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# **The struggle for life, defeat and loneliness as the main themes in the short stories of Yusuf Idris**

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#### **Abstract**

Yusuf Idris, the famous short story Egyptian writer creates in his short stories for his readers the rural characters living hard but more rewarding lives in the country than they can in the oppressive and corrupting environment of the city. According to him (Yusuf Idris) the people living in country sides are most honest as compared to the people living in cities who are dishonest and more corrupt though the people in villages live in the harsh conditions as their lives are tough but they manage to struggle for life and defeat the failures. In the short stories of Yusuf Idris the characters, although they may live in either city or country, will be viewed as human beings, moving through life in general, with all its sorrows. The main motto of this research paper is to highlight the main themes depicting the Struggle for Life, Defeat and loneliness in the short stories of Yusuf Idris.

**Keywords:** Oppressive, environment, villages, life, struggle

#### **Introduction**

A preview of the 'defeated' or 'downtrodden hero' is given in the story Nazra which depicts a little girl drowned in a sea of urban humanity. The little girl, perceived by a passer-by who is also the narrator, is carrying a colossal platter on her head, loaded with so many things that it seems about to collapse at any moment. Her smallness is in contrast with the ceaseless traffic that she skillfully avoids, with the assurance of an adult. She looks insignificant in the unidentified surroundings, but something shines through as she stops for a moment, to look at children playing ball. It is as if she were contemplating something denied to her, symbolizing in her person the hard life, as against other children's normal Tolerance in the joys of their young age. Then the crowd again surrounds her. The little girl is an unimportant individual whose existence has been somehow justified by the simple fact that someone has bothered to look at her and think about her.

In the case of a teacher in the story "Ash-Shahada" this insignificance is marked with failure. The story describes an encounter on the train between the narrator and a former school teacher of his in Dimyat. The sight of the man brings the narrator back to his schooldays. The teacher, Alhjifni Afandi, was a complex person, whose treatment of students went from cursing them, to confiding his troubles to them. He was a lonely man, whose wife had refused to settle with him in Dimyat and he had to live alone in a hotel room. His appearance was unattractive. He was fat, and his face heavily wrinkled. The students used to make fun of him, as did his colleagues. The inspectors did not mind chastening him before his students. The narrator's attitude towards him was a mixture of love and hate, but above all he respected him, especially since the teacher had called him the zaem of chemistry. That had made him study hard now, ten years later, they meet again. The narrator introduces himself, but the teacher does not seem passionate about the encounter. But when the narrator tells him that if it is thanks to him that he has thrived in life by becoming a doctor, the teacher's face lights up. He tells the narrator that he has been unsuccessful in life, while his colleagues have been encouraged to good posts. He and his wife have been divorced. But the news that not only the narrator but the whole class has been successful, fills the teacher with happiness. The teacher, although he is a failure in some ways, has not failed completely, since his pupils have succeeded in life.

In the story al-Marjiha, however, Abd al-Latif is harsh about his failure and his life ends tragically. He is a doomed man. 'Al-Marjiha's theme is the ineffectiveness and tragedy of life.

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Abd al-Latif is a poor man, whose sole wish resides in antedating but when the day comes, it turns out no differently from the others: "It seemed to Abd al-Latif, having waited for it for so long, that the day would come suddenly, great, extensive and wide, but once it had come it was not like that at all. Its sunrise came, then its morning grew, its forenoon came, big in its straightforwardness, without celebration, accurately the way he pushes a swing with his hand and it comes back to him afterwards."

Abd al-Latif is a sick man. He used to be a good carpenter, but since he has been distressed with balharisia he has grown progressively weak. His type of carpentry required a strong hand, and now he can do only small jobs. In significance he cannot have enough money to feed or apparel his family properly. On top of that his young son is ineffectual at carpentry, injuring himself every time he lifts a hammer. He had appraised his son to reparation for his disability, but his hopes had been enhanced. He is punitive and not sure whether his wife is delighted with him as a person. His only hope is to push the swing. Since his arm is weak he pushes it gently. But he is a man insistent with bad luck. The Umda's son falls from the swing and wounds himself badly. Abdal-Latif is thrown into ijaai and dies there. Abd al-Latif is a non entity and bad luck radiated out from his personality. While he lay semiconscious during his illness, an opium salesman flattered his sister in the house, and when Abd al-Latif asked his mother what was going on, she would make-up and change the subject. After his death, report endeavors whether the salesman will marry the sister of the mother. Abd al-Latif was really a victim of incidence, his health, hopes and honor distressed, unable even to shield himself.

