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The Narrative Component from a Cultural Perspective Youcef Idris's Al-Haram — A Case Study

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Abstract

The Marxist materialist vision insists that literature is a mirror of society, and that the task of literature is to enlighten and transform social perceptions; otherwise, it is merely an intellectual luxury. Hence, realism came to dominate narrative creativity, surpassing the mythological reveries that had characterized classical literature. This approach seeks to trace social issues through one of the most important novels by Youcef Idris. Accordingly, the study adopts two trajectories: A theoretical trajectory, through which it addresses the creative biography of the writer Youcef Idris and sheds light on the cultural approach as a serious contemporary critical stake. And an applied trajectory, through which it attempts to examine the social issues embedded in the novel.

Keywords: *Society, System, Narrative, Woman, Gender.*

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Introduction

Narrative discourse, by virtue of the distinctiveness of its composite generic forms—especially the novel—is characterized by its promise of a duality of knowledge and pleasure, insofar as it possesses the capacity to present and anatomize reality in all that it encompasses of pain, hope, and impulses. These themes, with all their socio-cultural connotations, recur strikingly in Al-Haram by the Egyptian novelist Youcef Idris. This novel seeks to present and discuss numerous issues within the context of the contradictions that structure the movement of the narrative from the inception of the event to its conclusion. It also operates on the notion of internal conflict between the character and the self, as an inevitable outcome of oppression as a dominant theme in the text—particularly the traditional oppression inflicted upon women as a result of male dominance and control. This has transformed woman into a being who endures all forms of injustice, deprivation, and emotional barrenness. However, Youcef Idris redirects the axis of oppression toward an entirely different orientation, wherein society itself becomes the agent of oppression due to its backwardness and its loyalty to medieval systems that bear no relation to civilization—systems that continually reproduce themselves, generating further backwardness and psychological and social suffering of the self. This constitutes the core problematic of the present study: how does Al-Haram address the issue of women's oppression and the duality of attitudes toward them, and what is the impact of this oppression on the oppressed self?

A Vision of the Novel

The novel recounts the story of a rural woman from the countryside of a hamlet known as "Al-Gharabwa," namely "Aziza." She is a married woman and the mother of two children. "Al-Gharabwa" constitute a group akin to the caste of the untouchables in India, as they are constantly victims of marginalization and social oppression. They find nothing with which to fend off hunger and destitution except working as seasonal migrant laborers; thus, they remain marginalized, victims of social injustice and poverty, their livelihood contingent upon whatever work is made available to them by the inspection owners in the estates of feudal pashas.

When speaking of "Aziza," we are referring to that rural woman who is loyal to her husband, who faces with him the hardships of life with her naïve smiles. Yet fate decrees that "Aziza" be deprived of that pale smile when her husband, "Abdallah," contracts bilharzia, placing her abruptly before the responsibility of

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a disabled husband and two children—everything she possesses from the wreckage of this world—since "Abdallah" is no longer able to go with his peers to work during the season of migrant labor.

Chance, imbued with deprivation and poverty, then plays its role when her husband "Abdallah" craves some potatoes. "Aziza" finds no alternative but to go out to the field of the landlord "Qamrin," who has just finished selling his crop, after which it becomes permissible for the villagers to dig in his land in search of whatever potato roots remain. While digging in search of a potato root, she is suddenly confronted by "Mohamed," the son of the landlord "Qamrin," the owner of the land, who does not hesitate to rebuke her, annoyed by her audacity in trespassing on his property. Undoubtedly, her pleas soften his heart, prompting him to search himself for a potato root.

Yet, in the midst of her eagerness and joy at securing a potato root, as she hastens toward her hut, she falls into a pit and finds no one beside her except the landlord, to whom she submits out of fear that the villagers might hear her screams and she would become the subject of their gossip. Aziza later gives birth to the child, whom she strives to conceal while working during the season of migrant labor, until she delivers him and accidentally strangles him when his crying becomes a threat to her. From this point onward, the villagers begin searching for the child's mother, and rumors proliferate, revealing a scandalous duality in judgment.

