considered him not only as a friend, but as an ideal to be emulated. In later years he would even name his little son Fahmi, so strong was his friend's influence on him. Seeing Fahmi, al-Ḥadīdī experiences a strange sensation: "He sensed a misfortune that had a special taste. He was always certain that he would meet Fahmi one day, and he was preparing himself for this solemn meeting. The great fear which he experienced towards Fahmi had its origin in the fact that he used to think Fahmi would continue to excel him and the others. One who has the ability to excel as a child must be able to excel as a youth and then as a man. He could never have pictured this meeting coming about in this manner; he could never have imagined that the child of his memories would turn into this man. He was preparing himself for this moment with many words that he wanted to say... the voice that for more than thirty years kept inflaming his ambition and pushing him toward excellence until victory, even for once, over this child of genius who remained in his memory like the images of untouchable saints. And this is the meeting and here is the saint."¹

Instead of a successful and brilliant man, al-Ḥadīdī finds a humble man, a nobody who does not dare speak, but lets his family speak in his stead.

1. 'Lughat al-Āy al-Āy', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.287.

When he finally does say something he speaks only when spoken to. Each of his answers is punctuated by 'Yafandi' and 'Ya bey'. Even when al-Hadīdi addresses him by the nickname, Abu 'Anza, earned in childhood, he is still addressed as 'Ya bey'.

The doctor puts him up overnight in his house, but without his wife's knowledge, because she might object. He puts him into the kitchen, and so that she does not find out that Fahmi is there he takes her to the theatre in the evening. On their return everything is in order, and they retire for the night. But in the middle of the night a shout pierces the darkness: "It is not exactly a yell, but it was the first one, shortly after midnight. It rose, totally inhuman. One can fathom even the secret of a beast's voice. It started in the first instance, wooden with a ring to it, like bones breaking and being crushed, held by the hand of a giant of mythical strength and stature, mercilessly crushing them."¹

The doctor experiences a dark fear of what he does not know the origin. The next sensation is that of guilt, "a dark feeling which ties him to the voice, and affirms that the bond between the two of them is of his own making and is his responsibility and that it is up to him to bear it till the end." After an interval the yelling starts again: "But then there was a dark whisper from which a voice arose suddenly, upwards, like a rumbling vertical flood, falling like the bones which are crushed and smashed, a voice close

1. Ibid., p.278.

to thunder."¹

The doctor begins to tremble, not because the yelling frightens him, but because of what lies behind it. His wife wakes up and becomes hysterical, and he tries to calm her down, but the noise starts again, spanning the whole scale of human emotion engendered by physical suffering, from anger to hope. The wife yells too, and then, frightened, curls up to her husband's side. Al-Hadīdi finds himself in a difficult situation. How can he explain to her why he has taken Fahmi under their roof when he himself does not know exactly what prompted him to do it.

As the yelling spells do not cease he goes to the kitchen, to find that Fahmi is not in his bed which is torn to shreds. He finds the sufferer wedged between two racks, half naked. Fahmi is "oblivious of him, of space and time, and the whole world because of all that is happening inside him. He stands up, falls on his knees, stretches on his stomach, opens his mouth ready to yell, and in order to suppress the yell he fills his mouth with part of his arm, a pillar or a broom, and he sinks his teeth into them. Blood flows from the arm and mouth, mixed with drops of burning urine."²

Al-Hadīdi is again overcome by frustration over the fact that he has been destined to live a life to "take away from people their wretchedness, poverty, impotence, disease, and lastly their pains and urine."³ He confesses

1. Ibid., pp.279-280.

2. Ibid., p.292.

3. Ibid., p.295.

to his wife what he has done, and recognizes that he made a mistake. But she is a hard woman, insensitive to Fahmi's suffering. Her only concern is that Fahmi should be out of the flat. She requests her husband to throw the man out, claiming that he is upsetting their son, who is trembling. She puts it to her husband in the form of a choice: one of them has to go. He begs her to let Fahmi stay, and calls a doctor who gives the child a sedative which makes him go to sleep instantly. But it is useless to drug Fahmi, because his kind of cancer is so painful that no medication can alleviate it.

It is at this juncture that al-Ḥadīdī feels something stirring in him, a new awareness creeping up on him: "He felt a faint peace, and voices reaching into the deepest parts of him, reviving him gently and sweetly; it is exactly that region where he feels the gathering of moans that he has set free."¹ It is that part of him that aches, and has been doing so for years, but he has never had the courage to express his feeling in a moan, as Fahmi is doing now, because of his fear that people would mock him, and accuse him of madness. They would only smother it, and relegate it again to where many of his repressions "are asleep".²

"Only now does he feel all his suffering, and he feels that it is uglier than Fahmi's suffering and pain, the whole difference being that he has no right to experience pain like Fahmi." But the pain that al-Ḥadīdī is

1. Ibid., p.

2. Ibid., p.296.

experiencing puzzles him. He would like to know what it is that pains him, despite the fact that he has reached the summit of his career, and is the head of a family. "From where then is that unbearable suffering coming that makes him envy Fahmi's state?"¹ What is the difference, he asks, between himself and Fahmi? It is not a matter of poverty or wealth, education or ignorance. The matter lies in the fundamental question: "Am I alive or dead? Fahmi is alive, and has lived, but as for me, I have not lived. And life, any life, is millions of times more wonderful than death, any death, even though the dead may be shrouded in elegant clothes, occupying the highest positions, happy in their married lives."² The criterion by which to measure life is to see whether one feels it, and this, as al-Hadīdi himself admits, he has not done. Rather he has been leading a mechanical life, the main purpose of which is to get where he is going. Fahmi has suffered poverty, but not alone. He had friends with whom he could laugh, whom he could consult on the problems of his work. Together they would enjoy the simple things of life, such as going to the market. Even eating would be a festive occasion. "With these many things scattered along the path of their lives, each of them is filled with a renewed sensation that he is alive and that life, however difficult, is sweet."³

1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., p.297.

3. Ibid., p.298.

By contrast, al-Hādīdī has fallen victim to the race for success. He was always busy trying to advance himself, and if the group with which he was involved was less in a hurry than he was, he would leave it for a new, quicker-paced group. If this in turn was also too slow, he would desert it, and go alone, unshackled by human relationships. His constant obsession with getting there has proved to be an unending process: "After graduation I said work, after work, the doctorate, after that, the professorship, and when I sensed that it required waiting, I left for the companies. I said, after marriage, and when I married I said, we shall start life with the children, and when I had fathered them I said, it is best that they are grown, and here I am still running in a hurry, and my aim is not to arrive anywhere, except at hurry in myself."¹ It is like saving money for a concrete purpose, and then saving it for its own sake.

Fahmi's pain gives al-Hādīdī a profound peace of mind. It is as if Fahmi were suffering for both of them: "...as if he were the one to whom it was at last permitted to suffer as he wanted, and with all his powers at his disposal. It is the pain accumulated over the years, the pain of buried sadness and sorrow."²

It is impossible to lead a life of one's own making unless one is prepared to experience sufferings which only grow worse. The outcome is a

1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., p.299.

lonely existence: "Yes, Fahmī, loneliness lies in getting to one's goal, in hurrying up, the ugly pain of parting with people and removing oneself from them, the lethal loneliness which generates fear of the others and destroys self-confidence. The loneliness by which you want to make yourself freer, more spontaneous, and more alive leads to a recoiling to the fear of others, to the limitation of movement."¹

This new awareness makes al-Ḥadīdī indescribably happy. Contact has been established between Fahmī and al-Ḥadīdī through their sufferings: "Depths speaking to depths in a language not understood."² Al-Ḥadīdī feels that he has finally begun to live again. He has recovered his ability to be apart from humanity without fear. His new psychological state is actually more than a new awareness. It is a revelation through which his whole life becomes clear to him, from birth to the present day. He looks at his past life as if it had belonged to another human, a stranger: "He hates nothing more in the world than that life of his, and had it not been for the powerful call coming from Fahmī, he would have put an end to it, and to himself. But the call is stronger; it creeps into his whole being and shakes the edifice of life in him in order to re-awaken his instinctive love for it. And from the deep darkness an image emerges and begins to creep in... (He sees himself) as he runs, and runs, alone. People live and he runs... contacts cut, amputated friendships,

1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., p.300.

partial friendships, with values strewn along the path, destroyed by a human being who did not want to bind himself to anyone so that the bond could not corrupt him, and so that he would not become part of a group or an individual friend, because in involvement there is a loss of the free self and being. The result is quick running to the summit, which in reality is a quick escape from life, and life means living and there is no life for me or anyone except through living. That you should cut yourself off from the living means, cutting yourself off from the original spring of life, and the loss of the appetite for life, and the transformation into death."¹

Physically, al-Hādīdī is not really alone, since he has a family, brothers, and a few friends, but they are only a veneer to his life. But genuine love of people must arise out of the need of people for people. This is as natural as one's need for air and water. Al-Hādīdī confesses to Fahmi, begging him for forgiveness. Fahmi understands and calls him by his first name. Al-Hādīdī takes him on his shoulders to take him to the hospital. He asks his wife to accompany him, but she refuses, saying that he must be mad. Thus he goes alone, under the gaze of the whole neighbourhood, awakened by Fahmi's screaming.

1. Ibid., p.302.

An obsession of a much narrower scope is described in 'Hālat at-Talabbus'. A college director looks out of the office window to find a girl smoking, alone in the courtyard. He is stunned. His whole personality is turned upside down by the sight: "When he caught sight of her it was not the College Dean who became angry and whose blood shot up in flames in his veins, but the child who was born and brought up in Sohāg. Since the time he began to think he understood that to smoke might be permissible for a man, be a shame (ʿayb) for a young man, be absolutely forbidden to children, and that in the case of a woman it was a crime, - more than a crime, a loss of feminine honour. But what if she was neither a man, nor a child, nor even a woman, but a girl, - a girl who could be no more than seventeen?"¹ He is angry, but cannot help watching her. He notes the way she holds her cigarette and draws in the smoke. He notes the expression of bliss on her face. It is all right for him to smoke, but this girl! He must expel her, because she is a germ. Yet he is undecided. She has a strange effect on him. He begins to think why he should expel her: "Because she is seventeen and smoking, because she is a student? What is the difference between her smoking as a student, and smoking as a graduate, since it is all smoking? Why do we forbid it to a budding youthful body and allow to it an old woman who coughs and spits whenever she draws a breath?"²

1. 'Hālat at-Talabbus', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.194.

2. Ibid., p.203.

He is fascinated by the freedom with which she is enjoying her cigarette. He is torn by the desire to ring the bell for the attendant to fetch her. Deep inside he is obsessed by the sight, perhaps even sexually attracted to her. He reacts physically. His mouth becomes dry and "a perspiration with a smell that he had not smelled for years came from him under his armpits."¹ He has to wipe his glasses, clouded by the heat that comes from his face.

The types of obsession described so far have had a positive quality. This may appear contradictory at first, since obsession with violence for instance, and with annihilation are negative aspects of the human personality. Yet by being violent, or simply stubborn, the heroes in the foregoing stories have attempted to assert themselves before the world, or at least they wanted to preserve something of themselves. The underlying quality of these obsessions was their dynamic character which made the heroes act.

There is a group of stories which is diametrically opposed to the group just dealt with, in spite of some similarities. The characters in this group are obsessed too, but in a negative way. Their psychological states cause them to stop acting and as a result they withdraw from the world. Their withdrawal is accompanied by hate, but hate which stifles action. The characters suffer in silent despair from a sense of alienation from the rest of humanity and develop

1. Ibid., p.203.

a bitter outlook on the world at large.

Such is the case of Abu Sayyid in the story bearing his name. Abu Sayyid is a man who is faced one day by the meaninglessness of life, but as in the case of a number of Yūsuf Idrīs's stories, his problem is rooted somewhere in his biological recesses.

Physically speaking, Abu Sayyid is not himself. He has a cold which drains him of his strength, but several days later, when his strength returns to him, he decides to make love to his wife. In the morning he returns to his job as a traffic policeman. The world looks bright and he immerses himself in his work of regulating the traffic and writing down in his notebook the licence numbers of offending cars. He feels on top of the world: "The world was the world, the world which is here, of which he is king. It was and still is good, and he is still sitting on his throne, ruling over it with his whistle and showing respect to those he pleases and debasing those he pleases by merely waving his glove."¹

At night he joins his wife in bed, covered in sweat, since he is still a little weak, but "his awareness becomes deaf to the world, and he and his wife and the bed are his whole world and thought."² But his wife refuses him, and he curses her. He tries until dawn when she falls asleep, but he is awake.

1. 'Abu Sayyid', in Arkhaṣ Layālī, p.33.

2. Ibid., p.34.

The same thing repeats itself night after night. She keeps defending herself while his virility makes desperate efforts. All this makes him lose his self-confidence. One morning he admits to himself that he has been defeated.

Abu Sayyid begins to shun his wife at breakfast, sneaking out of the house to go to work. His outlook on the world changes. It is not his world anymore, but something alien that is suffocating him. He becomes indifferent to it: "When he stands in the middle of the square, the cars crowding round him and the earth and the sky moving, as he is standing stiffly, lost, then he feels the futility of this kingdom which is his. His white glove annoys him, and he feels as if the place were a millstone smothering his breathing... let people trespass, smash and kill. Is he the one who orders the universe? Curse the cars and their owners, the passers-by and everyone who belongs to that beehive the echoes and shouts of which are stinging him. And for the first time in his life he hated his house and his wife's wretched face, and he did not go straight back to them."¹

In despair he decides to go and visit a friend, Ṭanṭāwī. He does not really care whether he gets there or not. He would not mind getting run over by a car. At Ṭanṭāwī's he smokes so much hashish that his host insists on taking him home. Under the influence of the hashish he explores time and space, and goes back to his village and adolescence. But in hashish

1. Ibid., pp.35-36.

he finds no solace.

Abu Sayyid becomes a silent man, who avoids speaking to others. He feels bored and loses his appetite for work: "He would speak only when someone stretched out his hand to extract speech from his inside, like spoiled juice without aroma or meaning. His mood is a mixture of boredom muddled by deep stubborn bitterness. His wife talks a lot and he does not move. His work in the square becomes bitter colocynth which he drinks during the slow hours that he spends slouching around. The greetings which he always used to direct towards his passing superiors become smaller and weaker and he begins to draw them out of his body, the way one would extract a rotten tooth."¹

He wants to be alone and he thinks of lies which he could tell to obtain a sick slip from the doctor. His apathy becomes so strong that he does not even occupy his hands. "His hands are empty, swinging by his side as if they did not belong to his body."²

But one night, as his wife lies beside him, weeping in misery, he feels that he has reached the end of his tether and cannot go on like this any longer. He breaks down and says, "with every part of his body shaking without tears: 'Just tell me, Na'īma, what should I do?' "³

1. Ibid., p.37.

2. Loc cit.

3. Ibid., p.41.

He goes to the hospital, helped by his wife. Even his mother-in-law helps by sending money. He cannot bear the thought of being alone. He stays with his wife because he needs someone to help him "solve his enigma".¹ His chain of thought takes him to his relationship to his wife and he feels remorse. He begins to blame himself, and decides to be frank with his wife, and explains his problem. He tells her that in all fairness they should divorce. But here his wife confesses to him how dear he is to her, all that really means anything to her in life. She points out to him that they are a family. At this moment he realizes fully that he is a father, of Sayyid, to whom he has not been paying attention. He rediscovers his son.

The story 'al-*ʿAskarī al-Aswad*' deals with the affects that inflicting cruelty has on the jailer and the jailed. The situation has its roots in the political atmosphere of the years 1947 and 1948 during King Fārūq's reign, known for its repressive decrees and arrests by the secret police. Yet the story is not primarily political. It is an exploration of the disintegration of personality caused by direct contact with cruelty: this disintegration continues after both assailant and victim have left the prison. The two characters become obsessed, but for opposite reasons.

The action takes place in the muḥāfaẓa, a section of the Ministry of Health which deals with mental cases. The story is narrated by a third person

1. Loc. cit.

who is trying to unravel the mysterious personality change in his old university schoolmate and colleague Shawqi. The story 'al-Askari al-Aswad' is both a psychological study and at the same time a philosophical one. On the psychological level it describes Shawqi's behaviour, as it manifests itself outwardly in everyday life, and on the philosophical level it tries to analyze the workings of his thinking and dilemma as a human being who has to live with other human beings with whom he has an ambivalent relationship as will be seen later. The jailer, the 'Black Soldier' is analysed in a similar fashion, and the point of the story is to compare his situation with that of Shawqi.

The narrator knows nothing of Shawqi's recent past, but he is struck by how different he is from the person that he once knew. He knew Shawqi as an open person, intellectually inquisitive, and eager to discuss anything of interest, especially politics. The bond transcended their relationship as two people. What they held in common was also the fact that they belonged to a specific generation, the 'lost generation', (al-jil al-hā'ir). They keenly felt the unsatisfactory political situation, and they considered themselves called upon to save the country. Despite the fact that he and Shawqi belonged to different political camps, they were friends, united in being of the same generation.

Then one day Shawqi was arrested. Those were the days of unrest,

culminating in political repression, with great repercussions on the identity of the younger generation: "After our college days had stirred us with conventions, speeches and revolutionaries, (the college) swarmed with secret police; there was rumour, fear, and a war of nerves. The whole generation scattered. Some went to jail, some others hid and fled to the countryside, faraway towns, and sometimes into themselves, digging a deep trench in their bosoms where they buried their rebellion, and beliefs and covered them up, and their main concern became to cover them up deeper and deeper, and pretend the opposite of what they believed."¹

It was in those days that rumours of torture were beginning to spread. The main torturer was al-‘Askarī al-Aswad, who had tortured Shawqi, but this the narrator found out only later after much difficulty.

