

ON SOME STYLISTIC AND LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF YÜSUF IDRİS' WORKS

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The famous Egyptian author, Yūsuf Idrīs (1927 -1991), was well known for three main reasons:

1. He was the leading writer of modern Arabic short story, drama and political and social essay.
2. He was one of the few who dared, against protest and criticism, to use the spoken language side by side of *fushā*.
3. He was artistically, politically and socially a non-conformist, controversial and even recusant and recalcitrant person, who very much enjoyed the image of the 'enfant terrible' of modern Arabic literature.

True, other Arab writers too share some of these "virtues and vices": for example, the Nobel Laureate, Nağīb Maḥfūz, has used in his works some 'āmmiyya, but mainly "in disguise", for example, by "translating" expressions current in the spoken vernacular into *fushā*; Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm and Maḥmūd Taymūr used the Egyptian dialect for their performed plays, but avoided *direct* confrontation with the authorities on social, political and religious issues, and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, although himself was well known for his rebellious views, especially as far as religion was concerned, had never used a style which contained colloquialisms and bitterly criticised those who did.

Works on Idrīs offer us a detailed analysis and deep insight into his world: his biography, views, technique and attitude towards and relationship with his *milieu*. However, none of them deals in depth with the multi-coloured facets of his language and style. Thus, P. M. Kurpershoek, for example, tells us briefly that "Idrīs attempts at freeing himself from what he felt as a strait-jacket imposed on him by the rigorous demands of classical grammar" (1981:114). Kurpershoek continues to describe in some detail the clash between Idrīs and Arab purists over the use of 'āmmiyya in dialogues, a view vigorously advocated by Idrīs, who used the dialect freely (1981:115-124). In another place, the writer singles out some more stylistic peculiarities characteristic of Idrīs's writings, such as, short sentences (1981:170-172); repetition, "in order to emphasise a particular point or achieve a dramatic climax" (1981:172); the use of paronomasia and rhyme (1981:174-175); syntactical inversions which stand in opposition to the common word order in Arabic (1981:176-180). S. Somekh sums up the stylistic features of Idrīs, emphasising his simple language, though often "poetical"; usage of figures of speech such as *oxymoron*; the shortness of his sentences and the inversion

of the common word order in Arabic (1967:24-28; See also, Badawi 1992:415). R. Allen, who compares Nağib Maḥfūz's style with that of Yūsuf Idrīs, claims that the style of the latter "seems more spontaneous and impulsive, on occasion almost to the point of irregularity" (1982:107).

The present short paper will attempt to add some more characteristic features of Idrīs's technique and style, using as a corpus one of his shortest short stories called *an-Nās* ("The People").

The plot concentrates on the story of a tamarisk tree which was growing in the centre of an Egyptian town, and which was worshipped by the citizens of the town for its healing quality against eye infection. The story highlights the mockery up to which the educated young generation was holding their parents, until a scientific evidence was found regarding the therapeutic power of the tamarisk tree. A fact which paradoxically puts an end to the interest of the people in the tree.

The general atmosphere of the story is sarcastic: Idrīs mocks the naivety of the people, who hold an inanimate, a simple tree, in such veneration. He highlights the clash between the two generations: the old who is superstitious, primitive, passive, brain-washed by tradition, dogmatic and the young generation who is rebellious, effervescent, challenging dogmas, anti-establishment. Until the surprising ending when both parties "swap positions", where the naive heroes lose some of their naivety, and the "progressive" are forced to admit that old traditions are not necessarily the result of superstitions.

The fact that Idrīs uses picturesque metaphors and other figures of speech for the creation of this atmosphere is obvious and does not need to be proved, since these figures may easily be discerned. However, this is accomplished not only by syntactical inversions and semantic shifts but by a *combination* of syntactical, semantic and stylistic devices. For example, to emphasize the fact that the tamarisk is an ordinary tree, and that the people who blindly believe in its healing quality are but naive and primitive, Idrīs uses periodical sentence for repetition, negation and the figure of speech called *litotes*. Hence, the tamarisk is:

لم تكن كبيرة ولا عالية ... ولا تعرف ربيعا أو خريفا ولا تعرف ضعفا ولا قوة فهي لا تنمو
ولا تصغر ولم يزد حجمها أو ينقص ... ولا يدري أحد كيف نبتت ... فهي لا تنمو إلا في
مناطق المستنقعات ... لا يدري أحد لماذا اختارت ناحيتنا ... لا يتبركون بها فقط ... ما
من كائن ...