Youcef Idris: Biography and the Specificity of His Narrative

Youcef Idris, often called the Chekhov of the Arab short story, was born in "Al-Bayroum," a village in the Governorate of Al-Sharqia, in 1928 (1928م). His early childhood was spent in his grandmother's house, while his education—at all stages—took place in Cairo. Considered one of the boldest writers in the Arab world, he began his literary career as a poet before transitioning to narrative writing, rising to prominence in the early 1950s as one of the pioneers of modern Arabic fiction. His command of both French and English, combined with an advanced understanding of psychiatry, enabled him to penetrate the depths of his characters and reveal their diverse impulses.

Idris began his political life in the Communist Party, channeling his revolutionary zeal through Marxism in a well-documented activist career. Among the most notable milestones was his participation in the popular resistance in Suez, as well as his experiences of imprisonment under both Nasser and Sadat—once accused of communism, and another time accused of conspiring against the state following Sadat's peace agreement. In both instances, he was released through presidential pardon. He also joined the Algerian Revolution in 1961, fighting against the French enemy, where he was wounded. After Algeria's independence, the authorities awarded him a medal of merit in recognition of his struggle alongside them, where he said at the moment of his honoring: "The lessons we witness today, even if they cost the Algerian people thousands of lives, are lives that will not be wasted… This revolution does not only cleanse Algeria of traitors; it purifies the world. It does not defend itself alone; it defends us. It does not only educate its people, but it also teaches us."

Idris was also known for his intense debates in Al-Ahram newspaper with several intellectuals, most prominently Sheikh Al-Shaarawi, which laid the foundation for enlightenment and modernist thought in the Arab world, and established him as a controversial writer, at times facing accusations of heresy and threats of assassination.

From a technical perspective, Idris's narrative art is distinguished by deep engagement with the issues of the self and society. From a Marxist viewpoint, he believed that the primary mission of literature is to work toward transforming society and its mentality, far from any intellectual luxury. This drove him to confront intellectual taboos—politics, religion, and sexuality—exposing all forms of backwardness that burdened the Arab self. He wrote about prison experiences in The Black Soldier, religion in his collection Cheaper Nights, and forbidden topics in A House of Flesh, among many others.

However, the focus is not merely to present Idris's literary output, but to highlight his consistent alignment with the marginalized, as an organic intellectual whose primary mission was enlightenment and liberation. His creative discourse was marked by a humanist tendency that transcended barriers of religion, ethnicity,

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and sect, a tendency he maintained throughout his life, enriched with a philosophical-psychological dimension derived from his readings, enabling him to comprehend the fluctuations of the Arab self and what hinders its progress.

Thus, his writings, in all their forms, served as an honest mirror reflecting societal transformations. They required a reader capable of going beyond literal interpretation, engaging with the subtext, since "his writings are, for the most part, symbolic even in the finest details; they do not concern a specific society, but humanity. Here lies the neutrality that distinguished Idris, regardless of what has been said or written about him." As Ammar Belhaj notes, "The reader of Idris's narrative should not stop at tribal sayings entrenched in different historical stages, but should consider the present state of global thought and its transformations. Idris had no choice but to ensure that his discourse was humanist, transcending the barriers of religion and ethnicity".

Awards Received by Youcef Idris

Idris received some of the highest awards, including, consecutively:

- The Republic Medal for his overall theatrical works in 1963 and 1967
- The Abdel Nasser Prize in Literaturein 1969 (1969م)
- The Medal of Sciences and Arts in 1980
- The Saddam Hussein Prize for Literature in 1988
- The State Appreciation Prize in 1990

Culture and Narrative

The cultural approach can compensate for the deficiencies that modernist approaches have shown in their treatment of creative texts. These deficiencies likely result from modernism's holistic vision of the text as a closed linguistic structure, which ultimately led it to fall into the trap of definitive statements and to rely on rigid frameworks, imposing approaches in a way that suggests, to some extent, a Procrustean logic. The cultural approach overcomes this by grounding its principles in the values of relativity and intertextuality. From the perspective of the cultural approach, a creative text is "nothing but a cultural event produced by various systemic accumulations, that is, the systems residing deep in the human unconscious, which direct it according to what they perceive as the set of convictions that shape its identity and being".