Although the reader suspects the connection between Shawqi and the 'Black Soldier', it is a clever device on Yūsuf Idrīs's part to leave the narrator ignorant of this connection, so that he can deduce the fact from outside observation in conjunction with the events. It leaves Yūsuf Idrīs free to describe Shawqi both from the outside in an almost clinical manner, and from the inside, as a being who thinks, feels and suffers.

Having known Shawqi, the narrator knows that there is something wrong. This is shown from signals in Shawqi's behaviour. For one thing

1. 'Al-‘Askarī al-Aswad', in al-‘Askarī al-Aswad, p.12.

he has lost his spontaneity. The quality of his smile has changed. Instead of being an expression of something, his smile now seems to hide things, functioning as an "inner veil that he extracts from his mouth when he wants to cover his features and hide his true face from the people."¹ His look has changed also. It has acquired a slippery quality that makes others avert their eyes. He has also changed physically, - his body has acquired the flabbiness of the prisoner. In short, he has become another man.

The employees of the section treat him as a hero, and his self-effacing manner is taken as a sign of humility. But this self-effacement is something else, a form of withdrawal. Such symptoms of withdrawal show in his manner of speaking. He speaks only in whispers, "in a faint, polite whisper as if he were expecting always to have his demand refused."² The narrator is waiting for the day when Shawqi will reveal himself, but in vain. He remains silent, but his inner state manifests itself in strange activities. He becomes petty, conspiring to receive little favours from the staff, such as being able to look through the microscope. He lies constantly, and even acts as a middle-man between the patients and the staff for a few piastres. He also begins to steal. Objects start disappearing, even trivial items like an old toothbrush. Shawqi acquires the reputation of a double faced man who would greet someone with his right hand, while his left would be taking his wallet. Although Shawqi

1. Ibid., p.5.

2. Ibid., p.16.

is a doctor, everyone now despises him, including his inferiors.

At first the narrator considers the surreptitious stealing as a symptom of kleptomania, but he begins to feel that Shawqi's strange behaviour has deeper roots. This he begins to understand when he hears of the other aspects of his life: how he cut his ties with his family after graduation, refusing to help them financially; the strange manner in which he married, received his diploma and the appointment at the Muhāfaẓa.

The narrator feels sympathy towards him as they both had to go through the same hard times. They are together again, having been separated by events. But Shawqi is the one that has suffered more, although both have been affected: "I, the drowned, am trying to save Shawqi, and Shawqi refuses through fear to be rescued. I continue my attempts to save him, while he wants to drown himself more."¹

Shawqi seems to have lost his grip on himself. This shows his loss of self-confidence and self-assurance. He is afraid to shoulder responsibility, and keeps to the letter of the regulations, afraid of making mistakes. His fear of responsibility is such that he would prefer to become invisible, or escape to some place where no one could see him. But here lies the paradox of Shawqi's present existence. Despite his wish to be away from people, he clings steadfastly to life. It is Yūsuf Idrīs's intention to describe this paradox

1. Ibid., p.21.

in great detail. Outwardly Shawqi seems to be detached from things, unable to concentrate for long on a given task. "He was always with you and himself, and other things which had no connection with time and space."¹ But when he reads the Black Soldier's file, he shows for the first time a great depth of concentration. It is the torturer who has made him what he is now, and therefore he is the only object that has any meaning for him. After reading the file, Shawqi opens up for the first time, albeit with one remark that the Black Soldier was worse than the sensationalistic newspaper accounts of sexual perversion.

The narrator continues meditating on Shawqi and comes to philosophical conclusions, of an existentialist nature. To him it is a known fact that a man who goes to prison comes out a changed person, and that those around him look for a solution to his problem, by interpreting it, and thus ending it. But this is only wishful thinking. Man is not a machine submitting to laws explicable by a theory. On the contrary, the closer one seems to get to solving someone else's mystery, the deeper that mystery becomes. Thus Shawqi's reluctance to speak, and his strange ways, do not go back to a remote psychological complex. Nor has he disintegrated and become corrupt. This the narrator now realizes, and he considers his previous attempts to 'save' Shawqi to be wrong. The problem touches Shawqi in his totality as an existing personality. The narrator

1. Ibid., p.25.

discovers the key-stone which will serve as a starting point for the understanding of Shawqi's new life: "Shawqi, who had entered prison, has not come out, but the man who did come out is another person with different characteristics and qualities."¹ Thus physically he is the same person, but mentally he is someone else. This makes him different from the rest of humanity: "Although he remains outwardly a human being he does not in reality belong to mankind, nor to the kinds of people one knows to be sound of mind, mad, ill or abnormal. You can say that he has come to be a new species, existing solely in himself."²

Thus Shawqi's motives for living become different from those of the rest of humanity, which he distrusts. He has to deal with people in his everyday life, but keeps at a distance from them, because he expects only the worst from them. He is one of them, and yet, at the same time, is not: "He did not live to multiply, survive or develop, but his motive in living was to flee and escape as if he saw in mankind only jinn and 'afarīt about to swoop down on him, wound him, and kill him, all devils, while he alone was a human being; or else it seemed that they were all human beings and he alone was the devil, with his enemies lying in wait for him and not satisfied until they finished him off. His tragedy was that he continued to live on the face

1. Ibid., p.29.

2. Ibid., p.30.

of the earth with those whom he feared and whom he frightened."¹

The world, then, becomes a savage place to live in, with danger lurking round every corner. Danger means fear, and a man like Shawqi is wary of everyone. More than that, he wants to flee from those who are after him, but this is an impossibility since he would be surrounded wherever he turned. His escape then becomes a sort of dodging of the most complicated kind: "He must escape while he exists among them. Escaping becomes a most complicated operation which may last a whole lifetime."²

Having been hurt once, such a man does not want this to happen a second time, but his tragedy is that he has no place to go. The only way out is a life of simulation: "Your whole being is ready to run at any moment, yet you must hide everything that is in you. You must walk on, and live without showing the smallest trace of fear. (You must) walk on very naturally, very confidently, confirming with your looks and expression that you are not afraid or concerned, that you smile, and that you are happy sometimes, sometimes that you are angry and that you are human like them."³

Such a man's wish is to be stronger than the rest and more self-confident. But the reality is different. His fear of others obsesses him to such an extent that his whole being lives in relation to the situation. He is

1. Loc. cit.

2. Loc. cit.

3. Ibid., p.31.

reduced to watching out for every instance of potential danger, so that his life's goals disappear, and his attention shifts to the outside. He ceases to be himself, yet he lives within himself more than ever: "His life has no goal or plan and he has no will in it. He does not want to reach through his will any goal, near or far, since his only goal is to avoid the danger lurking around him at every instant. He lives each moment for itself, and builds his life not upwards from his acts, piled one on top of the other to become a human pyramid, but downwards: he builds his life downwards and he digs it underground, like complicated twisting, ramified burrows. If at any time he should feel danger in one of the burrows he flees in another direction to make another burrow, another downward transitory escape."¹

While fleeing from people on the psychological level, he remains at the same physical distance from them. Hence the need for his dissimulation. He pretends normal relationships but this is a subterfuge: "He knows you, and builds a friendship or comradeship with you, while doing his best to flee from you. He draws you into a conversation so as to distract you from him."² Since he can trust no one he relies only on himself, and becomes his own best friend. His ultimate wish is to "encompass the whole world inside him and hide from the world with everything that he has encompassed."³

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1. Loc. cit.
 2. Ibid., pp.31-32.
 3. Ibid., p.32.

Although he wants to disappear from the face of the earth, it does not mean that he is suffering from a death wish. Quite on the contrary, his instinct to live is stronger than ever, not only in relation to himself but also to the others: "If only they knew his overwhelming desire to remain alive, a desire greater than that of all of them put together, an overwhelming desire to live a life always made sleepless by the all-encompassing and insane fear of the living."¹

He is like the others but he has used his mind, and his human attributes "to flee from mankind, to remove himself, to become radically different from them, to expend vast amounts of effort to deepen the difference, while expending equal amounts of energy to hide that difference, so that outwardly he appears more like the other people, and closer to them than the people are each to the other."²

Thus Shawqi lives out a colossal contradiction. The question is whether it can be resolved. If one wants to look into him as someone with a history, his change has its roots in prison, and especially in the torture inflicted upon him by the Black Soldier. When he leaves the prison, in his mind the whole world is still a prison, with mankind as so many 'black soldiers'. This he feels emotionally, and despite his obsession with withdrawal from the world he wants so much to be alive, and to be alive means to be alive like a

1. Ibid., p.33.

2. Loc. cit.

human being. He needs human company. The narrator senses this during their conversations, when Shawqi betrays a desire for his company, although he tries his best to hide it.

Their meeting with the Black Soldier sheds light on his suffering, and resolves his contradiction. At the sight of the Black Soldier, Shawqi loses his outward apathy, and becomes his old dynamic self. He recovers his strength of will and can confront the situation head on. He shouts at the Black Soldier, reminding him of the tortures that he inflicted upon him, and to prove it he shows to all his back scarred from lashing. After his departure, the narrator feels that Shawqi has regained his old personality, but also that he will never be the same again.

The predicament of the Black Soldier, or 'Abbās, is also one of crisis. He is a strong man who misuses his strength by torturing political prisoners, and as Shawqi says after the encounter: "...when you hurt others you hurt yourself without knowing."¹ This is what destroys 'Abbās's personality, a process which is depicted in the story, although Yūsuf Idrīs does not present his problem so clearly as that of Shawqi. The first source of information is 'Abbās's medical file, but the real story is told by his wife. 'Abbās grew up as a peasant distinguished in his village by his prodigious strength. After a tour of military duty he married and moved with his bride to Cairo where he

1. Ibid., p.68.

joined the police. He was very ambitious, and he attained happiness when the 'Pasha' took notice of him and employed him. His prestige grew in his section of Cairo and spread to his village, from which delegations would come begging him to intercede for them with the Pasha in various matters. This to him was a second source of income. He became a big spender, constantly entertaining guests in his house. But suddenly he changed. His wife would find him sitting dejectedly, apathetic to her and his surroundings. He became more and more withdrawn. His wife began to suffer, because she could not reach him. He began to talk to himself. He would return from work looking shattered, and to go sleep without eating. He began to smoke increasing amounts of opium. He would give his wife contradictory orders. At one stage he stopped going to the coffee house, and when his friends visited him he would tell his wife to send them away under some pretext or other. His behaviour became so intollerable that his wife's only wish was that he remain only "the way he was yesterday, for instance".¹

He would avoid her, and when he was outside he would avoid his friends, not greeting anyone "as if greeting were a hardship, and shunning people as if they were enemies."² He would be quickly aroused and have arguments with everyone, hurling insults at them. From time to time he would feel the need for company, but his friends would come reluctantly, and find

1. Ibid., p.51.

2. Ibid., p.52.

excuses so that they could depart early, after which 'Abbās would curse them.

His wife Nūr made a startling discovery: "'Abbās is not 'Abbās any more. He has become a new man, with different characteristics, and a different temperament, a stranger. He does not feel that he is the husband whom she married."¹ Nūr discounted the explanation of a friend, Umm 'Ali, that opium was the cause, because she knows that such an addiction was not a cause but a symptom, the cause being "greater and further than she herself could grasp."² She was mystified, and it seemed to her that only the supernatural could be the ultimate cause, and the scapegoat was Umm 'Ali herself, who must have given him the evil eye. She went through the ritual of exorcising the evil eye by killing a cock, but to no avail. 'Abbās's condition went from bad to worse.

She lost all hope the day she decided to speak to him in order to bring it all out into the open. She had hardly started to speak when he grabbed her, and hurled a string of insults at her, just stopping short of hitting her. She was condemned to live with him under the same roof. She would not go back to her village, because she feared for her life.

Thus she had no choice but live by his side. He did not speak to her, and it was from her friends that she found out that 'Abbās's employer and

1. Ibid., p.53.

2. Loc. cit.

protector, the Pasha, had left his position to be filled by someone else.

This is the story as told by his wife. It is the story of a man who has changed, suffering, and making others suffer. But to those who had been tortured the story was different. He would hit his prisoners, hard, with anything that he could lay his hands on, sticks, shoes, truncheons or his bare hands. As he was strong and tall he appeared to be drunk with his strength. He felt superior to his colleagues. To hit someone was to him an orgiastic experience: "If you saw him hit someone, you would never think that he belonged to mankind. He was not an animal, no, nor even an instrument, because the head of an instrument does not show the savage enjoyment while it strikes."¹ He was known to lose consciousness while beating people, and often he would turn against his colleagues who were always selected for their strength so as to be able to restrain him. When left alone with a victim there was always the danger that he would kill him.

A blow thus acquires a deep significance for both the aggressor and the victim, especially if the victim has lost the freedom to reply: "You do not feel the blow when you are free to return it. You only feel it when you have to endure it, without freedom, right, or power at your disposal to return it. You experience the full impact of the blow, not just a localised pain from the blow, or that overall pain springing from it, but another pain,

1. Ibid., p.35.

accompanying it, uglier and stronger – the pain of humiliation, when you feel that with every blow directed at a part of your body, another blow is directed against your whole being, at your feelings, and honour, as a man, a blow whose pain is agonizing because it strikes your soul from within."¹

The victim is stripped of his humanity and also of his animal characteristics; he is reduced to suffering in silence: "When the (victim) is transformed into a frightened and naked heap of flesh unable to bite or kick, he can only receive pain, and keep silent over it. And silence over pain is more painful and harmful than pain itself, especially if you are the one imposing that silence on yourself – the blow, this kind of blow, when you can do nothing to prevent the pain or the humiliation except to bear it and be patient, or else to kill yourself and commit suicide, a deed of which most people are incapable, and even if they were capable then the law of life refuses it and prevents them from carrying it out, since how is it possible, while you are in this situation, defending yourself and your existence, for you to begin to kill yourself and erase your existence? On the contrary, the ugliest thing about it is that you not only bear it and are patient, but that you cling to life even more."² The tortured, thus, affirms his will to live to the utmost degree, at the price of the most intense suffering. That is what happened to Shawqi, and he comes out of it scarred internally.

1. Ibid., p.36.

2. Ibid., pp.36-37.

The torturer himself is affected by the deed, but in a different way. He is free to act, i.e. to inflict pain, but in the process he undermines his own humanity: "The ugliest thing is the sight of him, the sight of az-Zanfali 'Abbās, the black Ṣaḥīdī soldier, hitting someone and his enjoyment at destroying a living being and a man. His victim changes before him into a frightened heap of flesh which screams in blind terror, and the sight of him just drives the Black Soldier to hit him even more and to get more enjoyment out of the pleasure of destruction. He keeps hitting and hitting, aiming at the greatest pleasure, like someone who destroys part of a building and strives with a bestial enjoyment to destroy it completely. The one hit changes into a frightened debris of a man, a debris that suffers. He is conscious of collapsing downward and with his frightened will he prevents himself from responding, while the man inflicting the blows changes into the debris of a man of a different kind, as if the man were destroying himself upwards, made happy by and wilfully enjoying the pain which he creates in a fellow human being."¹

Indeed the Black Soldier collapses in the end, and it is the human wreck that Shawqi and his friends see. Even before seeing him, Shawqi hears strange sounds coming from the room next door, screams that rise to a wolf-like pitch and subside to the whimpering of a baby. When they

1. Ibid., pp.37-38.

enter the Black Soldier's room they see a man with signs of physical illness. He does not have the demented expression of a madman, but one of total emptiness: 'Abbās's eyes were not sick, inflamed or mad, they were continuously silent, encompassing, like death. They had the encompassing quality which you sense in the ocean when you stand on its shore, and you cannot, because of its vast expanse, imagine that it has another shore."¹

Shawqi faces him, and asks him abruptly if he recognizes him. He shouts at him, discharging his own pain at 'Abbās, who just stares at him blankly. Shawqi's shouting has nevertheless an effect on 'Abbās. In a primitive, irrational way 'Abbās becomes terrified, that is, he has changed from one who used to inflict pain into a victim. 'Abbās tries to make himself small as he crawls towards his wife: "I would have never imagined that a man, shrivelling up, could become so small, to the extent that you could hardly believe that if he continued to shrivel up at the same rate, he would not disappear instantly and the human ball become hidden from existence."² Shawqi stops shouting, when 'Abbās, glued to the wall, opens his mouth and starts howling like a dog. He even tries to bite Shawqi. He gets hold of his wife's arm and starts gnawing it, and had she not withdrawn it, he would have bitten into it. 'Abbās now becomes completely demented: "We watch what

1. Ibid., p.58.

2. Ibid., p.65.

is happening. We watch 'Abbās as he starts to strike the bed, barking, howling, sinking his nails and teeth into the cloth of the mattress, tearing it, and chewing the cotton. And his excitement increases, and he starts to hit his face with his hands, like a mourner, and to sink his nails into his skin to wound it and tear it. And we look at him and believe that the next moment he will quieten down, but he does not quieten down, and as each second passes his excitement grows to such a pitch that it frightens us and makes each of us think of leaving the room. But 'Abbās grabs the flesh of his emaciated arm, which is showing through the sleeve of the torn gallabiyya, in his teeth and keeps pressing it. He looks at us with flaming, burning eyes, while pressing, and his saliva covers his naked arm. There is so much saliva that it begins to drip and run down. He is biting himself as if he neither feels nor suffers, or as if pain is pushing him to an excess of excitement, and he sinks his teeth into his flesh... his blood is dripping from his mouth and mixing with his saliva. His lips are parted and, in his mouth, between the teeth, is a bloody piece of flesh, the piece which he succeeded in tearing from his arm, and with the bit of flesh between his teeth, he howls and barks, making a subdued sound as if he were bleeding from his voice, with the blood colouring his howling and strangling it."¹

When comparing the way in which the two characters face their

1. Ibid., pp.66-67.

moment of truth, one is struck by the fact that Shawqi recovers from his obsessed state and starts acting like the human being he used to be, while 'Abbās az-Zanfālī becomes completely demented and does injury to himself. The play al-Lahẓa al-Ḥarija offers us a clue. The character Sa'd makes a comment which is political in content but it is one which may serve to interpret Yūsuf Idrīs's characters, such as 'Abbās az-Zanfālī: "There is no way to overcome what is inside except by putting an end to the enemy outside."¹ In Shawqi's case, the enemy was outside, in 'Abbās's it was inside.

