



SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES REFLECTED IN *ARKHAS LAYAL* OF YUSUF IDRISI: A STUDY

¹Eunus Ali Mollah and ²Dr. Raizuddin Alom

¹Research Scholar, Department of Arabic, Gauhati University

²Assistant Professor cum Research Guide, Department of Arabic, Gauhati University

Abstract:

Arkhas Layali (The Cheapest Nights) is the collection of twenty-one short stories written by renowned Egyptian thinker, Yusuf Idris. This book was published first in 1954 by Hindawi Foundation C.I.C. By this book, Yusuf Idris was burst into the literary scene of modern Egypt at the age of just 27. It was a literary uproar, boasted a laudatory introduction by the doyen of Egyptian letters, Dr. Taha Hussein, who pronounced its author a new major talent in modern Arabic literature. Though Yusuf Idris worked as a physician and psychiatrist for more than a decade, he gave up his medical profession in the middle of 1960s and devoted his life for the development of modern Arabic fiction writing. By the way, he contributed immensely to Egyptian short story, novel, drama, and other journalistic as well as political writings.

This paper entitled ‘Socio-political Issues Reflected in *Arkhas Layal* of Yusuf Idrisi: A Study’ discusses the major socio-political issues prevailed in the Egyptian society such as overpopulation, entrenched poverty, psychological alienation, social discrimination, political action, socio-economic inequality, etc. It also employs a descriptive-analytical approach and focuses on the short stories in *Arkhas Layali* of Idris.

Keywords: Socio-Political Issues, Social Injustice, Realism, Poverty, Political Allegory Etc.

1. Introduction:

Yusuf Idris is considered as one of the earlier thinkers and pioneers of short fiction writing in Arabic literature. His works focus on socio-political issues like love, repression, poverty, alienation, and the concept of masculinity. Sex is a central issue in this work, particularly the various sexual mores in the villages and in urban areas. Several stories explore the inherent iniquity in sexual relationships between men and women from different socio-political backgrounds. Yusuf Idris, one of the most acclaimed and well-known authors of modern Egypt, is figured as a renovator and genius of Arabic short stories, whose signature stylistic device that transformed Arabic literature. His first short story collection *Arkhas Layali* is a collection of some of his most important short stories, the title story of which follows a man who, unable to sleep, angrily meditates on the state of his life and the extreme poverty in which he finds himself. With compassion, astute observational skills, and biting humor, the writer Yusuf Idris explores the fraught lives of the Egyptian working class, all the while turning a critical eye on the power structures that oppress them.

Socio-political issues reflected in *Arkhas Layali*:

Arkhas Layali (The Cheapest Nights), published in 1954, is the most well-known and the first collection of short stories written by Yusuf Idris. It has been widely translated into European, Asian, and African languages and is frequently included in anthologies of Middle Eastern literature. It serves as a clinical yet deeply empathetic examination of the Egyptian psyche under the weight of poverty and systemic neglect. According to Yusuf Idris the cheapest nights of the poor are actually the most expensive for the nation. By failing to address the socio-political and socio-economic needs of the village, the political system creates a cycle of despair that reproduces itself through every new, unwanted child. Idris doesn't just describe poverty; he diagnoses it as a systemic disease, using his pen like a scalpel to reveal the hidden rot in the social fabric of 20th century Egypt.

Arkhas Layali is a landmark work of Egyptian realism that exposes the harsh socio-economic and socio-political realities of post-colonial, mid-20th-century rural Egypt. Drawing from his experience as a medical doctor working among the



disenfranchised, Yusuf Idris uses the protagonist, Abdul Karim, to illustrate how systemic neglect drives the working class into inescapable cycles of poverty. The primary socio-political issues portrayed in *Arkhas Layali* are discussed below:

Overpopulation:

Overpopulation is a burning issue in present day world. The central theme of *Arkhas Layali* of Yusuf Idris is the historical crisis of overpopulation in Egypt. He reveals that Abdul Karim's growing family is not a product of ignorance, but of absolute poverty. Deprived of money for cafes, leisure, or even heat during freezing winters, intimacy becomes his only accessible escape. In doing so, Yusuf Idris successfully redirects the blame for overpopulation from individual moral choices to systemic economic collapse.

Imbedded Poverty:

The majority of the stories in *Arkhas Layali*, particularly the title piece, illustrate the profound stagnation of the Egyptian peasantry. The protagonist, Abdul Karim, wanders the cramped alleyways of his village, suffocated by both physical confinement and economic despair in a society devoid of upward mobility. The narrative culminates in a devastating irony: seeking a momentary reprieve from the overwhelming pressures of his impoverished household, Abdul Karim turns to the very act that will inevitably produce another child, thereby locking him even deeper into the cycle of poverty.