*It was not big and was not high ... it did not know spring or autumn ... it did not
know wickness or strength ... it did not grow nor did it become small ... and its
size did not increase or decrease ... no one knew how it stroke roots ... it does not
grow only in swamps ... no one knows why it chose our area precisely ... people
did not only got blessed by it ... not a single person ...*

Thus, we see that in the first 11 lines of the story there are no less than 14 phrases which start with the negative particles *lām*, *lā* and *mā*.

Another characteristic is Idrīs's frequent usage of words which belong to a specific "semantic field" in an attempt to convince the reader, even though he is often running the risk of verbosity and exaggeration. For example he uses many phrases and concepts from the semantic field of religion to draw an authentic picture of the worshipping of the tree by the people:

نوع من التقديس ... وآمن الناس ... يتبركون بها ... تحفّ بها القداسة ... يحمدون الله
على وجودها دون سواها ... الواحد منهم يقرأ لها الفاتحة ... الكل يؤمن بها ... امتد هذا
الإيمان ... الكفر والألحاد ... الإيمان بالشجرة ... لا حول لها ولا قوة ... يخطب في المساجد
... الجهاد ... الإيمان ... نهل ... التقديس ...

*a kind of sanctification ... people believed ... they try to get a blessing from it ...
holiness surrounds it ... they give praise to Allah for its existence ... they read the
Fatīḥa [the first chapter of the Qur'ān] for it ... every one believes ... this belief has
spread ... blasphemy and heresy ... there is no power and no strength [a famous dic-
tum used by Muslims on various occasions in praise of Allah's might] ... preaching
in the mosques ... Holy War ... faith ... we said that there was no God but Allah
[a famous formula used on different occasions, emphasising the Unity of God] ...
sanctification ...*

Another characteristic feature of Idrīs is his use of phrases and expressions which carry more than one meaning or nuance. Hence, the denotative meaning echos the connotative meaning, thus, achieving ambiguity:

loneliness/unity of God - وحدانية
be blessed/enjoy - تبرك

lowly/ugly - قميئة
surround/rattle - حف بها التقديس
uncleaness/incurable - نجاسة

sharp/prescribed by the Muslim Sunna - مسنون
strong, powerful, as a saint; effective - سر باتع

Idrīs' use of synonyms to stress a point or to better illustrate an idea is also characteristic of the story. Thus, we find in the story several synonyms which enrich the text and yet are not verbose or clumsy. *E.g.*

stalks, branches = سيقان - فروع
grows = ينمو - يزيد حجمها
knows = يعرف - يدري
surround = تحف - تكتنف
foolishness = سخافة - عقول جامدة

high = عالية - كبيرة
tiny = قصير - ضئيل
shrinks = تنقص - تصغر
worsen = استمكن - المرض زاد
fears = ترهب - تخاف
skinny = شاحب - هزيل

To these one may add a number of antonyms which are usually used as *merismus* (Cantarino 1975: II, 502-503). *E.g.:*

It does not know the spring or autumn. = لا تعرف ربيعاً وخريفاً
 The old and the young. = الكبير والصغير
 The poor and the rich. = الفقير وصاحب القرشين

Finally, bearing in mind Idrīs' strong views about the justifiable place of the "living language of the street" in literature, his free, but well calculated use of *'āmmiyya*, usually for the creation of an authentic atmosphere, is not surprising. *E.g.*:

Correct words. = كلام مضبوط	Nice words. = كلام حلو
Both of you. = انت وهو	Sir. = يا أفندي
Leave us alone! = سيبك، يا شيخ	We have told you. = جالكوا كلامنا
	All the same. = برضو

In conclusion, although Idrīs may not have always employed original stylistic and linguistic techniques, since we may find these methods practised by some other authors, his frequent employment of these techniques make them part of his characteristic style. Moreover, the objectives of the writer and in particular, his sensitivity towards and his "involvement" in the subject of the story, make these techniques of usage an indispensable element for the creation of the ideal effect on the plot, the dynamics of story and atmosphere.

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