The stories dealing with violence, 'al-Lu'ba' and 'al-Awrā'a' are parallel to the Black Soldier's taste for violence for its own sake, but the story 'al-'Askarī 'al-Aswad' goes further and shows the consequences that such behaviour has on the human personality.

Obsession is the key to Yūsuf Idrīs's work. It is obsession that gives his writing its character and holds it together. To fail to note the importance of obsession means not to understand most of Yūsuf Idrīs's work. An excellent description of the type of obsession analysed in this chapter is to be found in one of Maupassant's stories: "On sentait cet homme ravagé, rongé par sa pensée, par une Pensée, comme un fruit par un ver. Sa Folie, son Idée était là, dans cette tête, obstinée, harcelante, dévorante. Elle mangeait le corps peu à peu. Elle, l'Invisible, l'Impalpable, l'Insaissable, l'Immatérielle Idée minait la

1. Al-Lahẓa al-Ḥarija, p.39.

chair, buvait le sang, éteignait la vie... Il faisait peine, peur et pitié,
ce Possédé!"¹

In addition to that, to use a phrase by Mario Praz, Yūsuf Idrīs's characters suffer from "the delirium of obsession",² as seen in 'al-Awrta' 'al-Lu'ba' and 'al-'Askari al-Aswad'.

Obsession is, however, not restricted to the stories dealt with in this chapter. It recurs to a greater or lesser extent in the other stories too. 'Abdalla in 'Qā' al-Mādīna', for instance, is obsessed with sex; Sanā' in al-'Ayb with her virtue, but what is also important in this respect is the fact that obsession influences the style of the stories. Yūsuf Idrīs's style changes according to the topic treated, and nowhere is it as apparent as in the obsessed stories. The style itself becomes obsessed: the sentences become long and repetitious with emotionally charged words in numerous juxtaposed clauses. A typical example is 'al-'Amaliyya al-Kubrā', in which the doctor tells how he became interested in surgery'. The sentence is almost a page long. It begins with the first part of the main clause which ends at the end of the paragraph. The middle of the sentence is a string of identical clauses, each beginning with "here where" (hunā haythu), (see above, pp. each with its own dependent clauses that go on for several lines.

'Intiṣār al-Hazīma' is another example. When the narrator meditates

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1. Guy de Maupassant, 'La Chevelure', in Boule de Suif, p.111.
 2. Mario Praz, "The Neurotic in Literature", p.6.

on the tragedy of death, the style changes. The sentences again become long and involved. It is also certainly this which made the author lose the thread of the story at one point, by jumping into his critique of civilization.

Obsession is treated in so many stories and described in such detail, that one wonders whether Yūsuf Idrīs has not himself experienced all these emotions. The analysis of psychological states in the story occurs so regularly that it becomes predictable. Such a situation can only arise if the author himself is preoccupied. It is this writer's belief that the author is an obsessed man who is using his pen to get rid of his own "idées fixes". Thus his writing would be of therapeutic value to him, but the effect is the opposite on the reader; he cannot but be affected by it. If the reader is a morbid person he will welcome such writing as a justification of his own depressed mental state; if on the contrary his temperament makes him seek a wider range of human experience, he cannot but be repelled by it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

POLITICAL COMMITMENT

Political commitment in Yūsuf Idrīs's work consists of involving oneself in political activities, the goals of which are to secure honour for the native land, Egypt. The author's sympathies clearly lie with the 1952 revolution, and a revulsion with the regime anterior to it. He expresses his emotion in the story 'Khams Sā'āt', in which a wounded policeman lies on the operating table. "We were in those days under Fārūq's rule. There was martial law, and oppressive darkness was dwelling over Egypt, and nesting in the hearts of men... I forgot that I was a doctor, and I forgot the duty expected of me. I was thinking only as an Egyptian who is being strangled by oppression, and then sees that oppression has slaughtered his brother."¹

It was an era of repression and again in the story 'al-ʿAskarī al-Aswad' he uses the figure of ʿAbbās az-Zanfālī to symbolize the terror of those times. Although situated in a specific political climate, the years 1948-49 with its martial law, the story should not be taken primarily as a political piece of writing. The author's intention is above all to exploit a literary theme, that of the effect of torture on both torturer and victim, with the specific events serving as a realistic background.²

1. 'Khams Sā'āt', in op. cit., pp.92-93.

2. 'Al-ʿAskarī al-Aswad', in op. cit., p.12.

In this other story, however, Yūsuf Idrīs's intention is not to criticize a political regime, such as Fārūq's, but to analyze the meaning of one's commitment to a political ideal. It is first of all an individual act of choice in which both the rational and irrational parts of one's personality take part. In the story 'al-Jurh' such a commitment is shown by contrasting a mother's commitment to her son who is fighting the British, and that of three young men who make their decision after some deliberation.

The story 'al-Jurh' concerns itself with the quality and depth of one's commitment to goals. The story takes place in a boat sailing to the battlefield where Egyptian patriots are fighting the enemy. The boat, sailing on a lake, contains five characters: the owner of the boat, three youths and a woman. The story revolves around two of them, one of the youths, Ḥilmi, and the woman.

From the conversation it transpires that the woman has a son who has been wounded in the battle and is now in hospital. Her maternal instinct compels her to see him and comfort him. She is an older woman who gives the aroma of old age: "Her arrival spread that smell of old people. You could not know whether its cause was the smell of the boxes in which clothes are kept or whether it was the smell of the woven clothes themselves. The important thing was that she reminded you of your grandmother, and the past."¹ Her obvious old age has not diminished her maternal feeling however.

1. 'Al-Jurh', in Qā' al-Madīna, p.194.

On the contrary, it seems as alive as ever: "She was a living lump of anxiety which made us feel that a new spirit had settled among us. Her eyes looked at us and did not examine us. Her hands were on her knees, on the edge of the boat; her hands implored an invisible god. Her head turned, and did not stop moving; it moaned suddenly to the shore, then went back and turned again."¹ She is constantly asking the boat owner how long it will take them to reach their destination. The youths are curious about the woman whom they keep questioning about her son. They ask her whether she would carry arms to defend Egypt, to which she answers that is not what really concerns her. It is obvious that she is more committed to the welfare of her son, rather than to that of the country in danger. Hilmi communicates his view of her to the other men, speaking in English, setting himself up as a psychologist. "She knows with her instinct that he must have changed after the battle. She wants to see for herself what changes have come over him and how it is possible for her son, whom she has raised and seen a child, to carry weapons and fight. She wants above all to make certain that her son is still her son, even after he has fought and carried weapons."² To this one of the others replies, also in English: "You idiot, the main thing is the frightening force which attracts the mother to her son, the force which no obstacle can stop."³

1. Ibid., pp.192-193.

2. Ibid., p.204.

3. Loc. cit.

Both these statements have an implication concerning the youths' own immediate goal in particular, and their lives in general. At the beginning of the story, Hilmi wounds his forehead against the mast in the dark, and throughout the voyage he covers the wound with his hand. The rest of the passengers find it amusing, thinking that he is exaggerating his predicament. This insignificant wound is contrasted with the situation of the woman's son. While Hilmi was hurt through carelessness, the son sustained his wounds through a choice which had committed him to something greater than his own safety. The woman's aim in making the voyage turns the attention of the boat owner and that of the woman herself to the three youths. The threesome claim that they are guerillas on their way to the battlefield, but they are not telling the truth. They had boarded the boat on the spur of the moment, not really knowing why, but now, confronted by the other two, they must convince them that they are truly guerillas. This forces them to ask about the meaning of their action:

"Sometimes man wakes up, finding himself directed to a specific place, without thinking. The owner's question made us wake up; everything before us had a reason. The old woman was going to see her son, the boat was moving because the wind pushed it. Hilmi was wounded on his forehead because he collided with the mast, but why were we going? Despite ourselves, we kept asking ourselves. And we found no reasonable or acceptable answer. All that we found was an overwhelming sensation which did not leave any room for thought or question, a sensation that something horrible and painful must have happened

there, and that we had to be near to what had happened."¹

It is as if everything had conspired to bring them to that awareness since they had boarded the boat. Yūsuf Idrīs uses the journey symbolically, as a journey through life. Passing the villages means also passing the lives in them, lives which begin and end in the struggle to survive.

They are all Egyptians who have been struggling to survive against odds for thousands of years. In this atmosphere the three youths must make a decision, and jump out of the boat towards the battlefield.

In the play al-Lahza al-Harija on the other hand, political commitment takes the form of a social critique, contrasting a young man's determination to train as a guerilla fighter and his father's narrow-minded opposition.

The play's theme is that of the young generation trying to assert itself against the wishes of the elders. The plot takes place shortly before and during the tripartite invasion of Egypt of 1956. The main characters of the play, Sa'd, trains as a commando against the enemy. His action is opposed by his parents and the ensuing arguments form the core of the play.

At the beginning Sa'd trains at a camp without his father's knowledge. His mother, Haniyya, however, knows and she tries to dissuade Sa'd, her reasons springing from her maternal instincts. Hers are emotional arguments which no reasoned argument can shake:

1. Ibid., pp.209-210.

- Haniyya: If you were a mother you would not say that.
- Sa'd: If all the mothers spoke like that to their children, who would defend the country?
- Haniyya: Let those who defend the country defend it, and leave us the way we are.
- Sa'd: And why am I not among those who defend it?
- Haniyya: You?!
- Sa'd: Yes, I.
- Haniyya: Because you are my son.¹

Sa'd leaves the house before his father Naṣṣār wakes. Upon his return Sa'd confesses to him that he is undergoing training, and Naṣṣār enters into a discussion which will last throughout the play. First he admonishes Sa'd for being absent without his knowledge. He uses the universal argument of comparing his childhood with Sa'd, saying how easy it is compared to his own, when once his father beat him so severely for being late for dinner that he still carries a scar on his leg. He does not take Sa'd seriously, not believing his story about his training. Sa'd has yet to convince him, and his father asks him questions in a mocking way. Sa'd speaks of the enemy, Israel and Britain, but Naṣṣār's thinking is very much down to earth, lacking in the long range view of things. Why should the British come back, having just left? To Naṣṣār the enemy is within, not without, but Sa'd disagrees:

1. Al-Lahza al-Harija, p.14.

Sa'd: I know who the enemies are (addressing his mother). True, there are enemies here (pointing to his chest), but those are the shadow of the enemies outside. Why is one deceitful? Because the enemies are the ones who have taught him to deceive so he could defeat them. Why am I selfish? Because the enemy is selfish. Our enemies inside are imperialism, they are the English. And if we defeat the enemies outside, we will defeat their shadow inside. And there is no way to overcome what is inside except by putting an end to the enemy outside. 1

Sa'd then accuses his parents' philosophy of life which he considers to be that of weaklings:

Sa'd: He is an intelligent enemy, better than you are, by God! Nor is he mad. But what are you? You are slaves. You have a morality of slaves, and a philosophy of slaves. Even our Lord you worship out of fear. Your whole lives have only one axis, which is cowardice... When are you going to give up that eternal fear? When are you going to move and become human beings? You have been living humiliated and you want us to be humiliated with you. Fūl, bring me fūl. Your whole lives are fūl. 2

Seeing that he has been unable to convince his father with his argument, Sa'd decides to leave the house in the middle of the night while his parents are asleep. He discusses his plan with his friend Sāmih. Unfortunately the noise he makes wakes up his father who, seeing Sa'd determined to leave, wants to have a word with him. Sa'd is in a hurry but his father insists. Naṣṣār tells Sa'd the story of his life, of his struggles, his poverty and involvement with foreign troops in World War II. That is why he wants his children not

1. Ibid., p.39.

2. Ibid., p.40.

to have to go through the same troubles. He had worked hard in order to ensure his children's future. What would be the use of his sacrifice if Sa'd was to be killed? Sa'd disagrees vehemently. He is not only his father's son, but a free individual. His father's view of Egypt is too limited.

Sa'd: With all due respect to what you are saying, Father, I see that Egypt to you is just our family. In my view the real family is Egypt, and that family is in danger and we must defend it. 1

Naṣṣār's view is diametrically opposed to Sa'd's, based on pure self-interest:

Naṣṣār: When I was hungry nobody went hungry because I was. No one stripped himself naked when I was naked. No one, my son, goes hungry for anyone else. Each one defends only himself, and depends on himself when someone attacks him.

Sa'd: The matter being so, why then did you go through those hardships, hunger, putting your life in danger because of us? Did you not say just now that each one is responsible for himself?

Naṣṣār: Are you strangers to me? My son, you are my family and my children. You are me.

Sa'd: And Egypt too is me.

Naṣṣār: You, my son, are my son.

Sa'd: But today I must be Egypt's son. 2

Naṣṣār does not understand. Only his son's eventual death is on his

1. Ibid., p.74.

2. Ibid., pp.74-75.

mind. All of Egypt is nothing compared to his son.

Nassār: I am ready to die a hundred times so that you may live just once. 1

Sa'd wants his father to let him be. He is a free individual who wants to fight for something he believes in.

Sa'd: Why don't you leave me to go and defend something I believe in, something in my blood, being and nerves. By God. I am free to do what I want. You must understand that, Father, I am not a part of your possessions. It is true that I was part of you, but now I have grown and become independent, one for myself; I have opinions and by right I must carry out what is in my mind, not what is in yours. 2

Nassār is offended, but Sa'd stands his ground, and in the end Nassār sees that it is no use arguing further. He agrees to let him go and wants to accompany him. He wants to put on a proper attire for the occasion, and he convinces Sa'd to go to the other room, so that he does not sneak out on him, while he puts on his clothes. Sa'd enters the room and his father quickly locks the door. It was all a ruse and Sa'd is imprisoned.

Nassār indeed treats his family in a patriarchal way. He is the head and all must obey. Sa'd's predicament is highlighted by scenes which depict the relationship among the rest of the family. He orders his wife around, requiring her to bring him warm water every morning. He always shouts at her from the bedroom.

1. Ibid., p.76.

2. Ibid., pp.77-78.

But in reality, Naṣṣār was testing Saʿd, because the lock on the door is broken. Saʿd knows this and yet does not make the effort to get out of the room. It is a clever device on Yūsuf Idrīs's part, but hardly credible in this play.

The play is not psychological in that it does not involve mental conflict, but the short novel Qissat Ḥubb combines the psychological and social aspect of political commitment, in that the hero Ḥamza makes his own reasoned choice within a restrictive and indifferent social context.

The problem posed in the novel Qissat Ḥubb is whether one can reconcile a commitment to a political cause with romantic love. If this is possible, then what are the consequences of such a union, and the individuals involved. The narrative centres around two main figures: Ḥamza, a former chemist turned active nationalist, and Fawziyya, a school teacher who becomes infatuated with the cause and with whom Ḥamza falls in love. A third character, Badīr, a prosperous lawyer, originally a Ṣaʿīdī who lives the bourgeois life with all its comforts, serves as a contrast to the restless Ḥamza.

The action takes place in January 1951, during violent anti-British disturbances and the burning of Cairo. Ḥamza is a fugitive, hounded by the secret police, since he is known as an activist. Whenever the security of the state is said to be at stake, he and others like him are rounded up and temporarily imprisoned. Ḥamza has therefore chosen a life of uncertainty, usually

in hiding so that he can engage in nationalistic activities. The action begins in a deserted area of Cairo which the subversives have chosen as a training ground for guerilla fighting. The organizers, of whom Ḥamza is one, form a committee the aim of which is the forceful expulsion of the British from the Egyptian homeland. They are only few in the movement, but are determined to fight. They collect money to buy weapons which they then store in safe places.

During one of his stays in the camp Ḥamza is visited by a school teacher, Fawziyya, claiming to be the 'Secretary of the Schoolteachers' Committee for Popular Resistance'. She says she has heard of Ḥamza's committee, and for this reason has come to them in order to bring the two organizations into direct contact. She promises to enlist her committee's help by raising funds towards the purchase of weapons. Ḥamza is slightly bewildered by a situation in which he is faced by a woman. To work with a woman is to him something unexpected and new: "...this was about the first time that work brought him together with a young woman, and deep down he did not trust young women..., although he would always say that there was no difference between a man and a woman, and that she had the same rights as he."¹ This sort of double standard is to be slowly modified as their relationship develops.

