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

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The famous Egyptian author, Yüṣuf Idris (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 fiṣḥā.
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, Naṣīr Mahfūz, has used in his works some ‘ammīyya, but mainly “in disguise”, for example, by “translating” expressions current in the spoken vernacular into fiṣḥā; Tawfīq 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 Tāḥā 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 toward 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. Kupershoek, for example, tells us briefly that “Idris attempts at freeing himself from what he felt as a strait-jacket imposed on him by the rigorous demands of classical grammar” (1981:114). Kupershoek continues to describe in some detail the clash between Idrīs and Arab purists over the use of ‘ammīyya 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 Na"igion Mahfu"uz's style with that of Yúsuf Idris, 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 Idris'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: Idris 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 heros 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 Idris 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, Idris uses periodical sentence for repetition, negation and the figure of speech called lîtotes. Hence, the tamarisk is:

لَمْ تَكَ كَبِيرًا وَلَا عَالِيًّا ... وَلَا تَعْرَفْ رَبِيعًا وَلَا خَرِيفًا وَلَا تَعْرَفْ ضَعْفًا وَلَا قَرَةً فَهِي لا تَنْمَوْنْ وَلَا تَصَغَّرْ وَلَا يَزُّ حِجْمَهَا وَلَا يَنْقُصُ ... وَلَا يَدْرِي أَحَدٌ كَيْفُ نَبُتَتْ ... فَهِي لا تَنْمَوْنْ إِلَّا فِي مَنَاطِقِ الْمُسْتَنْقَعَاتِ ... لا يَدْرِي أَحَدٌ لَمْا اخْتَارَتْ نُاحِيَتَهَا ... لا يُتَبَرَّكُ بِهَا فَقْطُ ... مَا مِن كَأْنِ ... 

It was not big and was not high ... it did not know spring or autumn ... it did not know wickedness 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 Idris’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 ... يُبَذِّرون بها ... تحف بها القداسة ... يحمدون الله على وجودها دون سواها ... الواحد منهم يقرأ لها الفاتحة ... الكل يؤمن بها ... استد هذا الإيمان ... الكفر والانحلاد ... الإيمان بالشجرة ... لا خلوق 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 Fātiha [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 dictum 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 Idris is his use of phrases and expressions which carry more than one meaning or nuance. Hence, the denotative meaning echoes the connotative meaning, thus, achieving ambiguity:

loneliness/unity of God – وحدانية حجة 
be blessed/enjoy – تبرك حف بها التقديس
surround/rattle – جنازة حف بها التقديس
uncleanliness/ incurable – مسنون 
sharp/prescribed by the Muslim Sunna – سر باتم
strong, powerful, as a saint; effective – قوية 

Idris’ 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 
leaves = ينبت 
grows = يزداد حجمها 
knows = يعرف 
surround = تكَّنف 
foolishness = سخافة 

high = عالية 
small = ضئيلة 
shrink = تصغير 
shrinkeds = تنقص 
the worst = استمتع 
fears = تخاف 
skinny = ضعيف 

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 ربيعًا وخريفًا
The old and the young. = الكبير والصغير
The poor and the rich. = الفقير وصاحب القرشين

Finally, bearing in mind Idris’ strong views about the justifiable place of the “living language of the street” in literature, his free, but well calculated use of ‘ammiyya, usually for the creation of an authentic atmosphere, is not surprising. E.g.:

Correct words. = كلام مضبوط
Both of you. = انت وهو
Leave us alone! = سيبك يا شيخ

Nice words. = كلم حلو
Sir. = يا أفندي
We have told you. = جالفوا كلمة
All the same. = برضو

In conclusion, although Idris 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.

REFERENCES