Regarding intertextuality, the cultural approach insists on the multiplicity of its references, believing that a creative text "is the product of different temperaments, and therefore no single method can fully achieve its aims." Consequently, the cultural critic must "skillfully blend the self with its immediacy and the text with its historicity, to reveal more of the text's protrusions on the concave mirrors of the self, so that the text truly becomes the voice of the class and the author's unconscious, rather than being arbitrarily interrogated as happens with modernist methods".

If the cultural approach represents the critical stake of contemporary texts, it is most evident in narrative texts, due to considerations related to the expansive scope of narrative and its capacity to fully absorb both reality and its perceptions.

A Reading of the Novel Al-Haram

A. The Title:

The first element that draws attention in Al-Haram is its title, a puzzling choice by Idris based on its traditional connotation. While technically it refers to "that which the Law forbids absolutely, such that

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anyone who violates the prohibition is subject to God's punishment in the Hereafter, as opposed to the halal, which is permitted and for which the prohibition is lifted by the Law" , Idris extends this sign into broader spaces dictated by the psychological and social contradictions of the Arab environment.

Idris depicts the sign of "haram" within a framework strongly intertwined with the concept of sin, intending to invert conventional perspectives and establish a contrast between deliberate sin and compulsion to commit it. This is something he believes religious discourse completely overlooks. Thus, the question is no longer whether "Aziza" committed adultery, but rather what compelled her to commit it, making society as a whole—including the authorities—responsible for the incident, and therefore absolving her of punishment.

Another point worth mentioning is the case when an act of adultery becomes regulated within society and sanctioned by governmental licenses. What, then, should such an act be called? Here, Idris approaches a perspective akin to Michel Foucault's view on the historicity of signs within a social context: "It is futile to remain fixed on the literal meaning of a sign, nor can one insist on a meaning that resists history and its transformations; rather, the meanings of signs vary according to the aspirations of authority and society generated by these transformations".

As an example, Foucault cites the sign of madness: in the Victorian era, it marked those religious dreamers often associated with the Church; later, the concept shifted to signify the marginalized, those deprived of competence and esteem; and in our era, after the emergence of psychiatry, madness became understood as a disease like any other, with fixed therapeutic rules.

This is precisely what Youcef Idris aimed for: an attempt to unsettle the rigid perceptions imposed by collective culture, which relies on definitive assertions grounded in texts without considering the pressing contexts that produce events.

B. The Narrative Events:

Returning to the events of the novel, we encounter a vast number of social bruises that indicate a sharp decline in the social structure. Perhaps the first of these is the contempt suffered by the "Gharabwa" inhabitants of the village, depicted as rough and distant from civilization. This perception was transmitted across generations until it became entrenched, transforming into a governing system through which discrimination on the basis of ethnicity was practiced, plunging the population into a severe identity crisis, making any negotiation or hybridization impossible, unlike what occurred in modern republics where law substitutes for identity.

The First Event: The Tax of Knowledge

From the very beginning, Youcef Idris presents the misery that pervades life in rural Egypt, depicting various forms of poverty and deprivation experienced by the villagers, who are nothing but "human waste, hungry and compelled to migrate in order to work, eat, and gain a share of life". This is reflected at the end of the novel after the revolution and the issuance of the Agrarian Reform Law, where only a single tree remains, creating a collective village myth that "this tree came from the piece of wood extracted from between Aziza's teeth after her death, buried in the mud, which then became that tree". Such descriptions—"demonstrating realistic mastery amid a world of events, expressions, descriptions, and dramatic sentences that introduce us to the climate and environment, weaving the events skillfully" — present a society devoid of knowledge, consumed by myths and superstitions, no longer able to distinguish values, abandoning its humanity, with injustice and various vices becoming its defining features.