He is a little confused by her presence, but he nevertheless explains

1. Qissat Ḥubb, p.54.

to her his basic ideas, namely that the rule of the country belongs to the people. They fix an appointment, and the following day she gives him a first instalment of twenty seven pounds. They continue their discussion and Ḥamza notices her nationalistic zeal. Yet he still finds it difficult to "convince himself that a woman could really do anything."¹ Although she seems now to have become a comrade in arms, he still observes her mainly as a woman, noting her fine physical appearance.

The following day he is travelling outside Cairo when he hears over the radio that there are uprisings in the city and that Cairo is burning. Martial law has been declared, which means he is in danger and that he must therefore change his residence. Upon his return, he calls on his lawyer friend Badīr who kindly offers him shelter in his luxurious flat in Duqqi.

Ḥamza feels very restricted in his self-imposed confinement. News of the disturbances, upsets in the government, and above all the hypocritical switching of allegiances on the part of important businessmen and whole companies, all this depresses him. Because of the strict curfew he cannot keep an appointment with Fawziyya, and that too contributes to his unhappiness. When, however, the curfew is eased, he ventures outside to meet her.

While at home, he enters into a discussion with Badīr, and it is in these moments that they find out how far apart they are in their outlooks.

1. Ibid., p.58.

Badīr, with his bourgeois way of life, likes to lead an ordered existence, in which everything fits into its proper place. He is sincere in his concern, however. As a friend of fifteen years' standing, he offers him advice. Ḥamza should find work, marry, raise a family - in short, succeed. An educated man like him should not waste his life. Ḥamza tells him that he is happy with this kind of life, but Badīr does not seem to understand. Ḥamza goes straight into the heart of the matter: "(I am happy) because the important thing is not how one lives, but why one lives; the important thing is what one does for people.... Of course you do not have to understand. You are a man who has his own private life, home and work. I have no private life of my own. I have put myself and my life at the service of the people. If the situation requires that I flee, I'll flee; that I go to prison, I'll go to prison, that I die, I'll die."¹

Badīr still cannot understand. He merely interprets this as a lack of ambition. Ḥamza's claim is that his ambitions are what the public demands of the people. His words are beyond Badīr's grasp, and he returns to his idea that Ḥamza should settle down. Communication between them, at least on this level, has broken down.

This inability to reach Badīr upsets Ḥamza greatly. At night he thinks at length about the fruitless conversation and comes to the conclusion

1. Ibid., p.67.

that the word 'people' has no real meaning in the sumptuous surroundings in which Badīr lives. The true people are the poor, like those of whom he was born in the country and who bear the brunt of a harsh society.

The following day Fawziyya comes to see him again. He had previously introduced her to Badīr under a false name, Fathīyya, under the pretext that he was giving her private lessons. Badīr respects this, and makes himself scarce, but subtly hints that he would like to join them. Deliberately, Ḥamza does not take the hint, and Badīr leaves them alone. The day after that she comes again, at six in the morning, with the news that his friend Ḥasan from the camp has been arrested. This unexpected turn of events forces Ḥamza to take care of an important matter, the moving of the 'cement', which is in reality dynamite, hidden in a crypt, to a safer place. As he goes out on his mission he notices a definite change in the Cairene atmosphere. The people have begun to behave differently: "It was still morning, and the sun was distributing its generous yellow glow on people and things. (But) Ḥamza was pained at seeing the people... (they) had the features of the Cairenes whom he used to know, there was no doubt about that, but they were not the same people whom he had seen long months before the fire. Their crowd was as it used to be; their hurry to go to work was the same, but an ugly silence dwelled over them; and their speed was strange also; it was not the speed of active humanity, but the speed of the terrified, the speed of those

who run in fear of the whip... And Ḥamza asked himself: "Where is the spirit in all this? Could a man believe that this is the Cairo which existed before the 26th of January, and those the people who demonstrated on the 13th of November, and those who captured a minister and said: "Where are our weapons?"¹

With this gloomy mood reigning over Cairo, Ḥamza moves carefully, on guard. He finds himself in a situation which occupies his mind to the fullest: his immediate mission of rescuing the dynamite, his disappointing conversation with Badīr, and above all the eruption of Fawziyya into his life. He feels strongly attracted to her, and this perplexes him, because it touches a part of his being unknown to him before. He had always considered himself a rational man, whose thoughts were governed by scientific method. Now he is unsettled, and because he is a rationalist, he thinks his situation out, only to discover that there are regions of oneself which lie beyond reason. He discovers that he is a man with a body, and for the first time he looks into a mirror to observe his features: "He is a scientific man who believes in the intellect (‘aql) and science, and there must be an interpretation of this phenomenon. There must exist some reason; he must study his emotions (infi‘ālāt). When she comes... and when she smiles at him... he turns into another person, a heart that throbs, without discussion, argument, science or intellect."²

1. Ibid., pp.81-82.

2. Ibid., p.90.

In other stories, Yūsuf Idrīs portrays the characters as undergoing comparable irrational changes which bring them into contact with the core of their beings. Ḥamza is not yet enlightened, but he experiences changes within himself, of which he is aware. In the course of the development of the novel, through new experiences, his understanding of himself and the others will grow, sometimes along rational, sometimes along irrational, lines.

As he cannot keep the dynamite in Badīr's flat, Ḥamza thinks of asking a friend of his, Rushdī, but to his disappointment, Rushdī refuses to help, giving as an excuse lack of space. Ḥamza is perplexed by Rushdī's behaviour, but after some thought he does not blame him for his refusal as he hesitates to condemn others: "Should he bear a grudge against Rushdī or feel sorry for him? Some seem to have hidden desires which tempt them to catch others in a moment of weakness so that they can enjoy themselves by taking revenge on them, humiliating them and asserting their own strength. Yet such desires tempt only the weak, and Ḥamza is very far from thinking of taking revenge on his friend, or despising him because of his attitude, because he knows that every man has a limited power to keep going along the path, and that those who are able to continue walking should feel sorry for those who are behind, and not lose hope in them."¹ Ḥamza in his national struggle has not become a fanatic. He is a realist and a rationalist who knows how to evaluate a

1. Ibid., pp.87-88.

situation on its own merits. He is aware that the political struggle is demanding, but at the same time he knows that not everyone is capable of the same degree of effort and perseverance. He is more interested in knowing his own motives, but, when coming up with a satisfactory explanation, he experiences no sense of superiority.

His infatuation with Fawziyya grows steadily, to the point of love and idealization. She becomes a sacred object to him, worthy of worship. He is happy to find her emancipated, thanks to her father who wanted her to be so, although he has to fight adverse opinions expressed within and without his family. But Hamza discovers that her progressive attitudes are coloured by a hypercritical and emotional stand towards the Egyptians: "You know, I was about to explode today. The people have completely submitted. They are playing dead, like a crocodile. However much you may prod him he does not feel anything. What is this! If they were twenty million women they would not play dead like this."¹

Hamza decides to set her straight and prove to her that there exists a strong fighting spirit in the people. As an example he cites the Alexandria disturbances of the 9th of March in which he had participated. He mentions the courage of the little boys who had nowhere to sleep, the most despised segment of the population. With them he contrasts those who have adopted a complacent attitude, especially at Alexandria University. He mentions his

1. Ibid., p.96.

attendance at a student meeting in Alexandria, at which a speaker declared ponderously that force could not expel the English from Egypt. Their expulsion lay in the Egyptians' awareness of their identity and spirituality. Ḥamza countered this argument by saying that only force would end that. There was noisy agreement by the student audience. As he could not be heard the professor wrote on the blackboard: "Knowledge is power", to which Ḥamza replied: "Knowledge (in an independent country) is power."¹

Fawziyya is fascinated by Ḥamza's account, and accepts his conclusions readily, another manifestation of her emotional attitude to the situation. From a condemnation of Egyptian apathy she swings to an admiration of the Egyptian spirit.

In her newly found enthusiasm she offers to take the dynamite, packed in Badīr's suitcase without his knowledge. Badīr is curious about it, and so he is told that she is taking Ḥamza's clothes to wash them. Badīr offers to do that in his electric washing machine, but the offer is refused. Badīr is so curious that, when Fawziyya leaves, he asks Ḥamza about their relationship, and whether he has slept with her. Ḥamza cuts him short, and forbids him to speak about her in this manner. But Badīr wants to make a comeback by asking him indirect questions which would in the end give him the information that he wants.

1. Ibid., p.103.

Badīr is unable to make any inroad into Ḥamza's private life, but he persists by changing his approach. He questions once more Ḥamza's involvement in politics and the wisdom of his decision to hide. Again Badīr cannot convince him.

The following day the atmosphere is spoilt for everyone concerned. Fawziyya comes for a visit, and Badīr, who had originally decided not to work that day, leaves as Ḥamza deliberately keeps him out of the conversation. When he finds himself alone with Fawziyya Ḥamza confesses to her, after several false starts, what he feels towards her is more than mere friendship. To his surprise she explodes with anger and accuses him of neglecting the struggle by indulging in the emotion of love. The struggle to her is more important than the love of two human beings. It is a sign of moral dissolution, and what he has done is to betray his role and her confidence in him. To her he is finished, and she threatens to discuss the matter with her female colleagues. Having vented her rage on him, she leaves without even closing the door.

Yūsuf Idrīs seems to be depicting in Fawziyya a type who assumes progressive airs by criticizing superficially her people. Instead of being rational, her attitude betrays strong prejudice against what she dislikes, and she is therefore incapable of reasoned argument. Her involvement is one-sided, without an adequate understanding of human motives. The struggle is just an emotionally charged idea, not to be sullied by lowly human desires, hence her misunderstanding

of Ḥamza's love for her, and the ferocity of the way she wounds him. It would appear that Yūsuf Idrīs is depicting on one hand the misunderstanding brought about by over-idealising a cause, and on the other, how this misunderstanding manifests itself when embodied in a woman.

Ḥamza is confused and hurt, but being of an analytical nature he dissects what has happened into minute parts. As he thinks, the picture grows blacker. He loses confidence in himself and blames himself for everything. He was certain that she loved him, but he had not taken into account the possibility of failure. He feels so depressed that he would like to hide somewhere, far from everybody. On the one hand he feels that, by not having Fawziyya, something precious has been taken away from him, and with it an important element in his motivation for struggle. On the other hand he is afraid that she will talk about him. In the midst of his self-deprecation, Badīr enters to tell him that he does not want Fawziyya to come back again. He claims that Ḥamza has not been honest with him, and out of spite he wants his suitcase back. Badīr's utterances cause Ḥamza to sink even deeper into depression. From reviewing the immediate past, he passes on to the whole of his life, only to be appalled by what he sees. He has done nothing by virtue of which he deserves to live.

He is overcome by a sensation of failure. When he should be fighting, he is hiding, indulging his personal problems. He must leave immediately and rejoin the struggle actively. But inside he is still bleeding. The resolve to fight

again has not succeeded in obliterating his pain.

But on the following day Fawziyya arrives, out of breath, to speak of an important matter. This time Ḥamza is bewildered, but extraordinarily happy. She has responded after all, and he is in love: "He felt that he truly loved her, to the extent that his love filled the whole world, so that if he distributed his love between millions of people he would light in the heart of each one a fire. He felt that the matter was serious and that his emotions towards her were not shameful (‘ayb), a deviation (inhirāf), but a material reality which kept creeping, layer by layer, into his depths. Not only that, he also realised that he had bottled up his emotion, repressing it and refusing to let it flow freely. He was like someone dead of hunger when he goes on a visit and when assorted foods are brought to him he refuses to taste anything."¹

Yūsuf Idrīs is portraying a change, sudden and irrational. Ḥamza has a flash of insight into his life which no self-analysis could achieve. Analytical thinking, indeed, complicates living, and makes it more unintelligible than before. Yet such thinking serves its purpose by preparing Ḥamza for an insight into the futility of his actions. It is here not so much a question of thought versus action, action in the form of political commitment and struggle, but rather thought versus emotion. Thinking may make one so complicated as practically to smother emotion, but under stimulus the two can meet. Such a situation occurs suddenly in many of Yūsuf Idrīs's characters who reach ecstatic heights or depths

1. Ibid., pp.127-128.

of depression. Despite the fact that these insights are meant for the betterment of the individual, the accompanying emotions have a manic depressive quality about them.

Fawziyya comes to apologize to Hamza for her behaviour. She embraces him, and they spend happy moments in each other's arms. She confesses to him that she wants to be his wife, but the reason for her foolish behaviour is given in a letter which she has written to him. She gives it to him but asks him to read it only after she leaves. However, Hamza is curious about its contents and reads it in her presence.

The letter is an apology. It is a long confession of the conflict in her conscience. She confesses that she has perpetrated a gigantic lie and all that she appeared to him to be was simply a front and a pose. She had not really joined the struggle out of conviction, but out of an exalted romantic spirit of adventure. The committee which she had said she represented did not exist in the sense that she had described. It was just a group of female teachers, who in a moment of passion had given themselves the name of the committee. Fawziyya just happened to feel more passionately than the others. Thus the story of the funds she was collecting was a fraud, and on two counts. She lied to Hamza about the provenance of the money, and she had also lied to her colleagues, from whom she had borrowed money on the pretext that her father was ill. Her promise of a hundred pounds was merely a way of impressing him,

and to make her appear a heroine in his eyes.

Romantic appeal then was her real motivation, but, she admits that, when tested, her commitment proved to be incomplete. When she took the dynamite, having promised to take it to a friend of hers, she had also lied about what she intended to do. The only place available was her home, but when she examined the contents of the suitcase in a taxi she had become terrified, and decided to rid herself of the load by leaving it behind in the taxi. So as not to arouse the driver's suspicion, she told him to wait, pretending that she was on an errand. She did not intend to return, but while in the street she experienced pangs of conscience, and went back to the taxi. At home she meditated on her actions and, like Hamza, evaluated her life. She felt that, although she was interested in politics, she did it mostly to prove herself before men. But when she met Hamza, she had recognized that she was attracted to him and had fallen under the spell of his manhood which was proving itself in dangerous activities and exploits. It was the incident of the suitcase that had triggered off her crisis, around which revolved the question of her responsibility. It had made her realize that she had been thinking only about her own interests and well-being. She realized that one must transcend narrow egotism and become an integral part of society: "For the first time I understood that the theories which I had read in books had not been written just to be read by people, but to be an expression of an existing and tangible scientific

reality which some people for one reason or another refuse to see. I understood that the society in which I exist is nothing but the big living body, and I am nothing but one of its millions of cells. And I have no life except in that body, whether I want it or not."¹ The life of society would go on while hers would one day end. She must give herself to that large body, because by virtue of its existence she would exist.

It was because of her new outlook that she had exploded with anger when Hamza was about to make his declaration of love to her. She was still under the spell of the new determination born of her theory in which the individual did not count. But again she felt that there was a flaw in her attitude, and she had to pass through another crisis. After leaving Hamza's house she felt empty, inwardly collapsed. She even thought of committing suicide. She returned to her home, however, and, utterly exhausted by the ordeal, she fell asleep, only to waken at midnight with the revelation that human emotion was real: "Why do we deceive ourselves at times and rid ourselves of our emotions as if they were filth?"² She spent the whole night thinking about the meaning of their relationship: "For some reason I did not expect that you would love me, or if you did love me, you would not declare that love, as if the hero of my fantasy had to act that way."³

1. Ibid., p.141.

2. Ibid., p.142.

3. Loc. cit.

She was overcome by guilt, and in order to punish herself wanted to cut herself off from Ḥamza. To avoid a turning back, she was planning to write him an insulting letter, but finally decided against it.

Ḥamza's reaction to the letter is very human. Fawziyya's confession has in reality succeeded in drawing them together even more. When she keeps accusing herself, saying that she did not believe in the cause, he denies it: "There is no such thing as 'I did not believe', Fawziyya. You were constantly moving toward it and that's what's important. Do you understand me? The motive is different in people, but as long as the goal is totally sound, the goal is always the one that will develop the motive."¹ Ḥamza sees that she has changed and is still changing. Her previous state of mind, and her taste of adventure were justified, because such were the times. Fawziyya needs to be reassured, but the most pressing matter to her is to know whether he still loves her. His answer is central to the understanding, not only of Ḥamza, but of Yūsuf Idrīs's characters in general: "That is a verbal question; we experience love the way we experience fear, joy and hatred (kurh)."²

The lives of many of Idrīs's heroes are rooted in irrational motivations which have been buried by the social habits acquired through the natural process of growing and rationalising. They do not really think out their existences, but survive by means of conducting their lives according to accepted values. A hero

1. Ibid., p. 145.

2. Ibid., p. 146.

lives a half-life, but the vital part of him lives somewhere in the subconscious seeking to assert itself, and such a self-assertion appears during a crisis. In many stories it is almost cataclysmic. In Q iṣṣat Hubb the crisis or crises exist but are resolved in a somewhat less turbulent atmosphere. The characters become at peace with themselves and the others. This is what makes the novel a rather optimistic piece of work. Optimism is apparent in the other narratives also, despite the lugubrious and sometimes gory setting of the plots. There the characters come out of their crises, but one is not always told how, and one is consequently left in suspense.

Yūsuf Idrīs seems to focus on the dilemmas which his characters face by concentrating on the quality of the consequent crises, and by describing them thoroughly. In Q iṣṣat Hubb on the other hand the whole process, from initial doubts to the crises and the ensuing new outlook on life is covered. Thus when Ḥamza and Fawziyya are brought together by her letter and his comments on it, the narrative does not end.

Their new relationship throws light not only on their individual selves but also on the people with whom they must live, i.e. society.

