

Twentieth-Century
Literary Criticism

TCLC 232

Volume 232

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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**Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol.
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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

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TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

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TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

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Yusuf Idris

1927-1991

(Born 'Ali Yusuf Sayyid Yusuf Idris; also transliterated as Yūsuf Idrīs) Egyptian short story writer, playwright, novelist, journalist, and essayist.

INTRODUCTION

Idris is an important figure of Egyptian literature, whose short stories, novels, and plays chart the shifting social and political trends in Egypt during the latter half of the twentieth century. He is credited with helping to introduce realism to Arabic fiction with the publication of his first collection of short stories, *Arkhas layali* (1954; *The Cheapest Nights and Other Stories*). In this volume and in his subsequent works Idris realistically portrayed the struggles of the lower working classes and drew attention to the major economic, political, and social issues that affect modern Egyptian society. While much of his earlier work was written in a realistic style, Idris employed elements of surrealism and symbolism in his later writings. Despite changes in his formal style, however, he explored a recurring set of themes throughout his career, including overpopulation, sexuality, social freedom, Egyptian independence, poverty, homosexuality, and the repression of civil liberties. For his honest depiction of the lives of ordinary people, as well as his relentless investigation of the social and political concerns of his time, Idris remains a significant and influential figure within modern Arabic literature. Sasson Somekh has remarked that Idris “established himself as a major figure in Arabic literature,” arguing that “the bulk of his work undoubtedly constitutes a landmark in modern Egyptian fiction; and the influence of his art is evident in the writings of younger Arab storytellers.”

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Idris was born May 19, 1927, in the Egyptian village of al-Bayrum, in the province of Sharqiyyah. His mother was from a poor family, but his father was a successful farmer, and for the first five years of his life Idris enjoyed special treatment as a result of his father's position and prosperity. At the age of six his life changed dramatically, however, when he was sent to live with his mother's family in al-Bayrum, so that he could attend primary school. As the only child in an adult household, Idris felt isolated, though he took some comfort in listening to his great-grandmother's childhood stories

and retellings of Egyptian folklore. After completing his elementary schooling Idris was sent to live with his uncle in Damietta, where he continued his education. At the outbreak of World War II he returned to his parents' care. The family moved a number of times during the war, and as a result Idris attended several secondary schools in Mansaral, Zaqaziq, and Tanta. After World War II ended he enrolled in Cairo University, where he entered medical school on a full scholarship.

In college Idris became politically active and was eventually arrested as a result of his activities, spending two months in prison in 1949. He began writing short stories while in college, and his interest in writing expanded after he became the secretary for an anti-British student nationalist movement, which required him to write pamphlets in support of the revolutionary cause. In 1950 he published the story “Unshudat al-ghuraba,” or “The Strangers' Song,” in the magazine *al-Qissah*. Soon after, he began publishing stories in the Cairo newspaper *al-Masri*, as well as in a weekly magazine titled *Rose al-Yusuf*. After participating in student demonstrations in 1951, Idris was once again imprisoned and served three months before he was released. That same year, he graduated from medical school and began an internship at a local hospital.

In the months that followed, Idris opened a clinic in Cairo and worked as a medical inspector for the Department of Health, an experience that exposed him to the poor living conditions of several impoverished Cairo neighborhoods; his work also provided him with important material for *The Cheapest Nights and Other Stories*. During this time Idris became increasingly disenchanted with Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel-Nasser and openly criticized his agrarian reform and foreign policies in several articles written for local newspapers, which led to another arrest in 1954. While serving a year-long sentence Idris met communist prisoners and eventually joined the Communist Party. He severed ties with the party in 1956, however, because he could not fully support the organization's beliefs. Soon after, Idris began working for a newspaper, *al-Jumhuriyyah*, where he produced a weekly column detailing his political and social views. The position also allowed him to travel extensively throughout the Middle East.

In 1956 Idris produced his second short story collection, *Jumhuriyyat Farahat*, one of his best-known works, as well as the play *Malik al-qutn*. The following

year he married a woman named Raja' and began raising a family. He also produced two more volumes of stories that year, titled *al-Batal* and *Alaysa kadhālika*. In 1958 Idris published a play criticizing the Egyptian government, titled *al-Lahzah al-harijah*, which was followed by another collection of short stories, *Hadithat sharaf* (1958). In 1960 Idris gave up his medical career and devoted himself to writing full time. Scholars have noted a significant shift in the author's writing style during this period, from socially realistic depictions of rural Egyptian life to a broader, more universal style of story-telling. In 1961 Idris traveled to Algeria to report on the war for independence but ended up joining the resistance movement against the French. He was wounded after six months of service and returned to Egypt. Idris continued to produce fiction during the early 1960s, including the novel *al-'Ayb* (1962), as well as two short story collections, *Akhir al-dunya* (1961) and *al-'Askari al-aswad* (1962), but became increasingly interested in theater and playwriting. His best-known play, *al-Farafir*, was performed and published in 1964.

Despite significant bouts of depression, brought on, in part, by political unrest in Egypt and the Middle East, Idris continued to produce stories, novels, and plays during the late 1960s and 1970s. In 1969 the author became the literary editor for the Cairo newspaper *al-Ahram*. Idris's health deteriorated significantly in the years that followed, but he continued to write during the last decades of his life. Among the last works published during his lifetime are the novel *Nyu-Yurk 80* (1981; *New York 80*), the play *al-Bahlawan* (1983), and the short story collection *al-'Atab 'ala al-nazar* (1987). Idris died on August 1, 1991, in London.