The Second Event: Pain in Exchange for Bread

At first glance, the novel may seem to depict the monarchical era, through numerous indicators such as the Pasha, the Inspector, the Effendi, the Tarboush, and other symbols of that period. Yet, there are many references suggesting that the novel also serves as a sharp critique of the July Revolution, particularly when

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the novel is adapted cinematically, as if to say: there remain many Azizas even after the revolution. The novel portrays the extreme degradation of the self, akin to medieval slavery, all for the sake of bread, and the surrender of honor, as happens with Aziza.

In wretched circumstances, entire families move with their children to join the migrant laborers, violating the humanity of adults and the childhood of children—all for bread. The dramatic depiction of misery reaches its peak when Idris shows Aziza selling bread after her husband falls ill, burdened by work. The narrator states: "The past year, in which they did not go, they saw the midday stars and lived on straw or sheer hunger, and thus went with the migration". She also bears this labor while pregnant with Qamrin's child: "Aziza did not agree to be moved to a shaded place, nor to cease work entirely, except after being told that her 'daily wage' would not be withheld. Her greatest fear was that her wages would stop, leaving her husband Abdallah and her children to die of hunger".

This represents the ultimate degradation, when a human being's well-being is worth no more than a piece of bread, stained with blood, and dignity is violated without any alternative.

C. The Character of Aziza: Gendered Discrimination

The novel presents numerous depictions concerning women's issues and the gender-based discrimination they face. At the beginning of the text, the narrator introduces Aziza's passionate longing and overwhelming desire for the simple childhood she experienced in her peasant father's house, a time of innocent play, expansive freedom, bathing in the irrigation canal ("al-tar'a"), and eating bread. This freedom was lost due to deprivation and hunger, highlighting the social marginalization of women in closed societies, where their liberty is restricted by practices that deny them even the most basic rights.

This is evident in the following passage, which exposes gender discrimination in a striking way. The narrator says: "Aziza lifted her head, straightened her back, wiped her sweat, and told him the story, pleading with him to allow her to continue searching. Mohamed spoke at length about digging, how it weakens the soil, hides its silt, and ruins the crop, yet she returned to plead with him, insisting with such fervor that she wept".

Through this elegant symbolism, Idris assigns specific meanings to each element:

- Mohamed: as masculine authority representing the center of Eastern society
- Aziza: as an Eastern woman representing the margin
- The potato: as a symbol of natural rights

Idris thus illuminates the suffering that surrounds women in patriarchal societies, where the oppression of the female is evident in Aziza's pleading for bread and crying to be allowed to continue searching. This reflects her lack of autonomy and decision-making power. Consequently, Mohamed's treatment of Aziza mirrors paternalistic authority, where his opinion must always be obeyed.

Conclusion

From this approach, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Youcef Idris remains one of the prominent figures of the short story in the Arab world, through his activist past and the engagement of his creativity with human issues, grounded in his belief that the purpose of creative work is transformation, not mere intellectual luxury.

- The cultural approach represents the latest achievement of human critical reasoning, not only because it compensates for the deficiencies of modernist methodologies, but also because it constitutes a

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rigorous critical stance based on intertextuality and relativity, thereby equipping it to encompass nearly all aspects of the text.

- Al-Haram is a novel that insists on immersing itself in the stark realism of human daily life, perhaps the reason that prompted filmmakers to adapt it into a cinematic work, ranked among the top one hundred films in cinema history.

The novel addresses numerous social phenomena, reflecting with authenticity the transformations of Eastern society, its struggles in the absence of knowledge, the prevalence of backwardness, and economic deprivation.

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