In the story Shaghla the main character is again a victim of poverty, which in his case is so painful that he must sell his own blood in order to survive. The character, Abdu, is a poor jack-of-all-trades, unable to clutch down a job. He lives with his wife in a neighborhood where people help each other economically when they are in need. This time he cannot even find another job, and his wife pleases him insensitively she worries him, and prompts him of all the disagreeable things that have happened in their family. But one day he finds retrieve in Talaba, a tamargi in the hospital, to whom he tells the story of his life. By recalling the past he recovers his confidence. Abdu felt peace when he was expressing his life story... and when he spoke about what had passed, his voice was full, and he felt he was growing bigger, he felt that he was a man, then his talk would grow feeble and his voice sleepy, and he would become nasty about the world, time and space, craving for the good that has been lost, and trembling at the evil which filled the heart. Then his world would become smaller, his voice would become even weaker and a humiliated smile would find its way to his face when speaking to Talaba about what had ensued to him.

Tumargi took him to the hospital. Abdu's work is to give a clout of blood. He acquires one pound thirty piaster for it, with a meal thrown in. His first thought on his way home is to buy food. At the scene of the provisions his wife Nafisa changes, she would have told him, were it not for her coyness, that she loves him. At night they spend the time gabbling like lovers. The next week Abdu will return to the hospital and will give a pint of his blood. This he does several times again, but the blood giving is taking its toll. He became strained and his wife stated it to him. She was

feeling kindly towards him, specifically after a dispute with a woman in the neighborhood who blamed him for giving blood. Abdu has to spend a whole week in bed, while at the beginning he would sleep off in the streets by the hospital. But one day, the hospital trashes to forge his blood, as he has developed anemia. Abdu in this story is not only crushed but disgraced by having to sell his blood, it is distinct of Yusuf Idris to highlight the physical features of unhappiness. It is a recurring feature of the author's work.

The story al-Hal-ar-Rabitfa although forbidding, is optimistic, since the main character, a sick woman from the sediments of society, indulges ambitions for her little daughter. The woman's situation is discriminated with the arrogant attitude of the doctor who in the end wakes up to the hard realities of life. The twenty-five year old Dr. Mazin is at peace with the world, because his rich family background has freed him from the horridness of having to struggle in life. His father is a significant physician with the Ministry of Health. Dr. Mazin has the best clothes, a nice car, and his everyday life is dreary and enjoyable. His professional life at the hospital is so regular that it is touched with monotony. When on evening duty, which is more tranquil, and does involve the pressures of the daytime, he orders varieties of sandwiches from Groppi's and the Excelsior, and makes certain that he is sufficiently provided with French and American magazines depicting women in bathing dresses.

He flourishes on chatter and the latest hospital jokes. His office is always clean and he makes sure, by looking at himself in the mirror, that he gives his patients the impression that he wishes to give. He is happy with himself to the point that he finds even the lighting at the hospital lyrical. Everyone respects him, but, because of his family background, he maintains the proper distance, knowing that the others are working there only to earn their bread. He welcomes the nurses properly, but never thinks of getting to know them. He lives in his private world, in coherence with himself, ignoring the unpleasant side of the outside world. He is in certainty unaware of what others feel, even thinking that they must be like him. He feels that all the people ought to have his enhancement and activity, that existence does not rate a single milligram of unhappiness, and that if life carried so easy and simple, without disgust or difficulties people would have no problems in this world. Dr. Mazin is aware of problems, but ignores them, and for this reason he selects night duty because it is easier.

On the evening the story takes place, he arranges himself for a night of expectable cases, for people whose illnesses he knows previously and whose words he can antedate. To make the night pleasant he orders his regular cup of coffee, and commands the nurse to polish a dirty doorknob, to make his surrounds more pleasant. The first three cases are the common ones, but the fourth one is unforeseen. A sergeant brought him a woman prisoner. He felt a sudden repulsion at her entrance. He goes through the routine checkup, but so hastily that he hardly touched her. When he asked her why she, for a similar attitude in pain she answers quietly that it is because of hashish. He found her response unexpected, because he had expected her to refute her blame loudly and state her virtue. When he revealed that she is ill she asked him quietly what is wrong with her. Again he is confused: Me was infuriated at the way she asked the question. These people do not fool. The word disease is a fearsome word which sends shivering through the limbs, so how can she