Emotional Alienation:

In *Arkhas Layali*, Yusuf Idris highlights the intense psychological toll of structural oppression. Abdul Karim begins the story by unleashing a torrent of misdirected abuse onto his neighbors, his village, and religious figures. His frustration with his life compromises his spiritual peace, causing him to rush through his prayers just to escape into the cold night. The political undercurrent demonstrates how extreme financial strain erodes community solidarity, replacing it with isolation, bitterness, and domestic friction.

Social Discrimination:

Unlike traditional political allegories, there is no overt villain or corrupt landlord in *Arkhas Layali*. Instead, the political critique lies in what is missing: infrastructure, education, state resources, and social safety nets. The state is entirely absent from the village, leaving the rural poor to navigate their biological and economic struggles entirely alone.

Socio-economic inequality:

Socio-economic inequality and its devastating impact on individual lives form another central theme of *Arkhas Layali*. The collection grapples with profound humanitarian issues, championing social justice and empathy while calling for a revolt against systemic oppression. Because the breadth of humanism in Yusuf Idris's work is too vast for a single paper to cover exhaustively, this study focuses on select facets—most notably, the pervasive poverty and social injustice depicted in the title story.

In *Arkhas Layali* story, the main character, Abdul Karim, is distinctly portrayed as a victim of circumstance. Crushed by extreme poverty, his reliance on physical intimacy with his wife becomes a manifestation of his psychological and social deprivation. Ultimately, he pays a heavy price for this brief respite: another mouth to feed. Despite Abdul Karim's bleak situation, the writer treats him with deep compassion, emphasizing his inherent humanity. Through this protagonist, Idris captures the tragic paradox of the Egyptian peasant who continues to expand his family despite living in destitution. The narrative serves as a scathing indictment of a government that abandons its rural class, failing to provide basic recreational infrastructure that might deter them from turning to procreation as their only solace. The story ultimately exposes the futility of national contraceptive initiatives when the population is too poor to afford a cup of tea, let alone birth control. What



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initially appears to be a free, temporary escape ultimately becomes a lifelong financial burden that costs both the parents and the nation dearly.

Fi al-Lail (In the Night) story unfolds as a poignant tragedy centering on Abdul Rahman Auf, the most impoverished man in his village. After a grueling day spent scraping together the price of a simple meal of corn, Auf joins his friends under the night sky. Though weary and burdened by harsh realities, the men eagerly await his arrival; Auf has a unique ability to evoke laughter, even when he isn't being overtly comedic. Through his dark humor, the villagers momentarily shed their miseries, choosing to laugh for their present and store up other laughs for the future. Yet, this escapism relies on a profound mutual understanding: they see his underlying sorrow, and he recognizes their inescapable poverty. This nocturnal gathering is a recurring ritual—a fleeting alternate reality where the men can temporarily reclaim their humanity. Dawn, however, inevitably shatters the illusion, forcing everyone back to their burdens and returning Auf to his desperate search for food. Idris elevates this seemingly ordinary vignette to expose the quiet agony of those crushed by systemic injustice. Ultimately, Auf is a man desperately seeking a momentary reprieve; beyond these shared chuckles and this brief, collective forgetfulness, he is left with neither solutions nor lasting solace.

The Spirit of Humanism:

A defining hallmark of Yusuf Idris's work is his deep investment in the psychological realities of his characters. He vividly portrays their thoughts, fears, and grief with an emotional sensitivity likely cultivated during his career as a medical doctor. His daily exposure to human suffering provided him with an intimate understanding of the human condition, allowing him to articulate his characters' struggles with remarkable precision.

Yusuf Idris explores the oppressed human psyche deepens in the short story *Nazra* (A Look). Here, the narrative exposes a stark social realism, embedding the young protagonist within a community hardened by greed and devoid of empathy. Through the narrator's careful, observant gaze, Idris projects his own profound humanitarian concern onto the figure of a young maidservant. The text evokes intense pathos for this child, who is systematically stripped of her youth and happiness by a society indifferent to her plight, leaving her perpetually marginalized among both the affluent and the destitute.