The two lovers are now in a state of bliss. Ḥamza feels like an artist with all his senses sharpened to the beauty of his surroundings, the city, the sky with its sun and drifting clouds. Life is full of meaning, and spontaneously his mind becomes occupied with the future, "with plans, the rays of which go out of

his head to stretch to tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, and hundreds of years."¹ But this state of bliss is disturbed from the outside. Badīr returns home and calls Ḥamza aside. He reminds him, in strong terms, that he had told Ḥamza not to bring Fawziyya to the flat. He even refers to her as a whore. Badīr turns him out.

Ḥamza finds himself with Fawziyya in the streets, but he does not feel bitter to his former host. He feels rather that it has been all his fault, in that he had not tried hard enough to know Badīr and his feelings: "Even while being thrown out by him he felt toward him a kindness (‘aṭī), love and sorrow, and these are feelings that had seldom entered his mind. It seems to Ḥamza that his view of Badīr and people in general has changed; they had to change. He has been mistaken in his comprehension of human society to some extent. He believes that people develop, but now he knows that he has seen this in a mechanical way. He saw oppression in numbers, a mass of underprivileged versus a small minority on top: "People are not units or tens, able to multiply, shrink and make history by their movement. People are the ripe flowers of life in whom are found the primary feelings which life has created... emotions and thoughts which have their own sanctity and also their own laws and existence."²

1. Ibid., p.148.

2. Ibid., p.150.

Hamza must look for a new place to stay, and Fawziyya offers him her mother's room, which he politely refuses. As they walk they discuss their relationship. They note how each has contributed to a change in the other. Their commitment to free the homeland of the occupier is seen from a different perspective by means of love. Hamza confesses that his motives are also self-centred. He had wanted to play the hero's role, seeking to sacrifice himself in order to receive the people's love and high esteem. He had thought of himself as a sort of Messiah, but love has taught him now that his role is a rather humble one. His commitment was really to fill a loneliness (ghurba) and for this reason he felt far from the people. His relationship with Fawziyya has changed all that. He now feels that he is totally bound to society: "We are all one family, do you understand me? You and I have melted in all the people and our number has become a million... I will not marry just you, but by marrying you I will marry society. I feel a new strength, an energy of activity flowing through my thinking, soul and being. Now I feel that this country is truly our country, these people our people and that we must live."¹

As they roam the streets they meet one of Hamza's companions from the camp, Sa'd. They are happy to see each other, and Hamza immediately tells him that he is in hiding and that he needs a place to stay. However, Sa'd excuses himself, claiming that since he lives with his father he cannot accommodate

1. Ibid., pp.154-155.

Ḥamza. His last hope is Abu Dōma at the cemetery. After long enquiries he finds him and receives shelter in the crypt of a rich man. On the way they are met by Abu Dōma's wife, a dignified woman, who is more educated than her husband. Abu Dōma's hospitality is boundless, and Ḥamza feels it proper to offer him a pound, but he refuses. Fawziyya and Ḥamza are impressed by his personality, and they are both pleased that it has turned out so well. Fawziyya, as usual, takes it emotionally: "This is a historical night, Ḥamza!"¹

Fawziyya still lives in a world of abstract causes, out of touch with reality. She comments on Abu Dōma and his wife, considering them mismatched. She thinks that the wife could have married someone younger and with a better position. Her remark touches the core of this thinking, and he goes on to explain what it really means to be committed to the people: "I have been fighting for a long time because I was a mere rancorous being who hated oppression and the enemies, but imperialism may end. Oppression may be varied, but the problem is more extensive than that. The problem is not one of enemies, no, it is the problem of the people and its goals, and what will solve it is one's faith in people first... Now I fight not just because I hate the enemy, but because first I love the people, and believe in the necessity of their happiness." Fawziyya does not grasp the point. Ḥamza tries hard to

1. Ibid., p.177.

convince her that there are worthy people all around them: "It is true that there are better people (than Abu Dōma and his wife), but you must know that in every man there is a good, clean and rebellious part, and another part, savage, individualistic and totally opposed to it. Do you understand? The experience of hiding, and the feelings which I carry toward you have taught me that I should deal with the good parts of people. It is true I am wary of their bad parts, but I do not deal with them. We must find in each one of us something good."¹ Ḥamza calls for tolerance if someone is not successful in acting according to the good in him. Fawziyya still finds these ideas difficult to grasp, and she admits it.

If one contrasts Ḥamza and Fawziyya, it is possible to understand Yūsuf Idrīs's intentions along two lines. First comes the opposition of man and woman. Ḥamza is the rational type who analyzes everything, including his feelings, but he discovers that such an intellectual approach to life is false, and accepts emotion as an essential part of the human make-up. When he recognizes emotion, he lets it flow freely, but does not himself be swept by it. It is a two-way movement: his mind keeps his emotions balanced, while they in turn enrich the mind. These would be the masculine traits.

Fawziyya is, on that level, Ḥamza's opposite. She is easily swept away by emotions which cloud her thinking. Her problem is an inability to

1. Ibid., p. 180.

analyze dispassionately. She is basically an emotional type who clings to an idea without really understanding it. Between her and the outside world stands the ideas through which she filters the world. Thus she may believe in the idea of good people, but she is critical of people in real life. These represent feminine traits.

The contrast between Fawziyya and Hamza can also be viewed in terms of thought, emotion and action. Hamza thinks and acts, and the two processes influence each other. A control over the emotions makes the actions reasonable. He thinks, acts, and in his thinking keeps changing, resulting in his attaining a broader and more tolerant view of the world without diminution of his resolve. He is the leader who, with a sense of responsibility, faces the world alone. Fawziyya on the other hand is the follower, who is emotionally dependent on him. She accepts his thinking, but makes few discoveries of her own, unless Hamza makes her face up to a problem. In this respect she is always one step behind him.

While in hiding Hamza receives a visit from Sayyid, another attendant in the cemetery, and finds that the struggle and the people preoccupy him also. But while Fawziyya's views stem from a feeling of superiority because of her better education, Sayyid's are born of resentment. He cannot stand Abu Doma's wife whom he considers haughty. He seems to resent people in general; an attitude which he applies to the English, the source of all the trouble. Hamza

does not agree that the problems will vanish after independence. What really matters is what the Egyptians will do with their destiny. Sayyid is not receptive to Ḥamza, who at that moment feels rather alone with his refined way of looking at things.

The only person with whom he can communicate is, after all, Fawziyya. A significant event, however, cheers him. In the personal column in one of the newspapers, Badīr asks Ḥamza to come back.

Ḥamza decides to venture into Cairo, and notes the change in the people since the fire. From a dejected lot they have turned into people who carry themselves with pride and this causes him to experience the dawn of a new life. He has always had hope in the people, but now he has the proof. He is fully aware of what is to be done: "The enemy is strong and swift. They will be stronger and swifter. In the past there were mistakes which shall not return. The future is certain. Victory is not hope any more; it has become a duty."¹

As he is walking, he is on the look out for the ubiquitous secret police, but, despite his caution, four of them jump on him. Fortunately he eludes their grip and starts running. He ends up in a large crowd, and he is afraid that is the end of him, when he realizes that the crowd is his safety, because they are the people.

The writings on political commitment are the weakest part of Yūsuf

1. Ibid., p.195.

Idrīs's work. The author deals rather naively with a very important subject. In 'al-Jurḥ' for instance, Ḥilmi's preoccupation with his wounded forehead and the mother's visceral loyalty to her fighting son are contrasted and it strikes one as being too superficial. The young men in the boat experience a sense of shame at taking the political situation so lightly, and make the choice by joining the fight. But this is too simple, and Yūsuf Idrīs resorts to symbolism in the form of the boat floating through a river of life in order to give political commitment a deep meaning. It is all too far-fetched.

The play al-Lahẓa al-Ḥariġa is not satisfactory either. The political part which is voiced by Saʿd is a rather simple-minded emotionalism. What redeems the play slightly are the reactions of his parents, who offer selfish arguments against his going away to fight. The father's indifference, born of self interest, is well handled from the argumentative point of view but the language sounds stilted. It is the mother who is really the most successful character, mainly because she speaks from human emotion which Yūsuf Idrīs knows how to handle best. The play is intended to be political, but in reality it portrays the struggle between generations. If the play is political, then the mother's role is understandable. If not, as is the case, her role is out of place. Although straight forward on the surface, the plays becomes chaotic on closer inspection.

The novel Qisṣat Ḥubb is unsatisfactory again. It is marred by the fact that Yūsuf Idrīs puts a woman into the story. The author's talk of the

struggle of the Egyptian people is filtered through the agonies of love. In fact the whole novel is about love, hence the title, and this makes the theme of national struggle meaningless. Yūsuf Idrīs is not expounding any views to the reader; he is merely trying to convince Fawziyya through Ḥamza's lips and the tone of the arguments sounds rather adolescent. The insistence of having women at the centre of political themes is also found in the long novel al-Bayḍā', not discussed here, as it is a rambling piece of non-writing. It is of use only if one is to trace the origins of some of Yūsuf Idrīs's ideas, which is not the purpose of this thesis.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE EGYPTIAN NATIONAL CHARACTER

Yūsuf Idrīs is highly conscious of being Egyptian. Throughout his work he makes incidental comments on the Egyptian character and in some instances even takes it as his central theme. He seems to like the country people, especially the fellah, in whom he sees the embodiment of what is best in Egypt. This is reflected also, as has been seen, in his favourable treatment of life in the village as opposed to life in the city. But it is the poor and simple people who are Egypt's backbone and hope, whether they are in the country or the city. When Egypt is contrasted with other countries, the author shows the population as a whole as a kind and generous people, but dangerous when aroused.

The story 'A-laysa kadhālik', the monologue of an Indian tourist, an M.P. in his own country, sings the praises of the Egyptian people. The story seems to have been written in the days when 'positive neutralism' was at its height. India and Egypt were at that time ideologically close, and this is reflected in the narrative. The M.P. makes a comparison between the two countries. By visiting Egypt he feels India more keenly: "People must visit one another, not only in order to get to know different countries, but to know their own. Here I feel India more. Then, if you were to come (to India) would

you not feel Egypt more?"¹ The M.P. says that India is building itself, and likewise in Egypt he feels that everything is growing. When he goes to an Egyptian village, he meets the same kind of poverty he knew from home. The English language is a common denominator between the two cultures: "I have discovered that we have learned from the same source... The English taught the Egyptians and Indians the English language. They wanted to defeat us by teaching us their language, so we used the language to understand one another."²

What has attracted the M.P. most of all is the Egyptian people. Everyone is helpful, even total strangers, who have invited him to their homes. The Egyptians are a kind people (sha'b alūf). They are disinterested and generous: "You are the first people I have seen who like to give without taking something in return. Everyone else gives and takes in return. You are always prepared to give. This is the height of humanity."³ The Egyptian laughter is infectious, and the Egyptian children are beautiful. To the Indian M.P. "this is the heart of the world."⁴ The Egyptians and the Indians are friends (sawa-sawa). They are the East: "The East, our East; the wide earth with its

-
1. 'A-Laysa ka-dhālika?', in Qā' al-Madīna, p.106.
 2. Ibid., p.110.
 3. Ibid., p.107.
 4. Ibid., p.108.

sun, and the good, strong, poor people."¹

The embodiment of the Egyptian character, the peasant, is also hardworking and obstinate. "The strange stubborn insistence of us Egyptians, the determination of the starving father who can scarcely find the bare essentials of life to make his infant son, who has flies playing hide and seek round his eyes, into an engineer or a doctor; the determination of the peasant who wants to water a vast expanse of earth with a shādūf that brings him a mere handful of water. The strange thing is that it is a determination which does each time not slacken, for indeed the father keeps on striving for his luck to change, for his needs to be met and for status so that he can make his son into an engineer or a doctor, and the peasant bends and unbends a thousand times, a million times, an infinite number of times, until he succeeds in irrigating his land."²

The Egyptian in his obstinacy will do his utmost to defend his homeland against an unjust outsider. He is a man with dignity who will fight anyone who would infringe upon it. The story 'Sirruhu al-Bāti' depicts this trait which gives rise to a stubborn kind of patriotism.

Since childhood the narrator of the story has been fascinated by the mystery of Sulṭān Ḥamīd's tomb where the people of the village seek blessing. He and his friends, although only in primary school, disbelieve the miraculous

1. Ibid., p.112.

2. 'As-Sayyida Vienna', in op. cit., p.95.

powers of the saint, and feel amused by those who believe in him. Yet his disbelief is not total, and he visits the tomb out of curiosity to experience the terror of the unknown, but that is only a momentary weakening at which he soon afterwards laughs. He asks who Sulṭān Ḥāmid was, but no one knows. The troubling aspect of the matter is the fact that he was not even a wali, although people visited him regularly. His title, Sulṭān, is another obscure point. There has never been a Sulṭān Ḥāmid ruling over Egypt. To top it all, he discovers in a neighbouring village a tomb, also belonging to Sulṭān Ḥāmid. He finds out that there are many such tombs belonging to the same person. One evening, however, a weary traveller is invited to their house, and says that he is from among the children of Sulṭān Ḥāmid. The traveller speaks of a man who fought invaders, and who in the end was cut up into small pieces. His followers came to be called the children of Sulṭān Ḥāmid. The group perpetuated itself and the traveller is one of them.

As the narrator grows up he forgets about the matter until one day he meets a foreign lady to whom he tells the story of Sulṭān Ḥāmid, and his childhood interest is thereby revived. The lady returns to Europe, from where she sends him a copy of a historical document which she thinks is of direct interest to the matter of Sulṭān Ḥāmid. It is in the form of a letter written in 1801 by a Frenchman, Roger Clément, to one of his friends during the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt. This letter forms the core of Yūsuf Idrīs's story. It is an exposition of

the spirit of the Egyptian people during the struggle against the invading foreign forces. It is seen through the eyes of a Frenchman, who deems himself the representative of French civilization which he tries to evaluate in terms of its mission abroad. He looks at the Egyptians as a Frenchman, but it seems that this is really Yūsuf Idrīs speaking with the intention of showing that such an outsider cannot but fall under the spell of the Egyptian spirit and admire it. This is what Roger Clément is supposed to have experienced and he describes how it happened to him. To him the Egyptian people are an enigma: "You asked me in your letter...to tell you about Egypt and the Egyptians, that people living on the banks of the Nile. My problem, my dear friend, is the people. I confess to you that I was not like that the day I came. As you know, my life has been in France, and I joined in shouldering the responsibility of our Republic. As I set foot on the soil of Egypt I felt that I was coming to a dark African country, to which I carried the flame of civilisation, and to which I would give a taste of the Republic from which my country springs. And here I am today. I witnessed tremendous forces with my own eyes... I was touched by their magic, but you will not understand; I shall not find anyone in the world, your world, who would understand what I mean."¹

The soul of Egypt is embodied in the fellahin. At first sight they

1. 'Sirruhu al-Bāṭi', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, pp.170-171.

give the impression of being simple folk: "If you see them near you and see their faces smiling at you with goodness and simplicity, and note their natural shyness in front of strangers, perhaps this will impel you to take them lightly, and think that if you were to hit one of them on the back he would not dare lift his face to you, but would accept the slight with happiness and submission. Take care not to do such a thing, Guy. General Kléber and Colonel Belot tried that and regretted it."¹

The point of the letter is that the Egyptians are resilient and cannot be subdued. Their outward simplicity and great tenacity when the odds are against them is their most powerful weapon, even against a technologically superior foe.

The Egyptians often insult each other: "You will not find any other people with such a wealth of insults. They speak only by shouting. But in spite of this, let a stranger, any stranger, dare to try and touch one of them. Hardly has this happened than a miracle is wrought, and here they are facing him, all the insults and differences among them forgotten."²

One day an incident occurs in the village of Shaṭānūf. The resentment of the populace is such that the atmosphere affects the moral of the soldiers of the French garrison, and consequently one of the soldiers shoots

1. Ibid., p.172.

2. Ibid., p.175.

a peasant dead. The irate peasants, under the leadership of the Shaykh al-Balad, go to the commander of the garrison and demand justice. Either the French must kill the culprit or else hand him over to them. The French refuse, saying that the man would have to stand trial. The following day a French soldier is killed on the way to the garrison. Belot arrests the Shaykh al-Balad and threatens him with execution by a firing squad if the culprit does not surrender before sunset. A peasant steps forward and confesses his crime, begging that the Shaykh al-Balad be spared. Colonel Belot decides to have the fellah tried and executed the next day in public. The trial takes place in front of the peasants who do not understand the French procedure. Roger Clément is to take care of the defense. The only thing that is known is that the peasant's name is Ḥamid. He looks like the other peasants, with two distinguishing marks: a tattooed bird on each cheek and a finger missing from his left hand. Clément feels that the whole trial smacks of the ridiculous: "My turn came to defend the accused, and I do not know what Belot's opinion was of my defense which I began with a discourse about the French Revolution and its sacred slogans: Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité. How funny it was for me to pronounce them in the square of Shaṭānūf."¹ But the trial is not concluded - the populace attacks the French with sticks and knives, shouting 'Allāhu Akbar.'