receive it with such calm? He told her that she has tuberculosis. He was sure that this time she will react and weep, but she simply tells him that that she already knows. He is surprised at her reaction since, although he is a doctor, his fear of the disease and its victims is not less than it is in others. He found himself before a new type of patient, and this made him curious, He wishes to know how she knew, and he asked her to tell him about her life. Unexcitedly she told him how she became pregnant by a driver in the country, then migrated to Cairo, and went from one driver to the next, ending up selling hashish. She is completely forthright and this has an effect on him. His face became red and yellow like a virgin's when a courageous hand is stretched towards her and played with her most sanctified possessions and morals. This woman was admitting everything without nervousness or disgrace, as if she were a professor lecturing on psychology. Despite his discomfiture, which he tries to hide by chortling, he asks her if she has a daughter. It is at this stage that she retorts, and the spark of life beams up in her. She speaks in blooming terms about her little daughter's intelligence and the goals she has for her. She wishes her to become a doctor. After the woman's departure from the office. Dr. Mazin is disturbed. Dr. Mazin sat mutely, no longer thinking. There was an anger choking him, and a feeling of fear, a dumb dead fear sneaking on him, he did not know from where, absent mindedly he fingered his stethoscope and the buttons of his coat.

In two stories, however, al-Wajhal-Akhar, and at-Tamrin-al-Awwal, where unhappiness is inflicted by specific people. In both stories those accountable are narrow-minded individuals who work through imparting fear in others.

In the story al-Wajh al-Akhar is depicted the extent to which human beings are limited in their outlook on life with the major effects of this on others. The narrator, who is an active person, likes variety and never uses the same barber twice. In this occurrence he recounts his experience with a certain barber, Usia Zaki, who likes to express his views to his customers. Zaki shows himself to be a man with vision, but an insight limited to what happens in the shop. In actual fact it is his profession that has shaped his opinions. He made an insightful comment to the effect that people have two faces, one at the front and one at the back. He has shaped a strong value judgment on the subject saying that the two faces are words of two equally exclusive requirements in man. The front one desires to look unique, by being shaven or having any kind of a moustache. Everybody wishes to look attractive by the way he treats the front face, in order to seem better in social position, but the back of the neck is the same for all, there being only a common wish to look alike. It is the similarity that strikes the barber, and in his mind he lumps all male humanity together in terms of the back of the head, all of them are the same to him and because of this he makes no dissimilarities between men.

Perhaps Yusuf Idris is endeavoring to show by inference that by treating everyone the same the barber fools superior to his customers. He is the only one who sees the backs of their heads and he subsequently feels blameless in passing decisions. His total life rotates around heads, and this also shows in the way he treats his apprentice whose lone profession is chasing flies from the customers. When the narrator points out to the barber the brutality of the boy's treatment, the barber answers that this is the best way for him to learn the business. Affronts are necessary because he

will learn only if he is fearful. The barber's world is stiff, rotating around his profession, and the stiffness of his views on men is coupled with the brutality of his training of the little boy. It is as if life assimilated and lost its meaning only in relation to his own profession. The theme of an insufficient outlook resulting from a narrow and insensitive professionalism is taken up again in the story at-Tamrin al-Awwal where it has far-reaching significances as the story rotates and it has an influence on schoolchildren and their approach toward learning. In'al-Wajh al-Akhar the barber bases his training of one boy on fear, and because it is a limited environment it concerns the acquirement of one simple skill. In a school, on the other hand, fear intrudes the whole student body, and distorts all sensitivity and takes away the joy of learning. School thus stands against life: "Scarcely has he reached the school when he finds it filled with agitated ghosts like himself, searching for the sun, but the sun, unlike spike, is not a pupil in school. Everything is overwhelming, and the feared day begins with the bell. The far rash himself is a fearsome figure, an old man who controls time. After the bell the whole courtyard becomes still with the pupils forming up in ranks. The most unlikable experience of the day is the morning presence of the nazir who stimulates fear in everyone, including the teachers. He looks at the students and the students die, and when he looks at the teachers, the teachers dry out, he looks at silence and silence shivers. The nazir is fond of little 'surprises' which he precedes by a series of affronts. With his one-track mind he begins to speak about order, or about a student accused of stealing, whom he asks to step forward to show himself to all. The students cannot comprehend the cause for the nadir's perpetual bad mood. They do not know the reason for that sudden fear, nor the secret of the deep glare in the nazir's face. Has a relative of his died? That is ridiculous, since he has a grimace every day. It makes no sense that every day a relative of his should die, or perhaps a relative of his does die every day.