This theme of internal oppression shifts from the socio-economic to the deeply psychological in the character of Ramadan in *Abu Sayed* story. He experiences profound emotional turmoil and an acute sense of loss due to his impotence—a condition that fractures both his private and public life. His psychological struggle triggers an internal crisis, turning his domestic existence into an emotional wasteland. Tortured by the persistent fear of societal exposure, Ramadan eventually confides his anguish to his wife, seeking a momentary reprieve and an empathetic confidant. Through Ramadan, Idris confronts the cultural stigma of impotence in Eastern societies, where patriarchal norms rigidly conflate virility with the very definition of manhood, effectively stripping the compromised male of his social identity.

Conversely, collective human solidarity emerges triumphant in *Khams Saat* (Five Hours) story. The narrative chronicles a medical team's relentless, five-hour battle to save a patient shot in the back. The writer leverages his medical background to depict the frantic, synchronized efforts of the doctors and nurses, whose hands move with desperate, practiced speed to tend to the dying man. By immersing the reader in this crisis, Idris illustrates how the medical staff transcends professional detachment, effectively becoming a surrogate family unified by shared trauma and an unyielding commitment to human life.

Love as a social image:

Love and tenderness serve as vital catalysts that elevate the individual from the narrow confines of egoism into the broader realm of collective altruism. Through this emotional expansion, the individual aligns with the grander objectives of the community, actively participating in social progress. To secure the affection of others is a foundational human longing—



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one pursued regardless of the personal cost. For Idris, love operates as the bedrock of happiness, truth, and shared existence, binding humanity together in an inseparable matrix.

Throughout *Arkhas Layali*, Yusuf Idris dissects the multifaceted layers of this emotion, mapping its trajectory across romantic intimacy, marital devotion, familial ties, and universal humanitarian solidarity. He continuously prompts the reader to examine the intricate contradictions of the human heart, demonstrating how love can simultaneously serve as an unparalleled source of joy and a profound wellspring of suffering.

This emotional duality is vividly illustrated through Yusuf Idris's contrasting depictions of paternal dynamics. In the story *Abu Sayed*" the narrative spotlights an enduring, non-transactional paternal devotion that remains steadfast independent of self-interest. Conversely, In *the Swing* story offers a stark counter-model through the character of Abdul Latif, who embodies a chilling parental cruelty.

Through these opposing archetypes, Yusuf Idris underscores compassion as the absolute core of the human experience. In a humanistic framework, the active practice of empathy directly mitigates systemic harm and violence, laying the necessary groundwork for a peaceful, cohesive society.

Image of Freedom:

Few values are as sacred to the human experience as freedom—an innate, instinctive yearning rather than a mere secondary objective. Human liberty, encompassing the sovereignty of thought, conscience, and expression, stands as the primary catalyst for psychological well-being, self-worth, and genuine fulfillment. In Yusuf Idris's philosophical framework, freedom is an inalienable characteristic of the human condition; to be human is to possess rational agency, to navigate moral choices, and to retain the right to err. When systemic oppression worsens, the pursuit of autonomy naturally intensifies, until the value of a life lived in dignity far outweighs the fear of mortality itself.

This existential choice is vividly dramatized in the story *Al-Hajaanih*, where the protagonist, Morsi, displays a profound disregard for his own survival when weighed against the prospect of subjugation. Driven by the conviction that one must either live in liberty or die with honor, Morsi risks his life to infiltrate the oppressors' camp. By seizing the very weapons used to terrorize the defenseless, his radical act of resistance restores power to the community. The narrative captures the resulting victory through a collective catharsis: lanterns illuminate the village, and laughter erupts over matters both profound and trivial. The streets fill with celebratory processions of children, and a song originating from the *Al-Hajaanih* spreads through the crowd, uniting the young women and youth in shared triumph. Through Morsi's martyrdom, Idris illustrates that the struggle for freedom and equality transcends localized politics, serving as a universal humanitarian crusade that speaks to the core of our common humanity.

Image of modesty and ethical Values:

Modesty and moral restraint stand among the most revered virtues within Yusuf Idris's literary universe. In *Mishwar* (The Trip) story, this ethical boundary is embodied by the protagonist, Al-Shabrawi, whose internal sense of decorum prevents him from taking visual advantage of Zubeida while she sleeps. Noting that her dress had a hole, and her thigh was visible, Al-Shabrawi deliberately lowered his gaze as he gathered the dress and covered her. Similarly, in *At Night* story, the writer presents a traditional archetype of the modest woman through Auf's wife, whose attire reflects cultural and religious standards of decorum. Through these characterizations, Yusuf Idris offers a subtle critique of a superficial, Westernized modernity that equates social progress with the erosion of traditional modesty.