1. Ibid., p.177.

The soldiers are frightened because they still remember the first campaign in which they subdued the eastern part of the delta. The elite of Napoleon's army was faced with the same crowd, with crude weapons, shouting Allāhu Akbar: "Why should I conceal from you that some of our soldiers urinated on themselves out of sheer terror? No one was ever able to interpret this phenomenon. Could it be that it goes back to the savagery of the fellahin's onslaught, or to other, unknown reasons?"¹

The peasant Ḥāmid manages to escape and from then on it is a battle of wits between the population and the French occupiers. In order to confuse the French, many peasants are tattooed with Ḥāmid's tattoo and cut off their fingers. His fame spreads throughout the delta, to Cairo, and he becomes a symbol of resistance. But in the end Ḥāmid is caught, and killed. His death does not end the resistance, however. Quite on the contrary, he becomes a legend and comes to be known as Sulṭān Ḥāmid, and at the site of his burial his followers erect a tomb. The place becomes a site of pilgrimage, which irritates the French. They dig up Ḥāmid's body, cut it into pieces which they scatter throughout the delta. But this does not deter the Egyptians from building a tomb at every spot where such a piece fell. Thus the French have no longer just one Ḥāmid on their hands, but a hundred.

1. Ibid., p.166.

Roger Clément witnesses a gathering at the tomb one Thursday evening. He is taken in by the fervour of the populace: "I knew that what was under the cupola of the tomb was not important. The important thing was the rough harsh bodies wrapped around the tomb. The important thing was the single call originating from tens of thousands of wide hungry mouths. The important thing was that other face of the mythical beast which laid bare the hearts of our soldiers with one stroke of the hand."¹

Roger Clément experiences something bigger than life: "I felt, my friend, that I was facing powerful forces, I truly experienced that; I felt it to such a degree that I was almost compelled to kneel to them, and ask for forgiveness. I felt the elixir pouring into my heart, and a shivering musical light filling my breast and mingling in my entrails. I experienced for the first time in my life the greatness of life, and the fact that we are humans, possessing this miraculous power, our power to come together so that from our gathering emerges something loftier than the life of each one of us."²

It is an experience which Clément cannot fight, "feeling that I am proceeding involuntarily to this destiny".³ The experience is unconditional, and no thinking will make it intelligible. It is a mystery, and must be accepted as such. A conversation which he had with one of the Egyptians is the key to it:

1. Ibid., p.190.

2. Ibid., p.191.

3. Ibid., p.192.

- "— Do you love Sulṭān Ḥāmid?
 — More than my own children.
 — Are you ready to die for him?
 — I would not die once, but many times.
 — Why?
 — Why!? Such a matter cannot be questioned.
 — Do you know anything about him?
 — All I know is that I am ready to sacrifice my life for him.
 — Who is Sulṭān Ḥāmid?
 — It is enough that he died a martyr.
 — Nothing more than that?
 — Nothing more than that." 1

Thus, Sulṭān Ḥāmid is a hero, a symbol of resistance while he is alive. The seeming simplicity and goodheartedness of the Egyptian peasant is stirred into a united and determined savagery, which will endeavour to expel any enemy from the homeland. After his death he is sanctified, but as time passes the historical circumstances are forgotten, and only the sacred element remains. Ḥāmid's deeds are raised to legendary status, which satisfies the peasants' thirst for the supernatural. In times of peace that is what remains, along with the simplicity of the people.

The enmity of the Egyptian people for foreign occupiers is further depicted in the story 'al-Washm al-Akhīr'. This is an account of the withdrawal of the British troops from the Suez Canal zone in 1954. As Yūsuf Idrīs mentions in a footnote that he witnessed the withdrawal, it is likely that the feelings

1. Ibid., p.186.

expressed are his own. The narrator naturally resents the British presence in Egypt, and he draws an initial contrast between the two ways of life. The English military camps are built in a strange way, and although this is desert country plants grow in the camps in abundance. The only Egyptians to be found are the poor barefooted wretches who have to beg food from the soldiers. The English are the masters, and are tranquil because internal dissention keeps the Egyptian people divided. But now the Egyptians are taking over. Just before leaving the camp the English soldiers, enlisted men, enter into conversation with the Egyptians. They are like them in a way, - simple people, sons of workers, "peasants", who are shunted around the world in order to preserve the Empire. It is the officers who are the unpleasant characters, insisting on retaining their haughtiness to the last: "The officer came, nervously. In his depths slept an English aristocracy from which the world has had to suffer for ages."¹ Although the troops are leaving, the narrator still feels that the country is occupied. The departure ends in the simplicity of a school trip that came during the vacation and spent eighty years in Egypt. The narrator reflects: "How bitter I felt. I did not want the departure of the enemies to end this way."²

The enemy, the English, have diluted the spirit of the Egyptian people who have forgotten what they once stood for. Only a vague resentment remains.

1. 'Al-Washm al-Akhīr', in al-Bajal, p.16.

2. Ibid., p.17.

The Egyptians have had no opportunity of throwing them out. The only satisfaction that the narrator derives from such an orderly departure is in wishing that they may be followed by disaster wherever they go.

Opposed to the savagery of the fellah before an invader, and the resentment of an articulate individual at a departing occupying force, one finds the joy of fighting the enemy on sovereign soil. In the story 'al-Baṭal', the character Aḥmad embodies such a joy which has the simplicity of the peasants,¹ but without its demoniac qualities. The narrator of the story receives a telephone call from someone named Aḥmad, whom he cannot place, and who appears to him to be a chatterbox. After some time the narrator finds out that he is a friend of his brother, but he is puzzled as to why he should be phoning him. Aḥmad makes no sense over the telephone, and the narrator thinks that perhaps he wants help, but he is too shy to ask. The narrator remembers Aḥmad visiting his brother at their home. He would stand with his head lowered, not daring to look anyone in the eye. He would do anything for others, even jump into the sea if told to do so. If he did, the following day he would return and simply say that the water was cold. That would be his gentle way of reproaching someone. Aḥmad is a genuine person, and the narrator feels warmth towards him: "Aḥmad 'Umar was linked in my mind, and I do not know why, to something touching in the spirit of our people who are never happier than when mocking themselves and their mistakes."¹

1. 'Al-Baṭal', in al-Baṭal, p.54.

It turns out that Aḥmad is with his military unit in Heliopolis, and has nothing to do. He felt like speaking to someone and the only telephone number he knew was the narrator's. Aḥmad has just shot down an enemy plane. He speaks excitedly about it, but without conceit. He takes it all like a child. He even fires a shot for him over the telephone.

The following day Aḥmad's picture appears in the newspapers. The narrator's colleagues in the office are proud of such a feat, but see only the outward aspect of the matter: "He is the true son of his mother. He even looks like the beast that destroys the world. See what he looks like!"¹ The reaction is not that of an aggressive personality, but of admiration, born of the same simplicity which makes Aḥmad a shy person.

Another aspect of the Egyptian character, besides its simple and easy-going quality, is its conciliatory and diplomatic aspect, which is brought out in the humorous story 'Mu'ahadat Sīnā'. The plot revolves around a huge piece of excavating machinery on loan from Russia and run by a Russian engineer, Masha. One morning the machine breaks down, and Masha announces that a very important spare part needs to be sent for to the central office in Cairo. Unfortunately the part does not arrive due to bureaucratic complications. Yet through mysterious channels the matter of the spare part

1. Ibid., p.58.

reaches an American company which promptly despatches one of its engineers, Bill, with an equivalent American spare part.

This causes a problem. Masha resents the fact that an American part should be used in a Russian machine. He states categorically to his Egyptian subordinates that he will never agree to such a thing: "This is a Soviet machine and nothing but a Soviet spare part will do."¹ But he later relents, and in order not to lose face he proclaims that he does it only for them, and to show them that they are all wrong. This means an encounter with Bill. The Egyptian chief engineer tries to avoid a clash between them, by acting as a moderating influence. The two foreign engineers talk shop, and each discovers that the other is not stupid: "Soon Masha knew that Bill really knew his mechanics and that people in the United States were not as ignorant as he had thought and Bill also discovered that the Russian Masha was not just a recording of the sayings of Marx and Lenin but was also a human being who got angry sometimes and rebelled, who was pleasant sometimes, and smiled innocently like a child."²

They both argue that the spare part should be tried. But another problem arises. Who is going to drive the machine. The Russian insists it should be him since the machine is Russian. The American thinks it should be

1. 'Mu'āḥadat Sīnā' in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, p.220.

2. Ibid., p.221.

him, since without his spare part the machine would just be scrap metal. They begin to trade political insults: "Each of them stood firm and violent as he gathered in his one body all of his nation's stubbornness and energy to fight."¹ It is a ridiculous situation, especially in this forsaken desert, far from anywhere. Their stubbornness means that the camp comprising some five hundred and fifty employees is at a standstill.

But in the middle of the night an Egyptian, who had learned mechanics with the Austrians, climbs on to the machine and with another man's help sets it working. The problem has been solved. The machine is Russian, the spare part American and the driver Egyptian. Bill and Masha grudgingly recognize the ridiculousness of their attitudes.

It is obvious that Yūsuf Idrīs idealizes the Egyptian character in this chapter. This is only natural in view of the fact that Egypt had been occupied by non-Egyptians for so long, for every nation extols its own virtues which make it morally superior to the rest of humanity.

1. Ibid., p.223.

CHAPTER NINE

SOCIAL THEMES

The previous chapters dealt primarily with situations in which the characters were approached from the psychological point of view. The characters were unique, with their own emotions and thoughts. Even in the case of works dealing with the Egyptian national character and political commitment, it was the concrete human being who served as the point of departure for the development of a theme.

In this last chapter are grouped together works which seem to stand apart from Yūsuf Idrīs's other creative writing in that they are philosophically inclined. The author concentrates on an abstract problem, which the characters, through their deeds or words, attempt to define. In this sense such works, with the exception of Malik al-Quṭn, could be labelled dhihnī, a term which qualifies part of Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's theatre.

The play al-Mahzala al-Ardiyya is a social critique concerned with the effect that ownership of property has on social relations in general and family relations in particular. The general theme underlying the play is that of "property is theft".

The scene is set in a doctor's office. A new patient is ushered in accompanied by his brother and a policeman. The patient is Muḥammad III

whom his brother Muḥammad I wants to have committed to the asylum. Muḥammad III, a highly educated man, with a Ph.D. in agriculture, is accused by his brother of insane behaviour. He has supposedly tried to commit suicide many times, and the previous day he was alleged to have beaten his wife and threatened to kill her with a knife.

The doctor begins to question the patient, who displays the illogical thinking of a madman. He appears apathetic, agreeing to all the accusations levelled against him by his brother, including the fact that he is insane. The doctor points out that he is sound of mind if he can declare himself insane. But here Muḥammad III irrationally accuses the whole world of being insane. He feels persecuted by everyone, starting with his brother who presumably has been calling him a failure, and a socially irresponsible human being. He feels tired, and the cause of it all is the sun, because as soon as it rises the world wakes up and troubles start, enmity, aggression and killing. He is also afraid of turning into an ant. The doctor asks him whether other things also bother him, such as his wife, to which he answers that fortunately he is not married. He is reminded that he is married and he agrees. His wife Nūnū is ushered in as a witness, and tearfully consolidates the case for certifying him. Muḥammad III himself confirms the allegations against himself, but claims that it is the films that incited him to do it.

Doctor: No, no, you are an intellectual, an educated and clever man, so how can such a thing happen?

Muḥammad III: Because I am a clever, educated man and an intellectual.¹

In addition, Muḥammad III claims to have a "hen complex", a possible satire of psychoanalysis on Yūsuf Idrīs's part. The doctor is satisfied that Muḥammad III is insane and he is ready to hand him over to the policeman when another person bursts into the room with a revolver in his hand. He is Muḥammad II, the middle brother. He threatens to shoot at the slightest provocation. He accuses Muḥammad I of trying to have a sane man committed, by fraud, in order to become his guardian and take his land. Their father had bequeathed to them ten feddans, divided equally into three parts. Muḥammad II accuses Muḥammad I of having tried all kinds of stratagems to get at Muḥammad III's portion, by drugging him, and even accusing him openly of communism until he was jailed for it. Muḥammad I denies all of this. The doctor calls in Nūnū, but Muḥammad II claims that she is Muḥammad I's wife and accomplice. She admits to having lied, but the doctor feels that this is a matter for the Bāshkatīb and Muḥammad I quickly adds that Muḥammad II should be charged with assault and battery with a dangerous weapon. But the doctor seems to believe Muḥammad II's story and reminds him that earlier, when he was trying to give him a sample watch from the factory where he was director general he was really trying to bribe him. Muḥammad I protests that a person should

1. 'Al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya,' in al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya, al-Farāfir, p.26.

not be believed just because he is holding a gun while he, an unarmed man, should be considered a liar.

At this point each of the brothers tries to justify his actions.

Muhammad I plays the role of the injured party. He complains that he had to sacrifice his own life in order to send Muhammad III through school.

Also Muhammad III does agriculture, and not medicine like other people.

Muhammad I points out that Muhammad II is not of sound mind either, as he once had a nervous breakdown. Muhammad II explains the situation to the

doctor. As a policeman he once surprised a man trying to break into a store.

Instead of shooting him in the leg, he killed him. He had a breakdown

as a result. But to him Muhammad I is someone who likes to take advantage

of a person, even in such things as dropping in for tea at the most inconvenient

times: "He exploits our respect for him in a most despicable manner."¹

Muhammad I acts hurt again, pointing to the hard times he had

had to go through at the beginning. Neither brother, according to him, had

made the gesture of giving him a small sum of money at the beginning of the

month. He has a family to support, which they do not, and that is why he

needs the land, not for himself, but for his children. Muhammad II is quick

to seize on the hypocrisy of the statement. It seems that if one appeals to the

"future of one's children" any trick is permissible and one should not be blamed

1. Ibid., p.47.

for it. The trouble with such an attitude is that it repeats itself generation after generation. As an example he gives the case of their uncle who rebelled against the avariciousness of his father, but in time became like him.

In the second act the mother of the three appears. They have grievances against her, and Muhammad III starts the accusations. According to him she did not really care for him. When he needed her most as a child, she was not there to comfort him. The other two brothers have more money left by their father, and used it to remarry. It was all right for her to remarry, but not with the money belonging to the family. Muhammad III thinks she abandoned them, but she retorts that they really threw her out. Everyone was after her money, not only her sons. Her new husband was after it too, and unable to get it from her, left her. Muhammad I accuses her of hypocrisy. It is true that their father made a dishonest living by selling examination papers. When he told his wife where the money had come from, she would be indignant at first, but soon she would start demanding money to buy a house or land. He was forced to sell more papers and it is then that he was caught. According to Muhammad II their father sacrificed himself for their future while their mother let strange men court her after his death. Their mother thinks that her life was intolerable with her two subsequent husbands, each trying to get her money. Instead of reproaching her, her sons should understand her. Besides, she is their mother, afraid for her children. Their hearts have hardened towards her. Not so, says

Muhammad III. She has betrayed them:

Muhammad I: Who told you our hearts have hardened? We think that you have sold us, and bought the world to live in it as you wanted.

Muhammad III: If only she had really sold us. You have betrayed us, Mama. The most awful betrayal is not that a woman should betray her husband, but that a mother should betray her children, preferring someone else to them while they still need her. The husband may forgive his wife's betrayal, but they as children, despite themselves, cannot. 1

Muhammad III is a very sensitive man, and his attachment to his mother verges on the pathological. He feels so attached to her that when he fails to win her love, he feels utterly alone in the world, wounded and helpless. But he is the intellectual of the family, which has made him ever more wretched. He wishes that people were nicer to one another:

Muhammad III: Our way must be wrong. There must be a better way to live. There must be a way of life which permits brothers always to be brothers, and does not let a mother deceive her children, nor children deny their families, a way which lets good feelings grow, a way which does not destroy them and break them, a way which lets us live. 2

The doctor is perplexed, and after a few absurd sequences, he gives up and calls for the Najda.

Instead of the police, the father and the grandfather arrive. They have come back from the dead. The three brothers immediately start criticizing

1. Ibid., p.61.

2. Ibid., p.63.

them and accusing them of being the root cause of the whole situation.

They were the cause of the feud, and it did not end with them. Both

father and grandfather feuded with other members of the large family.

Possession of the land has only succeeded in exciting in them predatory instincts, and in creating personal problems, as in the case of Muḥammad III.

The story 'Fawqa Hudūd al-'Aql' serves as the basis for the play al-Mahzala al-Ardiyya.¹ The plot is essentially the same. An unscrupulous elder brother wants to acquire his brother's share of the land inheritance by hook or by crook. He wants to have his youngest brother committed to an asylum on the pretext that he has attempted to murder his wife. The middle brother appears and spoils the plan. The import of the story is of a more limited scope than that of the play. The story concentrates on the insensitivity of the eldest brother and his final breakdown, when the doctor wants to have him arrested. The culprit, from an arrogant character, becomes a despicable creature grovelling at the doctor's feet. The play on the other hand takes the motif of inheritance, and treats it in terms of the universal theme: the relationship of property and social relations.

