

Social Realism in Yusuf Idris's *Arkhas Layâlî* (The Cheapest Nights): An Analytical Study

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Abstract:

Social realism is an important literary approach that presents the real conditions of society, especially the struggles of poor and marginalized people. Yusuf Idris is one of the most important modern Arabic writers who realistically depicted the lives of poor and marginalized people in his short stories. His first short story collection *Arkhas Layâlî* (The Cheapest Nights) was published in the year 1954. The book was warmly welcomed by both readers and critics alike, and it made Yusuf Idris famous at the young age of twenty-seven. The short story collection *Arkhas Layâlî* shows the harsh realities of poverty, social inequality, unemployment, and human suffering in Egyptian society. The story mainly focuses on the miserable condition of a poor family trapped in economic hardship and continuous social struggle. Through simple language and realistic description, Yusuf Idris presents the difficulties faced by poor people and criticizes the government for ignoring the suffering of the poor. This study attempts to analyse the elements of social realism in *Arkhas Layâlî* and examine how Yusuf Idris portrays the painful realities of ordinary life.

Keywords: Social Realism, Yusuf Idris, *Arkhas Layâlî*, Poverty, Social Inequality, Egyptian Society, Arabic Short Story, etc.

Introduction:

Yusuf Idris is a famous short story writer, novelist, and playwright from Egypt. He is renowned for his deep engagement with social realism. His short story *Arkhas Layâlî* (The Cheapest Nights) is considered one of the finest examples of social realism in Arabic fiction. The story realistically portrays the life of Abdel Kerim and his family, who suffer from extreme poverty. Through vivid characterization, simple narrative techniques, and a profound understanding of human nature, Idris explores major social issues such as poverty, overpopulation, unemployment, illiteracy, and human suffering among the lower class in Egyptian society.

Social realism in literature is an important genre that aims to portray everyday realities, often focusing on the struggles of the working class and marginalized groups within society. It

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highlights social issues such as poverty, oppression, inequality, unemployment, injustice, and human suffering. In modern Arabic literature, social realism became a powerful medium for writers to express the struggles of ordinary people and to criticize the unjust social and economic conditions of society. Among the prominent writers of this literary approach, Yusuf Idris occupies a significant place for his realistic portrayal of Egyptian life and his deep sympathy for the marginalized sections of society.

The short story *Arkhas Layâlî* (The Cheapest Nights) is one of the significant social realist works of Yusuf Idris. In this story, Yusuf Idris portrays the painful life of poor people who struggle for survival in difficult social and economic circumstances. The story reflects the unequal social system where the poor continue to suffer while the rich remain powerful and comfortable. Through simple language, realistic narration, and a deep understanding of human nature, the writer exposes the social and economic inequalities present in society.

This research paper aims to explore the various dimensions of social realism in *Arkhas Layâlî*, examining how Yusuf Idris employs this literary style to critique society and portray the lived realities of his characters. Through a close reading of the story, the research will analyze the themes of poverty, economic hardship, overpopulation, and social inequality. The study also explores Idris's criticism of social injustice and his contribution to modern Arabic literature through the use of social realism.

Objective of the Study: This research paper will focus on the following objectives:

1. To analyze the portrayal of poverty in *Arkhas Layâlî* (The Cheapest Nights).
2. To examine the theme of social inequality in the story.
3. To study Yusuf Idris's use of social realism.

Research Methodology: This research paper is mainly based on the analytical and descriptive method. Both the primary and secondary sources are consulted for preparing this research paper. The primary source of the study is *Arkhas Layâlî*, written by Yusuf Idris. Secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and literary criticism related to Yusuf Idris and social realism are consulted.

Yusuf Idris: Prince of the Arabic Short Story

Yusuf Idris (1927-1991) is widely regarded as one of the greatest short story writers of the Arab world. His literary contributions have significantly shaped modern Arabic literature, particularly in the realm of social realism. His works vividly depict Egyptian society and the struggles of individuals within socio-political structures. Yusuf Idris won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature posthumously in 1997 for his novel *City of Love and Ashes*, which solidified his reputation as an international literary figure.

Yusuf Idris was born on May 19, 1927, in a small village called al-Bayrum, in the governorate of *al-Sharqiyya*, Egypt.¹ His father frequently moved due to his work in land reclamation projects. So, Yusuf Idris was sent to live with his grandmother in a village. This experience may have significantly influenced his later perspectives on women's issues.

Science and chemistry attracted Yusuf Idris, leading him to enrol in medical college. During his studies, he participated in numerous demonstrations against British colonial rule and the King Farouk's regime. As a result, he was imprisoned and suspended from his studies for several months. Amid these circumstances, Yusuf Idris wrote his first short story collection, which gained considerable popularity among his peers. He later practiced his medical training as an intern at Qasr El-Aini Hospital in 1951.² However, the appeal of writing eventually drew him away from medicine. In 1960, he became an editor of Al-Gomhouria newspaper, and in 1973, he joined Al-Ahram newspaper as a writer.