This sense of modesty alters interpersonal dynamics across various social strata. In *Shaghlana* story, Nafisa's deep-seated bashfulness prevents her from explicitly declaring her passion for her lover: Conversely, in *Al-Hadith*, this moral framework is weaponized as a tool of social critique through Abdul Nabi's wife. Upon visiting the Egyptian coast, she is profoundly



alienated by the immodest attire and transgressed gazes of urban women, who stare at males with no regard for propriety, prompting her to unleash a torrent of condemnation against what she perceives as moral decay.

Finally, the writer demonstrates that Hayaa is not an exclusively female trait, but a complex human condition that affects men in distinct ways. It can manifest as a gentle, endearing social politeness, as seen when Auf bashfully asks Abeed for a cigarette. However, within a rigid patriarchal framework, this same sense of shame or reserve can transform into a psychological prison. This is tragically illustrated by Al-Shabrawi, whose prolonged journey with the mentally ill Zubeida leaves him emotionally exhausted. Though desperately needing the catharsis of tears to relieve his suffering, he is ultimately paralyzed by a socially conditioned male stoicism and a sense of shame that forbids him from displaying vulnerability.

Image of Forgiveness:

The concept of forgiveness stands as a cornerstone of the humanistic ethos that permeates Yusuf Idris's literary genre. Throughout his fiction, Yusuf Idris underscores the vital necessity of mutual comprehension, tolerance, and reconciliation as prerequisite conditions for resolving interpersonal conflict and restoring social harmony. In the story *Al-Mukana*, this theme is vividly enacted when the dismissal of Al-Awsati prompts immediate, collective mediation from the community. Recognizing the devastating impact of unemployment, the villagers repeatedly intervene to persuade the employer, Mr. Taha, to rescind his decision. When their initial efforts prove futile, the narrative notes the community's despondency. Undeterred, however, the village elders make a final, concerted push for conflict resolution, yet they are met with Taha's unyielding intransigence. Through this localized dispute, the writer stresses the broader sociological value of open communication and reciprocal empathy. He posits that the capacity for compassion is an inherent human trait, suggesting that collective solidarity and mutual respect remain humanity's most effective tools for dismantling systemic division and constructing a peaceful society.

Image of Betrayal:

Within the landscape of interpersonal ethics, the betrayal of a friend constitutes one of the most devastating violations of human solidarity. Because mutual trust serves as the foundational cornerstone of all social relationships, its calculated subversion inflicts deep, often irreparable psychological wreckage. In the short story *Khams Saat* (Five Hours) story, Yusuf Idris provides a harrowing exploration of this moral fracture through the character of Ali. The narrative charts the catastrophic consequences of deception when a police officer is lured into a dark corner by Ali, only to be shot in the back and left on the brink of death.

As the dying officer grapples with the realization of this perfidy, his agonizing cry exposes the depth of his trauma. The deliberate, rhythmic repetition of the word friend within this brief utterance serves an acute narrative function; it simultaneously underscores the sanctity of the severed bond and amplifies the visceral pain of the deception. The tragedy lies not merely in the physical violence inflicted, but in the total erasure of the reciprocal loyalty that preserves human dignity. Through this bleak vignette, Idris forces the reader to confront the profound psychological and moral fallout of shattered trust. Ultimately, by illustrating the devastating vacuum left behind when fidelity is abandoned, *Five Hours* paradoxically reinforces the broader humanistic ideas that permeate Yusuf Idris's short story, asserting that collective human survival is impossible without absolute fidelity to one another.

Conclusion:

A defining hallmark of Yusuf Idris's social realism is his radical reframing of societal crises. He framed the devastating reality of rapid overpopulation and poverty is stripped of moral judgment. He tried to demonstrate the expansion of the peasant family is not a product of ignorance, but an inescapable consequence of systemic economic failure and a total lack of social infrastructure. By positioning marital intimacy as the sole cost-free refuge available to the destitute, the writer shifts the burden of blame away from individual morality and places it squarely on a negligent state.



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Professional proximity Yusuf Idris to human vulnerability allows him to navigate the complex internal landscapes of his characters with striking clinical authenticity and emotional sensitivity. He bravely confronts entrenched cultural taboos by dissecting masculine impotence within a rigid patriarchal society. Ultimately, he asserts that human survival is an inherently collective endeavor. *Arkhas Layali* justify that the fiction of Yusuf Idris remains a powerful monument to humanistic literature. By balancing a clinical understanding of human frailty with a profound empathy for the subaltern, he demands that his readers look past the surface of societal decay to recognize the enduring resilience, dignity, and interconnectedness of the human spirit.

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