The central theme of the play al-Farāfir is the relationship of master and servant. The characters are introduced at the beginning of the play by the 'writer' who assigns them their roles, but disappears when he is superfluous,

1. 'Fawqa Hudūd al-'Aql', in al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila, pp.244-261.

leaving the two characters to debate the meaning of their relationship. The master is named appropriately as Sayyid and his subordinate Farfūr. They take their roles for granted, but Sayyid wants to have a name to distinguish him from his role and orders his Farfūr to find him one. But Farfūr is against it, in order to preserve the opposition between master and servant. What really counts is what the master's work entails. Farfūr makes suggestions to Sayyid, who is ignorant of the various professions. At every suggestion Sayyid asks Farfūr about the meaning of each profession and finds them all unsatisfactory. Farfūr's comments are a social critique of each profession:

- Farfūr: Will you work as an intellectual?
- Sayyid: What do these intellectuals of yours do?
- Farfūr: They don't do anything.
- Sayyid: How come they don't do anything?
- Farfūr: That's a question which shows you're not an intellectual.
- Sayyid: All right then, is there anything else?
- Farfūr: Will you work as an artist?
- Sayyid: What kind of artist?
- Farfūr: An artist without art.
- Sayyid: Is there such a thing in the world as an artist without art?
- Farfūr: We have many of these! ¹

1. Al-Farfūr, in al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya. Al-Farākīr, pp.149-150.

Sayyid is undecided as to the work he should choose, and he knows that his happiness is at stake. Farfūr comes to the rescue by asking a 'spectator' whether he is happy in his work:

Farfūr: Are you happy in your work?

Spectator: Very much so.

Farfūr: And what do you do?

Spectator: I look for work.¹

Sayyid resolves the issue of work by proposing to dig a grave, a pleasant pastime to pass the rest of the day. The work, however, must have meaning, and for that reason they need a body. This brings them round to asking questions about life and death. To be born in order to die is a bad joke. In order to make it a good joke it is necessary to reverse the priorities:

Farfūr: Instead of living in order to die, we shall die in order to live.

Sayyid: How do we die in order to live?

Farfūr: I am telling you it is going to be a good joke. I mean, instead of us wanting to live, afraid of and depressed by death, we shall want to die. We shall get up every day, living the day, filled with the joy that we have lived, and if we die, so what?

Sayyid: Then in this case the best way for people to work is to be in education.

1. Ibid., p.155.

Farfūr: But isn't it a shame for them to work in education?
Education of whom? Whom would they bury?

Sayyid: They would bury each other. ¹

Sayyid tells Farfūr that he is beginning to talk like a philosopher, which Farfūr denies, saying that the only philosophy he is interested in is the one that tells him what he should do as a servant. Thus they are back where they started, in their roles of master and servant, although they have at least found an occupation - digging graves. But by virtue of their roles, conflict develops. Sayyid clings to his role of master, but Farfūr tries to dodge work, like all servants, by being clever.

Sayyid: All right, bring the axe over here and work.

Farfūr: Me, work?

Sayyid: Good God, who is going to do the work?

Farfūr: You.

Sayyid: No, I am the master and you the one working for me.

.....

Sayyid: But I am going to work too.

Farfūr: What will you be doing?

Sayyid: I'll work as your master.

Farfūr: I mean, what will you be doing?

Sayyid: I shall lord over you.

1. Ibid., pp.156-157.

2. Ibid., p.159.

This Sayyid does to the best of his ability, making use of his prerogatives as the master, who can give absurd orders without fear of contradiction. If Farfūr gives his opinion, Sayyid immediately points to the superiority of his judgment:

- Sayyid: Why don't you dig her?
- Farfūr: Where, here?
- Sayyid: Here (pointing to another place).
- Farfūr: What do you mean, here and not here?
- Sayyid: Because as long as you want to dig here and I want you to dig here, then my here is better than your here.
- Farfūr: And in which book was this revealed?
- Sayyid: As long as I am your master my opinion will always be better than yours.
- Farfūr: Even if my opinion is right and yours wrong?
- Sayyid: Is there such a thing, my dear boy, as a right opinion and a wrong opinion? The right opinion is my opinion, and the wrong opinion is your opinion.
- Farfūr: And I say different.
- Sayyid: Then you are mistaken, mistaken, just like that, without any discussion. ¹

The argument about where to dig continues until Farfūr asks Sayyid why he is the master. Sayyid does not know and Farfūr, likewise, when asked

1. Ibid., p.161.

by Sayyid why he is a servant confesses his ignorance. They have not made much progress so far. They are Sayyid and Farfūr, but they do not know why. They call therefore for the writer of the play to enlighten them. The writer comes, only to state categorically to Farfūr that he is the servant, and Sayyid his master and that the matter is closed.

Sayyid at this point announces that he is tired of working. He wants something else. He wants to marry, and since he is the master, even the duty of finding a bride falls on the servant, Farfūr.

In act two Sayyid and Farfūr meet after years of separation. They both find that the lives they had been leading have proved unsatisfactory. Sayyid has specialized in fathering dictators, i.e. masters, named after the great figures of history: Alexander, Napoleon, and Mussolini, who were experts at annihilating whole populations - a wonderful crop of people to be buried. Farfūr in turn was a street peddler, selling the rejects of the society that Sayyid was running: guns, philosophy books, and writers. They both agree that they miss the good old days when they were together. Yūsuf Idrīs implies that somehow life has got out of hand, and so they want to start all over again, which means that they are once more back where they were at the beginning of the play. Sayyid suggests that this time they should write their own narrative (riwāya), instead of having an outside agent do it for them. But Sayyid assigns the roles, before the narrative is written. Sayyid will be the master and Farfūr the servant. Farfūr rebels, complaining that the narratives are

always written to his disadvantage. Sayyid suspects him of wanting him to reverse the roles, which he refuses to allow. He then tells him to write the narrative himself. Farfūr is caught off guard, and confesses that he is incapable of doing such a thing. What is most important to him however, is to be able to understand his role. In the past, they were both objects used as actors but now he has made the decision that he will not perform unless he understands the part he is playing. He begins by asking the question why is Sayyid the master and Farfūr the servant, a question asked before, and leading to the same conclusion:

Farfūr: Why are you the master and I, why am I a servant (farfūr)?

Sayyid: Didn't he (the writer) tell you, my son, that it is because every master must have a servant?

Farfūr: Why must it be so?

Sayyid: Because every servant must have a master.

Farfūr: Why then?

Sayyid: That is the way it is. It must be so because it must.

Farfūr: You mean in the narrative.

Sayyid: In the narrative, and outside. It must be so. It is always so. And every servant has a master, and every master has a servant. That is how it goes.

Farfūr: Goes what?

Sayyid: The narrative.

Farfūr: You're wrong then.

Sayyid: Mistake or not, what does it matter? We are not here to correct things. We are here to work. ¹

They cannot seem to agree on anything, and so they call on the writer to come to their rescue. But a voice informs them that the writer is gone for ever, and that now they have to rely on themselves. This time, what has only been an academic discussion between them, namely the critique of the narrative, and of the roles assigned to them, becomes a reality and a problem to be resolved. They find themselves free to govern their own destinies. Sayyid sits down, crosses his legs, and does nothing. Farfūr rebels, and goes on strike. Sayyid sulks, and tells Farfūr that he must bear the consequences of his strike: no work, no money. Besides Sayyid has decided to strike too.

The play would probably end here, with both of them doing nothing, and saying nothing, were it not for the hard world of reality assailing them, in the form of their wives' request for money. Sayyid's wife is informed that there is no money because Farfūr is on strike. Farfūr's wife Waliyya makes an appearance too, followed by an army of tattered children. The two women hold opposite views of Farfūr's strike. To Waliyya it is a matter of bread and butter, while in Sayyida's case it means that the dressmaker is not going to be paid. Sayyida, being a lady of means, looks on Farfūr's strike in enlightened terms. She speaks of equality and progress. Inequality resides only in the minds of those who think themselves superior to others. Waliyya takes a more down to

1. Ibid., p.200.

earth and fatalistic attitude:

Sayyida: You are a human being and he is a human being.
To be a master and servant exists only in the
minds of some who imagine themselves better and
more intelligent than others.

Waliyya: You are doing all the work, true, but the master
also exercises his mind in order to make you work,
and thus the one who works with his mind is the
master and the one who works his body, the servant.

.....

Farfūr: In this case the master you know is better than
the one you don't know. ¹

The fatalism of Farfūr's wife is religious in origin. She is highly
conscious of their poverty, but she finds consolation in the fact that in the
Hereafter it is they that will be the masters, while the masters of this world
will become their servants. Sayyid and Farfūr find themselves alone again,
faced with their dilemma. They become conciliatory under the influence of
their wives' presence, but the outcome of the new mood is that Farfūr is now
proud of his status.

Sayyid suggests that they should give up having a narrative, which
means that there will be neither master nor servant. But again, they are
beset by the need of having a story, and this time they decide to write it
themselves. The question arises, however, as to who will be the writer, the one
who will choose the roles. They begin with empirical reality (bil-mawgūd).

1. Ibid., pp.208-209.

Sayyid takes this again as being a situation with the same two actors, master and servant. Farfūr tells him that the difference has now been erased:

Farfūr: Let us leave the old names alone...

Sayyid: Very well. Who will be the master?

Farfūr: Master of what, I mean? There are no masters.
Each one is the master of himself. ¹

Thus they decide to work, both on the same level. But again problems arise. They experience a feeling of chaos since they are incapable of organizing their work. They need someone to direct them. Moreover, in their work, one of them must meet the customers. At this point enters a dead man, who wants to be buried. The dead man is confused by the set-up. He tells them that by having chosen such a way of working they are not working for anybody but for themselves; that is, the graves that they are digging are their own graves. Then they decide to switch the old roles. Sayyid becomes the servant and Farfūr the master. The change in roles, produces a change in Farfūr's mentality. He becomes a true master, as arbitrary as Sayyid used to be. He adopts a haughty and patronizing attitude towards Sayyid whom he starts to lecture:

Farfūr: Before we learn to walk in our family we have to learn how to be masters.

Sayyid: Why are you a master?

1. Ibid., p.212.

Farfūr: Why am I a master? There is no such thing called 'why'. I am your master and that is that. Every master must have a servant and every servant must have a master, otherwise the world and the universe would be corrupt, and chaos would set in. ¹

Again the situation ends in an impasse when Sayyid the servant asks why he should be a servant and Farfūr the master. When Sayyid wants to go back to the narrative, Farfūr refuses. What is necessary is a solution without having to have recourse to a narrative. At this point a 'spectator' offers a solution, that they both be masters, and the one to work would be the State. To this they gladly agree, and even upgrade their state to Empire. They in turn become emperors.

But as might be expected, a sort of power struggle develops in relation to the empire and the roles of master and servant re-emerge. They get lost in the abstraction of running an empire until a second 'spectator' intervenes in their argument and brings them back down to earth:

Second Spectator: In order to live we must work, and in order to work there must be people who work, and people who make others work.

Farfūr: Servants and masters.

Second Spectator: Servants and masters. What is wrong with having someone making you work if it is in your interest? ²

1. Ibid., p.222.

2. Ibid., p.229.

Farfūr protests that his dignity as a human being is at stake, money being of lesser importance. His humanity submits to the law of nature, in the eyes of which we are all brothers, where no one is another's master. A female 'spectator' intervenes and introduces herself as Madame Freedom, from the Empire of Freedom, where everyone acts as he pleases, without interference of the State. There is no such thing as a Sayyid, but there is a Boss. Farfūr of course shows great interest in this and enquires whether he could be the boss of bosses. Farfūr simply cannot get away from the idea of master and servant.

Farfūr and Sayyid review what they have done so far, and find that it has all been a failure. There are no solutions. In fact they have run short of solutions, and in despair turn toward the spectators who suggest that they should acquire a machine to do the work of the servant, but that will not do, either. Another suggestion is offered, followed by still more. At this stage the wives enter, protesting that the two men's endless discussions are depriving the families of their livelihood. But to Farfūr asking the big questions about life is more important than the immediate search for food and mere survival: "Yes, more important than living is to know why we are living, and more important than why is to know how we live."¹ Farfūr now gives his philosophy of society as he sees it. Society, for example, Egyptian society, is made up

1. Ibid., p.237.

Farāfir and Asyād, all the way to the top. And so it is with nations, each trying to achieve supremacy at the expense of millions of lives. This is the story of civilization. The question remains however as to why one is on top and the other at the bottom. There seems to be no answer. The real fault, however, lies with the philosophers "whose thinking must be thinking about thinking, and true thought is that about the one that thinks about the one that thinks that he is thinking."¹ The best thing is to leave the world alone.

But this does not satisfy the wives whose families are starving. They suggest that the two men live lives like other normal human beings and then think as much as they want. In fact, the whole world is moving except for them. Farfur agrees and with resignation accepts the situation, but compares himself with a blindfolded buffalo condemned to the water wheel. Both Sayyid and Farfur accept to live normally and appeal to the writer. To their surprise they find a tiny baby wrapped in nappies. Once again they are thrown back on their own resources. Sayyid in despair says that he is tired of being a master. Now the spectators and the wives clamour in chorus, each one wanting something different from the two characters. The wives want work, the others a solution.

It is too late, however: the man who works the curtain announces that their play is over. They ask him for a solution, which is that they commit

1. Ibid., p.238.

suicide. They wake up in the Hereafter only to find out that Sayyid is still the master and Farfūr the servant. The problem thus is insoluble.¹

The story 'Jumhūriyyat Farḥāt' contrasts the hard realities of everyday life and the bliss of life in the Utopia dreamed up by Sergeant-Major Farḥāt in his squalid surroundings. The contrast comes out by comparing the man's behaviour when he is working and when he is dreaming out loud.

The story is narrated by a person who was arrested for an unspecified reason, and is brought into Farḥāt's presence. The description of the place underlines the wretchedness of life: "I had hardly entered the police station with the guard, than I felt a sudden revulsion. It was not the first time that I had entered it, but it was the first time that I saw the section at night, and because of it I felt when I passed through the door that I was entering an underground trench connected with the present or the near past; walls covered in blackness... you did not know whether the slippery floor was made of asphalt or mud, an undefinable smell that would make you nauseated and a faint light coming from very old lamps on which flies had made their nests and laid their eggs, lamps from which most of the light was condemned to remain inside them."²

The police station contains heaps of furniture, confiscated goods, and people everywhere, "with their heads leaning over their laps, and policemen

1. This play reminds one of Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot.

2. 'Jumhūriyyat Farḥāt', in Arkhaṣ Layālī, p.244.

looking like ‘afrits at midnight in their black attire."¹

Farḥāt occupies a small room, stocked with every kind of weapon. He is an intense man whose skin is "smooth like a tightened drum".² The narrator observes Farḥāt. He detects an Upper Egyptian accent. He thinks him a tired man, who rose through the ranks without any hope of ever becoming an officer. He acts like an officer, however, with extreme sternness, but unsuccessfully. He shouts at everyone: "He would explode and curse the world, the bad luck, poverty and those who were the cause of it all."³

He treats the people who come to him with their complaints all alike, like a rabble. He curses them and accuses them of making up stories. He does not believe a word of what they say. The presence of the narrator is a relief to him, and he unburdens himself. He confesses to him that he once wanted to make a film, and he goes on to explain his idea: A poor Egyptian succeeds in making a lot of money, and as he is completely altruistic he wants to better the standard of living of his fellow countrymen. He acquires so many industries that he decides to unite them in one huge complex: five thousand feddans for the factories and another five thousand for the houses of the workers. The houses have gardens, balconies, with space to raise chickens and rabbits. Everyone is paid justly, according to his work. Everyone as a result is happy and has an

1. Ibid., p.245.

2. Ibid., p.246.

3. Ibid., p.248.

incentive to work. Everyone is clean. There is only one policeman in a glass cage, there for all. There are casinos and cinemas. Life is mechanized; the houses have electricity; everyone is well dressed. But the benefactor becomes bored with his money and decides to renounce it. He announces his decision over the local radio. The narrator is intrigued about the outcome of the decision, but Farḥāt only says that it is "just words".¹

Farḥāt's situation is opposite to the elements in his story. It is a dream in which he is the actor, the benefactor of mankind. But what a contrast between the two worlds! His office is a bleak, filthy underworld, while his projected society is bathed in electric light and enjoying all the amenities of the good life. Here the people are wretches who lie constantly, there they are honest and cultured. The contrast is greatest, however, between Farḥāt himself and the benefactor. Farḥāt despises those he comes in contact with, cursing them constantly, while the benefactor is good to everyone.

Farḥāt lives in a world over which he has no control, but in order to make himself feel superior, he assumes the manners of an officer. His dream is the fulfilment of his own aspirations, but deep down he knows the futility not only of this life, but also of the one that he has dreamed up. Once he has achieved everything, what then? Boredom will set in, and he will

1. Ibid., p.267.

give up.

The whole point of the story comes out only at the end, and the narrative acquires a new significance. The hero of the film becomes tired of his unlimited wealth and power and renounces everything. The dénouement of the film is the way it is because the scenario was dreamed up by Farḥāt, and since it is an intellectual exercise of imagination, the Utopia becomes meaningless once it is achieved on the intellectual level. The dénouement shows Farḥāt's tragedy in retrospect. With the loss of Utopia, he has nothing to dream about, and he is condemned to the squalor of his everyday life.

The short story 'Jumhūriyyat Farḥāt' served as the basis for a short one-act play of the same name.¹ The play is essentially the same as the story. The short story, however, has more atmosphere, which is lacking in the play, and is rich in descriptions of the physical surroundings. The impact of reading the two texts is different in each case. In the play, the reader is confronted with the people, in the story with the place. Moreover, the character of Farḥāt is more developed in the story through descriptions of his appearance. In the play, such descriptions being redundant, he is merely a mouthpiece.

The play al-Mukhaṭṭaʿīn takes up the problem of ideology and its relationship to political leadership. The institution which acts as the seat of power is the Supreme Happiness Foundation (Muʾassasat as-Saʿāda al-Kubrā).