Yusuf Idris earned the title "The Prince of the Arabic Short Story."³ Before the 1950s, the Arabic short story was still in its early stages; then Yusuf Idris came and transformed the genre by bringing it closer to the colloquial language and realities of everyday life. He contributed significantly to its development from a local literary form into one with global appeal.

Yusuf Idris was also known as the "Chekhov of the Arabs," in reference to the great Russian writer Anton Chekhov, because his writings closely portrayed rural life and human sufferings with realism and compassion.⁴

Yusuf Idris was a versatile writer; he produced a wide range of literary works, including short stories, novels, and plays. With his creative talent, he built a rich literary legacy consisting of twenty short-story collections, five novels, and ten plays. Some of his distinguished works are *The Cheapest Nights*, *The Republic of Farhat*, *The Hero*, *The Black Soldier*, *The White*, *The Sin*, *The Disgrace*, *A House of Flesh*, *The Language of Oh Oh etc.*

Although Yusuf Idris left the medical profession, he continued to heal society in another way. Through his honest and direct portrayal of social problems, he exposed the challenges and contradictions that affected ordinary people. Even after his death on 1st August 1991, Yusuf Idris remains a permanent and influential figure in Arabic literature, and his works continue to inspire readers and writers across the world.⁵

Introduction to *Arkhas Layâlî* (The Cheapest Nights):

Arkhas Layâlî (The Cheapest Nights) is the most well-known and first short story collection of Yusuf Idris, published in the year 1954.⁶ It is commonly included in the anthologies of Middle Eastern literature, and it has been widely translated into European, Asian, and African languages. This collection of short stories has a significant place in modern Arabic literary works because it focuses on the lives of common people rather than the lives of the rich. Yusuf Idris's comprehensive analysis of Egyptian society shows the harsh reality experienced by women, labourers, farmers, and other marginalized people of the society. He uses simple and powerful language in his stories to show the everyday difficulties faced by the poor people.

Yusuf Idris's title story, "The Cheapest Nights," is considered one of the best stories in the collection. In the story, Abdul Karim, a poor farmer who works hard to support his family, is profiled in *Arkhas Layâlî*, a book that examines multiple aspects of social realism. This short story collection focuses on themes such as poverty, social inequality, overpopulation,

unemployment, struggles to survive, and lack of sympathy from society. Unlike other authors who describe these problems in general terms, Yusuf Idris gives a realistic touch to the problems by depicting realistic characters.

One of the strengths in *Arkhas Layâlî* is that the story depicts human experience in reality. The author does not idealize the lives of poor people but rather portrays them through his sensitive approach to the issues of poverty. Idris does not create heroes in his stories but only ordinary individuals, whose lives are reflective of larger social issues prevalent in Egyptian society. On the other hand, Idris highlights the courage of the poor people in terms of their hopes, kindness, and emotional intelligence.

In the context of literature, the work *Arkhas Layâlî* has become a significant step forward in the development of the Arabic short story. The writer uses clear narrative technique, strong characterization, and realistic dialogues, including colloquial phrases from the everyday life of Egypt, in order to make the plot authentic. The author's interest in social problems, along with his talent as a writer, allowed Idris to become one of the prominent writers in the history of Arabic literature. Thus, the literary work *Arkhas Layâlî* is considered to be valuable for studying social realism, as it provides readers with deep understanding of the socio-economic situation in Egypt.

Social Realism as a Literary Concept:

Social Realism is a broad term that has been often used in literature, paintings, and other forms of art. It does not belong to any particular age, nor can it be assigned a particular place in history. Art attempts to capture society as accurately as possible. Social realism in literature refers to the truthful depiction of everyday life, especially the struggles and injustices faced by ordinary people, often within a specific socio-political context. The phenomenon of social realism mainly reflects the problems or matters that people throughout the world face, such as poverty, prejudice, gender inequality, discrimination, racism, suppression, oppression, corruption, resistance, exploitation, expatriation, violence, untouchability, social conflicts, and other systemic issues. The themes of social realism can be seen in the literary works of Yusuf Idris, especially through his realistic short story collection *Arkhas Layâlî* (the Cheapest Nights).

Major themes of *Arkhas Layâlî*:

Arkhas Layâlî is one of the most important short story collections of Yusuf Idris, published in the year 1954. With its realistic atmosphere, colloquial language, marginalized characters, and sympathetic tone toward the characters' difficult lives, it was considered a new beginning for the Arabic short story. Over the next twenty-five years, Yusuf Idris further enhanced his reputation by publishing thirteen more collections. His contribution to Arabic short story had a significant influence on Arabic fiction, and his writings are often regarded as a major turning point in the history of the Arabic short story.