The anguish continues in the classroom under the teachers meaningless questions which make the students minds go blank. The teachers throw different insults at the students according to their subject. With the succession of lessons and the variety of classes, the insults vary and their language varies. There are refined French ones, Classical Arabic ones, chemical ones, structured and mixed-up ones. As if it were not enough to have their intelligence insulted, their behavior is not secure either. Their notebooks are filled with the teachers' observations about their manner of walking, eating and sitting, even with annotations ringing them to take hold of themselves when they get irritated.

The result of this terrifying approach to learning is that no one learns anything and the pupils fail by the dozen. The students curse the teachers. What stubs them most is why they hate school so much, and why they controvert their teachers. They spend worthless moments, even though they hear people say that the best days in one's life are one's school days. The pupils feel that the only thing that helps is to have luck. One of the most intolerable classes is gymnastics. The teacher in charge of the lesson is a dictatorial type who takes his job too seriously. Gymnastics exist to make men out of them and the teacher makes them feel it through sarcasm, by saying that in a gymnastics class he needs no women or pampered boys. His motto is mens sana in corpora sano which in these conditions sounds ridiculous in view of the fact that under such treatment the

mind will never become healthy, despite a strong body. The pupils, however, are surprised to learn that a new teacher has been assigned to their class, though to them this wails just another tyrant. The new teacher is a young man, who immediately tells them that he sees they are unenthusiastic in what they are doing, and he therefore asks that those who want to exercise should raise their hands. The pupils are speechless, mistrusting disloyalty. Perhaps it was a delicate way to find out who did not want to participate. They have been done this before with the French teacher, who would give a zero with a smile. The gymnastics teacher sanitizes their nervousness and repeats, this time with firmness, that he wants good relations based on trust. The pupils cannot believe their ears, since no one has ever asked them for their opinions before. From the day they were born there has been a strong person pushing them somewhere, and nobody had asked them what they loved or what they hated. Everyone says, it is in your own interest, but it does not befall to anyone to ask them their opinions about what interests them. After a moment's silence, all except one or two lower their hands, which gratifies the teacher. The pupils experience a mixed feeling of joy and fear, because they do not understand. The event is something so much out of the ordinary, that they think the teacher mad or unbalanced. The teacher openly showed his surprise at their abhorrence of gymnastics and asked them why they feel like this. He has now gained their confidence, and they speak to him in emotional tones. He dismisses them. In the following session however, as the students are now free not to participate, everyone takes part in the exercises. The students feel now, that no one is forced, that it is in his power to choose. Nazir observes one of these sessions in his habitual bad mood, and surprises angrily about this sudden keenness for gymnastics.

But the question arises, in Yusuf Idris's case, why the worst happens so often in his stories. If it is not enough for him to depict misery, but he depicts it in its extreme forms, Yusuf Idris openly finds the more strange elements in life, the less usual kinds of tragedy, more attractive as subjects. This is partly because these are more dramatic in their essence but partly because tragedy better outfit the demands of his disposition. It is in this light that one understands better the city stories in the previous chapter. When the stories are compared with those in this chapter, one notices a common strain to both kinds, namely human suffering. City people do not really suffer because they live in the city, but because they are people. Seen in this light the country stories appear even more dreamlike and the depictions of country life mere hopeful thinking on Yusuf Idris's part.

### **Conclusion**

Human suffering is the central theme of most of Yusuf Idris' short stories. The wretchedness of the characters is contrasted with the simple happiness of 'Amm Hasan in Sahib Migrt, the man possesses all the good qualities which are missing in the other stories. He stands apart so much that he is unreal. But it is Yusuf Idris idealizing again. 'Amm Hasan is viewed nostalgically, just like the countryside. Both are so good. The author, however, being so fascinated by the negative aspects of life, does not want 'Amm Hasan to enjoy his blissful existence. There has to be someone to hound him and do him physical harm. Yusuf Idris knows what human suffering means, but he does not want his characters to be happy.

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