1. Jumhūriyyat Farḥāt, in Jumhūriyyat Farḥāt wa-Malik al-Quṭn, pp.52-78.

Its head is the President of the Administrative Council's (Ra'īs Majlis al-Idāra) whose aim is to make the people happy. The President is an idealist but his aims are too vague and insufficient for the people who want their goals defined. This is put forward by the character Aho Kalām: "The world must be defined and striped. Man must define everything, even himself. Everything will become clear, understood and sound: white is white, black is black, and with each colour standing next to the other, black will not infringe on white, and white will not drown the black, and the straight progression of lines will be recognised from beginning to end."¹ It is a strict, authoritarian ideology which does not allow of any shades of gray.

If one examines the President's own beliefs more closely one finds that he is not very serious about them. In fact he is imbued with the sense of his own importance which he takes care to show to others. This comes into the open when he is questioned by Almāz, a woman whom he has appointed a Director of Personal Relations:

Almāz: I still don't understand. What are you? Are you acting out a story or is it a real Council? What is it all about exactly?

President: I am both. To myself, I am the President of the Administrative Council, and before the people I act it. 2

Almāz is highly critical of the way the President is running things.

1. Al-Mukhattatīn, Al-Masrah, May 1969, p.86.

2. Ibid., p.90.

He lacks a plan. She suggests that he see a visitor who has some definite ideas on the subject. Al-Akh enters, all striped, according to the new doctrine. He accuses the President of presenting the people with false happiness: "A phoney happiness, a sick, drugged, transitory happiness, the happiness of equality in misery. We want true happiness."¹

It is really the striped ones that have the answer. Al-Akh demands the Presidency and obtains it. Almāz herself is striped, having hidden the fact before. The ex-President becomes scared and imploringly tries to persuade the others that he too is striped. To prove it he takes off his outer garments to reveal other garments, which are striped. The man is accused of opportunism, but someone suggests that he be kept, as opportunists can be very useful.

Al-Akh becomes the beloved leader, al-Akh al-Akbar, Big Brother. The ideology of stripes spreads around the world, and every object, from whole continents to the fish in the sea, is striped. He has renamed the institution the "Foundation of True Happiness". But now that he is in power, al-Akh becomes unhappy. He has doubts about the ideology which he has succeeded in propagating throughout the world. He confesses to Almāz that the striped world is a distortion of reality. He recognizes that white and black are not the only colours. No one should have black and white imposed on him, nor any

1. Ibid., p.91.

other colours. It should be up to each individual to choose his only colour according to his desires. Al-Akh wanted to make the world fall into line with his own thinking but now he recognizes that his mind is limited: "I know that the world is big, very big, bigger than my brain, bigger than anyone's brain."¹ He speaks to the other members of the Foundation and they are horrified. He goes out to a coffee shop dressed in red, and is beaten up. The members are all against him and tell him that if he carries on like this they will have to do away with him, and to prove it they play a tape recording of his funeral. But they need him alive, and as the yearly celebration is at hand, he will have to make his customary speech. He goes on to the balcony and starts expounding his new views. But as he is speaking, the microphone is switched off and instead a pre-recorded speech is broadcast, without the populace noticing. After the speech the members offer their respects to al-Akh, the leader of the Mukhattatīn.

It is in the third act, which is the most important in the play, where al-Akh discovers new truths. It is there that the intention of the work is revealed. The first two acts are a prelude, which sets the scene for the invention and institutionalization of a successful ideology, which needs a leader, in this case al-Akh. In the third act the problem is defined. It is the problem of the charismatic leader. Al-Akh has succeeded in rousing and rallying

1. Ibid., p.94.

the masses of the world who now worship him. He is their unquestioned leader to whom they owe blind obedience. But when he discovers that his ideology is false he is unable to convince anyone of his changed views. More than that, the members are opposed to him. He has become prisoner of the masses. Because he is a charismatic leader the masses adore him, but he in turn must fulfil their expectations. Both he and the masses are prisoners of his charisma. That is why the members want to keep him alive, if only to serve as a figurehead, whose dangerous views are to be kept from the people.

In the foregoing works Yūsuf Idrīs treated social problems on a rather abstract level. By way of contrast should be mentioned the play Malik al-Qutn which is straightforward, as it is not concerned with abstractions. It is simply an indictment of an unjust social situation. The play could be considered a link between the works on political commitment and those on social themes.

The theme of the play is the exploitation of the peasant by the wealthy classes. The play centres on two main figures, the landowner, as-Sinbātī, and the peasant, Qamḥāwī, who sells the cotton he grows for as-Sinbātī.

Qamḥāwī is overjoyed to hear that his crop has earned him sixty two pounds, but his elation is of short duration. From the total as-Sinbātī subtracts the cost of seed, fertilizer and equipment. In the end the peasant's income is only six pounds forty piastres. Naturally he finds this unfair as he

is the one who had to put all the effort into his crop, including picking the cotton worm. During the discussion another landowner, al-Ḥājī, comes on to the stage. His purpose in the play is to act as a sort of arbiter between the two antagonists. He shows sympathy for Qamḥāwī and has a look at as-Sinbātī's books. He thinks some of the charges a little high to which as-Sinbātī replies that al-Ḥājī charges even more. Al-Ḥājī insists that Qamḥāwī's returns should be at least seven pounds but as-Sinbātī is adamant.

A fourth character appears, the Merchant, who, because of his wide experience of the world, assesses the true significance of the situation: "Cotton in the field is dust... when it enters the bank it is gold."¹ All the money goes to the Pashas, Beys and wealthy landowners. The money is manipulated on the stock exchange, for the benefit of the wealthy. This means more money, without any work.

Thus the whole system of cotton growing is based on exploitation. There is a chain, at one end of which is the wealthy exploiter, and at the other end, the lowly peasant who has to toil in the fields. The system is representative of a society with a defined class structure. As an example of this is the case of the young man Muḥammad, Qamḥāwī's son, who is in love with Su'ād, as-Sinbātī's daughter. Muḥammad's mother claims that a marriage between them is unthinkable because "you are a peasant and she is a lady."²

1. Malik al-Qutn, in Jumhūriyyat Farḥāt wa-Malik al-Qutn, p.39.

2. Ibid., p.27.

The works dealt with in this chapter are concerned essentially with the problem of power. Considering Yūsuf Idrīs's work as a whole, this is the most satisfactory part of it. It is significant that such works are plays (with the exception of the short story 'Jumhuriyyat Farḥāt', which itself serves as a basis for a play of the same name). All the pieces are concerned with the master-servant relationship in one way or another, and this is what gives the plays unity as a group.

In al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya the older generation has a hold over the younger through financial power which carries with it the evils of greed and cruelty. In al-Farāfir the problem is presented in its most elementary terms. This is a very pessimistic play, despite its humorous dialogue. The problem is insoluble, since even after their suicide, the two characters remain master and servant. In the short story and the play Jumhuriyyat Farḥāt the Sergeant-Major daydreams but becomes tired of his dream. Jumhuriyyat Farḥāt is interesting in one particular respect. Considering that the play al-Mahzala al-Arḍiyya discusses an abstract problem not found in the story on which it is based, and considering the abstract nature of al-Farāfir, one would have expected the play Jumhuriyyat Farḥāt to be more abstract also. In reality the play is only a dramatic paraphrase of the short story. One would have expected to hear the Sergeant-Major's reasons for his giving up the Presidency of his Utopia. This would have been in line with Yūsuf Idrīs's thinking in his plays. But this theme, curiously enough, appears in the play al-Mukhattatīn. Al-Akh becomes

disillusioned with his ideology but because of the nature of charismatic leadership, he remains the prisoner of his own system. The problem in al-Mukhattatīn is in direct opposition to the one found in al-Farāfir. In the latter the problem is in the open from the start, with the characters discussing it and experimenting with new systems, which they choose freely, but al-Akh is forced against his will to remain master. Al-Farāfir, Jumhūriyyat Farhāt and al-Mukhattatīn form a triad which deals with the same problem, power, more specifically totalitarian power. In all three works the master is a master solely by virtue of being one, and the servant is a servant for the same reason.

Al-Mahzala al-Ardīyya is less abstract in this sense as power is not discussed in terms of power, but in terms of private property. It is implied that abolition of private property would dispose of exploitation. Malik al-Qūṭn on the other hand is a straightforward social critique and deals with no abstract problem.

The works discussed in this chapter are very different from the rest of Yūsuf Idrīs's writing. They pose problems which engage the reader's interest and enlarge his horizon. This is especially true of al-Farāfir, which is perhaps the best piece of literature that Yūsuf Idrīs has so far produced.

CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION

Yūsuf Idrīs uses the three genres of the short story, the novel and the play. It is in the short story and the play that he has been most successful, while in the novel he appears to have failed.

His short stories and plays are very dissimilar in both content and tone. The two genres may actually represent two different needs on the part of Yūsuf Idrīs: the former serving as a vehicle for an almost microscopic analysis of individual mental states and emotions, compressed into a limited setting for which the short story is best suited, and the plays, on the other hand, seeking to explore abstract ideas where the psychological aspect is almost absent.

When at his best, Yūsuf Idrīs uses the medium of the short story to great effect. He is a master at evoking the atmosphere in which his characters move, so that sometimes atmosphere and character are indistinguishable. This is where the author's strength lies, and the reader is able to recognize the stories as his. When reading such pieces, it is not possible for the reader to remain outside and detached from the situation, as one might when, for example, reading the stories of Naḥīb Mahfūz. On the contrary, the reader participates in the predicaments and agonies of the characters. This is not so much because of one reader's greater sensitivity as opposed to that of another, but rather is created by the works themselves. Yūsuf Idrīs is very careful not to let his

readers escape. He seldom plunges directly into his plot, but uses a more oblique approach, often by starting his stories in the middle where he describes the atmosphere in the most subjective terms possible, so as to prepare the reader psychologically for the drama to follow. It is perhaps this close connection between atmosphere and character which causes the reader to either like or dislike such stories. This touches on the fundamental aspect of Yūsuf Idrīs's stories: how to understand them. Since the reader, because of the author's technique, will be either attracted or repelled by his stories, a problem arises. If he is repelled, he will be unable to participate in the psychological states of the characters, and therefore will not understand them; or, having read one or two stories, the reader will be so emotionally exhausted that he will feel reluctant to continue reading the rest. But in order to grasp Yūsuf Idrīs's work one must read it in its entirety. This applies to any author, but in Yūsuf Idrīs's case it is imperative, as he concerns himself with the most subtle psychological states, which he explores from several angles, and the descriptions overlap from one story to the next. After reading Yūsuf Idrīs's short stories, one is faced with a psychological situation which is a continuum that is rather difficult to dissect.

This brings us to the question of themes. These are at times difficult to discern; the more psychological and introverted the story, the more the themes recede into the background. It is as if Yūsuf Idrīs were using them not merely as themes to be expanded into a piece of work, but rather as

a setting in which to unfold the psychological make-up of his characters. Conversely, the less psychological the story, the more prominent the theme, and also the more detached the reader may become. In this latter group of short stories, which are the most accessible and possibly the most widely read, the characters' outward appearance is described, at times in great detail, and the tone of the stories is light. Such stories can even be humorous.

The psychological stories, on the other hand, are mostly lacking in such concrete descriptions. Instead of looking at the characters from the outside, the reader identifies with them, looking at the world through their eyes.

A microscopic and compressed description of psychological states, preferably obsessed ones, is then at the core of Yūsuf Idrīs's work. It is perhaps for this reason that the author fails as a novelist. His novels, such as Qissat Hubb, and even more so al-Bayḍāʾ², are flat, and the characters are stereotyped, moving through a plot worthy of a popular magazine. The action, non-existent in al-Bayḍāʾ³, is found to some extent in Qissat Hubb, but because of the colourlessness of the characters the novels themselves become colourless.

Al-ʿAyb goes to the other extreme, as in it Yūsuf Idrīs uses his 'compressed' technique. Although the novel is relatively short, this technique so successful in the short story, becomes a drawback in the novel. The main

character, *Sana'*, is overcharged with emotions which in the last quarter of the book amount to obsession. It makes it very difficult for the reader to accept the book charitably. It is an overblown short story, and should have been written as such. Had Yūsuf Idrīs produced a work half this length it would have been more successful. The short story, '*al-Askarī al-Aswad*', possibly the best of Yūsuf Idrīs's compressed type of story, demonstrates the limit, lengthwise, beyond which he becomes unsuccessful.

The technique is again used in *Rijāl wa-Thīrān*, which is a frenzied account of an interminable chain of bullfights which are described in minute detail, and one bullfight is almost indistinguishable from the next. Interspersed are obsessed comments on fear and heroism, which in spite of their tortuousness, are a relief from the boring descriptions of the fights. In this book Yūsuf Idrīs says things which he has said much better and to a fuller extent elsewhere in his writings. The book is not a novel, nor even an extended short story. It is simply a book of one hundred and forty-seven pages.

The novel *al-Harām* is the most satisfactory of his novels. It has an interesting plot and an array of interesting characters who are clearly recognizable as Yūsuf Idrīs's. Paradoxically, it is precisely because of this that *al-Harām* is not a successful novel. The characters tend to conform to type. They are Yūsuf Idrīs's loners who come into contact with one another almost under protest. The chapters deal mainly with one or two characters at

a time, and are more or less self-contained, as if each were a short story. The whole novel seems to be a succession of short stories, held together tenuously by the dominant theme – how 'Azīza's 'adultery' affects life in the village. What makes the book readable is its style, for the most part descriptive, with the compressed technique used rather sparingly.

When returning to the plays, especially al-Farāfir, al-Mahzala al-Ardiyya and al-Mukhaṭṭaʿīn, one is faced with an art unlike the rest of Yūsuf Idrīs's work. What apparently makes these plays successful is the author's reliance on the technique of the absurd. The characters, absurd themselves, move through absurd settings, and exchange absurd dialogues which can at times be very humorous. It is the absurd and the humour which set these plays apart from his other works, which are almost without exception morbid and sometimes gory. The short stories, in terms of their own logic, are successful precisely because these morbid and gory characteristics are woven together through obsession. But when Yūsuf Idrīs sets out to treat important topics, such as political commitment, he fails. As mentioned before, either the obsessed style is out of place, or, without his usual technique, the serious tone often verges on the naïve and the ludicrous. But then Yūsuf Idrīs has found a way out: his absurd theatre, in which he concerns himself with social themes which are more fundamental than the transitory one of political commitment. By way of humour he has thus been able to tackle

topics on which he failed when humour was lacking. Moreover, he found that the play was the best medium of expression: a quick dialogue, which puts every remark upside down, seeks to underline a thesis that at first sight is not absurd. By this is meant that in order to be understood, an absurd piece must have a rational base, so that through the absurd dialogue the main theme can be discerned and followed. It is at the end of the play that the absurdity of the theme, i.e. of the problem, appears. Thus the theme which is followed by the reader, rationally, becomes absurd in retrospect. The only drawback of the plays, particularly al-Farāfir and al-Mahzala al-Ardiyya, is their length.¹ Yūsuf Idrīs becomes carried away with the plays to the extent that in their last scenes they cease to be interesting. By cutting the unnecessary parts - which could be done easily enough without damaging the whole - the works would be more compact. By shortening them, Yūsuf Idrīs would make his plays the more perfect. A good example of compactness is the play Jumhuriyyat Farḥat.

In his other plays Yūsuf Idrīs is not so successful. Al-Lahza al-Harija is naive because of its contrived seriousness and stereotyped characters. At the other extreme is al-Jins ath-Thalith, in which the author uses the compressed, obsessed technique together with the absurd technique. Here Yūsuf Idrīs overdoes it, and the reader is bewildered at the end of the play. Yūsuf Idrīs could well avoid this type of play.

1. This is also Luwīs 'Awad's view. See his ath-Thawra wal-Adab, p.360.

Yūsuf Idrīs's work is divided then into three genres: the short story, the novel, and the play. The three genres are more or less separate, because each of them tends to concentrate on situations not seriously considered in either of the other two. The short story has two aspects. The first could be described as realistic, and represented mostly in the country and city stories, and also partly in some of those stories dealing with the downtrodden man. But it is really the stories which deal with physical suffering and obsession which are the centre of gravity of Yūsuf Idrīs's short story. They are of an existentialist stamp, concerned with l'homme déchire, and identifiable with Colin Wilson's outsider "who feels too much". This is already felt in the realistic stories, in which Yūsuf Idrīs seems to be searching for his own uniqueness as a writer. The story 'al-ʿAskarī al-Aswad' is perhaps the most successful in this group and is at the very centre of Yūsuf Idrīs's preoccupation. One has the impression that Yūsuf Idrīs has found himself as an artist in this story.

In fact Yūsuf Idrīs has two centres of gravity, the second lying in his plays, the most representative of which is al-Farāfir. It is the existence of the two centres, rather than a single one, that the reader might find intriguing, as the author's intentions are contradictory in these two genres. In the short story the author displays and exploits negativism to such a degree that he slams the door on reality and leaves the reader imprisoned in his

characters without any hope of letting him out. The reader has no choice but to abandon the issues discussed and think of something else.

The plays on the other hand, display the positive aspect of Yūsuf Idrīs's art. The issues, despite their pessimistic aspect, make the reader think and formulate new issues. The plays are stimulating on the whole, while his short stories are not (with the exception of the good realistic stories).

In the novel Yūsuf Idrīs insists on tackling political commitment. It is perhaps the unhappy choice of subject matter that makes his novels so dull. It is also perhaps no coincidence that al-Harām, despite its drawbacks, is his most successful novel, since it has nothing to do with political commitment.

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