Arkhas Layâlî is Yusuf Idris's most well-known and first collection of short stories. It has been widely translated into European, Asian, and African languages and is frequently included in anthologies of Middle Eastern literature. This collection contains twenty-one

short stories which are mostly representative of short scenes, lively observations, and uncomplicated events. The collection *Arkhas Layâli* shows Yusuf Idris's concern with portraying the poorer classes of Egyptian society as accurately as possible. The author presents these poor people as he finds them and allows facts and their implications to speak for themselves. There is no moral at the end; it is just a crying, plain truth. Many of the stories from this collection are very short, and even this limited space enables Idris to create a vivid, moving picture.

The major themes of the story are discussed in the following:

1. Poverty: Poverty is one of the most important themes of *Arkhas Layâli*. The story depicts the miserable condition of poor people clearly. In the story, the characters are suffering because of a lack of money and basic needs. They struggle daily to survive in difficult conditions. The author Yusuf Idris describes poverty not just as an economic issue but as a human tragedy. The poor characters experience hunger, pain, hopelessness, and emotional suffering. Their lives become full of anxiety and uncertainty. They are forced to tolerate hardship because they have no other choice. Yusuf Idris also presents a realistic picture of the living conditions of the poor. The atmosphere of the story reflects darkness, suffering, and helplessness. The poor people are trapped in poverty and cannot improve their lives. Their dreams and hopes slowly disappear because of social and economic pressure. The story also shows how poverty destroys human dignity. The poor characters often become victims of humiliation and neglect. Society does not treat them equally. Their suffering remains unnoticed by the powerful sections of society.

The problem of extreme poverty as well as social injustice is addressed in *Arkhas Layâli*. Throughout the story, the main character, Abdul Karim, creates a feeling in the reader that he is a victim of circumstances. He experiences a sting of poverty, and as a result, having sex with his wife reflects psychological and social loss. He pays the high price by giving birth to a newborn.

"بعد شهور كانت النساء كالعادة يبشرنه بولد جديد، وكان هو يعزي نفسه على السابع الذي جاء في آخر الزمان، والذي لن يملأ طوب الأرض بطنه هو الآخر."⁷

(After a few months, the woman, as usual, informed him that a new baby had been born, and he was feeling sorry for himself because the seventh baby had finally been born at the end of time; all the bricks of the earth would never fill up this one either.)

Despite the harshness of his situation, Yusuf Idris portrays Abdul Karim with dignity and deep sympathy, emphasizing his essential humanity. Through this character, Idris illustrates the condition of the Egyptian farmer, who continues to have children even while living in extreme poverty. He accuses the government of failing to assist the farmer in this case and of not offering him alternative forms of entertainment so that he wouldn't turn to procreation as a kind of entertainment. The story can thus be read as a sharp critique of Egypt's struggle to address overpopulation and the limited effectiveness of its family-planning efforts.

2. Social Inequality: Another important theme of the story is social inequality. Yusuf Idris presents a society that is divided into the rich and the poor. The rich people enjoy comfort

and privilege. On the other hand, the poor people suffer from deprivation and exploitation.

The story is a reflection of the unequal social structure where poor people are not given equal chances. They continue to be marginalized and powerless. Social discrimination and injustice arise from economic inequality. The poor people are often ignored and treated as inferior by the rich people.

Yusuf Idris, through his writings, criticizes this unfair social system. He explains that poverty is not simply the result of individual failure but is the result of social inequality and exploitation. The gap between the rich and the poor continues to increase, leading to human suffering and social instability. The story also highlights the emotional effect of social inequality. Poor people feel isolated, hopeless, and powerless. They lose confidence because society does not value them. The author reveals society's brutality and insensitivity through his writings.

3. Population Growth: Another major theme in the story is the growth of the population. The couple continues to have many children even though they cannot support them properly. As a result, the children grew up in unhealthy and difficult conditions.

4. Human Desire and Escape from Reality: The story shows how people try to escape from reality. The husband spends time at night with his wife because it is the only way he can forget his daily struggles. These “cheap nights” become a form of emotional and physical escape from poverty and frustration.

5. Struggle of common people: Another significant theme is the struggle of common people. The characters in the story are not heroes in the traditional sense; they are normal people trying to deal with everyday problems. Through them, Yusuf Idris displays the strength and resilience of human beings.

6. Social Criticism: Yusuf Idris criticizes society for neglecting the poor. The story says that poverty is not only a personal problem, but also a social problem. There is no proper education, health care, or support system. Yusuf Idris indirectly questions the responsibility of society and government.

7. Psychological Conflict: Finally, Yusuf Idris explores psychological conflict. His characters often suffer from inner struggles, confusion, and emotional pain. This level of psychological realism adds depth and relatability to the story.

Narrative Style of Yusuf Idris:

Yusuf Idris is known for his realistic and socially conscious narrative style. From the beginning of his writing career, Yusuf Idris insisted on the use of colloquial language in written form to convey dialogue. The descriptions, meanwhile, were written in a style that observed most of the grammatical and stylistic conventions of the written language. Structurally, his stories are compact and fast-moving, usually beginning with conflict and progressing quickly toward a strong climax. He avoids unnecessary descriptions and keeps the narration intense and engaging. Many of his stories end suddenly or ironically, leaving a deep emotional and social impact on readers.⁸

The short stories of Yusuf Idris have met with literary criticism. Very few critics, however, have tried to tackle the question of his style. Yusuf Idris has displayed an unmistakably personal, lively, witty, and simple style since the earliest stages of his writing career. Many of those who have appraised his work have dismissed the stylistic aspects by merely noting that his dialogue is lively and is written in his protagonist's natural language, namely spoken Arabic as opposed to the narrative parts, which are written in formal Arabic, a practice common to many modern Arab writers of prose fiction. Taha Husayn, while highly praising the talent of Yusuf Idris on his undoubted contribution to the development of the Arabic short story in his introduction to Idris' book *Jumhuriyyat Farahat*, laments this fact and advises Idris to abandon the use of the colloquial as a literary language and adhere in future to a pure literary idiom, or subject his literary talent to degeneration.⁹

Yusuf Idris himself said about his writing style as follows:

“I personally regard the language problem as a burden on me. But I'm very content when writing in Egyptian Colloquial... Personally, I cannot write in the classical written language (*fusha*). I can do it, and it may turn out fine, but at the crucial moment of composition, I am not in a position to choose between what is suitable and what is not. The writing is almost dictated to me. I am the means, not the writer himself. Introducing the force of will here impairs the entire process. Perhaps it is better to interfere later with a conscious mind and through the author himself.”¹⁰

Findings:

The present study reveals the following major findings:

1. Yusuf Idris depicts the daily life and struggles of poor people in a realistic manner, making social realism the main theme of *Arkhas Layâlî*
2. Poverty is the main theme that affects the dignity, feelings, family life, and future of the characters as reflected in Abdul Karim's family life.
3. The story exposes social inequality in terms of differences between rich and poor.
4. Idris presents overpopulation as both a social and economic problem, linking it to poverty, illiteracy, and the lack of effective government support.
5. Through the story, Yusuf Idris criticizes the government and society for neglecting the poor people and for failing to provide adequate employment, education, healthcare, and social welfare.
6. Idris shows the mental pain of ordinary people in a very real way, and he does it with kindness and understanding.
7. Yusuf Idris writes in simple language. He tells the story in a natural way, using the kind of language people use every day, which makes it feel more authentic.
8. *Arkhas Layâlî* establishes Yusuf Idris as a leading writer of social realism and a major contributor to the development of the modern Arabic short story.

9. The study finds that the social issues presented in the story, such as poverty, inequality, unemployment, overpopulation, and social injustice, remain relevant in contemporary society.
10. Overall, the study says that *Arkhas Layâlî* is a powerful story about real life that shows what it is like to be a marginalized person, and it is calling for people to be more aware of social issues and to fight for what is right.

Conclusion:

The present study concludes that Yusuf Idris's *Arkhas Layâlî* (The Cheapest Nights) is one of the best examples of social realism in modern Arabic literature. Through the realistic depiction of Abdul Karim and his family, Yusuf Idris presents the harsh realities of poverty, social inequality, overpopulation, unemployment, and human suffering in Egyptian society. Rather than idealizing the lives of the poor people, he depicts their daily struggles and exposes the socio-economic conditions that keep them in poverty.

The study also shows that Idris uses simple language, realistic narration, vivid characterization, and colloquial dialogue to make his stories authentic and emotionally powerful. His characters are ordinary people whose experiences represent the lives of many marginalized people of society. At the same time, the story criticizes the government for failing to provide adequate education, healthcare, employment, and social welfare. The story emphasises that poverty is not only an individual problem but a result of social injustice and unequal opportunities.

The study also demonstrates that *Arkhas Layâlî* is a significant literary work and a valuable historical document that reflects the realities of Egyptian society in the middle of 20th century. Although the story was written in 1954, its themes of poverty, inequality, unemployment, and social exclusion remain relevant in many parts of the world today.

Briefly noting that Yusuf Idris successfully uses social realism to give voice to the poor and marginalized, while encouraging readers to think critically about social injustice. He made a significant contribution to the development of the modern Arabic short story, and *Arkhas Layâlî* is still a vital tool for understanding Arabic literature and the social realities it depicts.

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