MAJOR WORKS

Idris's short stories are generally considered the author's most significant literary contribution. The tales in *The Cheapest Nights and Other Stories*, which depict difficult social conditions within Egyptian society, are prominent examples of his use of realism. In addition to his unflinchingly realistic descriptions and plotlines, the author also employs colloquial language in an effort to create a faithful portrait of Egypt's rural, peasant, and lower classes. Issues of poverty, oppression, and overpopulation are among the primary themes that Idris explores in this collection. In the title story, for instance, the protagonist, Abd al-Karim, is a husband and father who is frustrated by the inescapable poverty that characterizes his life. After attending the evening prayers at his mosque, he encounters street children begging for food. Irritated by his own financial state, he curses the children and their existence, then returns home, where he must climb over his own six children to reach his

wife. After they make love, the story then moves forward in time, to show the protagonist being congratulated on the birth of another son. Another story in the collection, "Shughlana" ("Hard Up"), also illustrates the poverty that the lower classes face in Egyptian society. In this tale the protagonist, 'Abduh, a cook, is forced to take less and less lucrative jobs, until finally he must sell his own blood to provide for his family. After determining that he is anemic, the blood-bank turns him away at the end of the story, claiming that they do not want to exploit him.

Idris's second volume of stories, *Jumhuriyyat Farahat*, is considered one of the author's most important works. Once again Idris exposes the struggles of Egypt's working class in the collection, but he also explores political issues, particularly with regard to foreign occupation. In the title story of the volume, an unnamed narrator is arrested for political activism and brought in to a police station, where he encounters Sergeant Farahat. Farahat recognizes that the narrator is a gentleman and assumes that he is not a prisoner. When he discovers the truth, however, his attitude towards the man changes dramatically. Another story in the collection, "Qissat Hubb," also promotes the idea of Egyptian independence. Idris later expanded the story into a novel, which was published as *Qissat Hubb* (1967; *City of Love and Ashes*).

In the late 1950s the author continued his critique of Egyptian politics and society in the volumes *al-Batal* and *Alaysa kadhālika*. In the former collection, Idris emphasizes anti-British sentiment, as in the story "It Is a Game?," in which a child is badly beaten during a game of Egyptians versus British. As a representative of the British side, the boy is subjected to physical violence at the hands of his peers, who are so caught up in the effort to defeat the British that they lose their sense of reality. The stories of *Alaysa Kadhālika* treat the theme of oppression, as well as the gap between the rich and the poor. The title story of the collection depicts the inequality in the relationship between a judge and his servant/mistress. In another tale, "Al-Mahraza," translated as "The Wallet," a boy discovers that his family is impoverished, and in the process he must accept that his father is not infallible.

Idris turned his focus to the double standards that existed between the genders in Egyptian society in the volume *Hadithat sharaf*. The book's title story examines the injustice caused by the disparity between society's views of female and male sexuality. Sexuality is also an important theme in the stories of *Bayt min lahm* (1971), while the author returns to Egypt's political conflicts in the 1982 collection, *Uqtulha*, which features a story titled "19502" that addresses the 1952 Egyptian revolution. In his final short story collection, *al-'Atab 'ala al-nazar*, Idris once again confronts oppressive societal beliefs, as depicted in "Abu al-rijal," or "The

Leader of Men," in which an aging Sultan accepts his homosexuality after years of repression.

Although generally not as well received as his short stories, Idris's novels address similar concerns and themes to those the author explored in his shorter fiction. Egyptian independence is the primary theme of *City of Love and Ashes*. The two main characters of the novel, Hamza and Fawziya, fall in love but decide that their love is secondary to their cause: Egyptian freedom. As some scholars have noted, Idris employs multiple registers of language in the novel to depict the diction of characters from different regions and social classes. The author's short novel *al-Haram* (1959; *The Sinners*) is concerned with the relationship between class discrimination and society's perception of sin. The novel centers around the discovery of a dead baby, found on the grounds of a cotton estate in the Nile Delta, and speculation regarding the mother's identity. Conflict deepens between the two classes on the estate, the migrant workers and the year-long residents, who believe themselves to be morally superior. When the mother, a migrant worker, is revealed as the victim of rape, those passing judgment are forced to reconsider their own moral stance. Promoting the idea that prejudice is learned, the novel depicts the young children of both classes playing peacefully together. Gender issues are the focus of *al-'Ayb*, in which the author considers the question of women working outside of the home, from both a male and female perspective. In *Nyu-Yurk 80*, Idris investigates the cultural differences between Eastern and Western culture, emphasizing especially the materialism of the Western world.

Idris also produced several significant plays during his literary career. In *al-Lahzah al-harijah*, he concentrates on the rising nationalist and anti-imperialist attitudes that reached their nadir in Egypt in 1957, following the nationalization of the Suez Canal. The play focuses on the financial hardship that an Egyptian family faces during this crisis, as well as their courage in opposing imperialist forces, but it also harshly criticizes the Egyptian government. His most famous play, *al-Farafir*, presents a satirical portrait of the relationship between a master and servant in two acts. In the controversial play *al-Mukhatatin* (1969), the author once again expresses his frustration with the Nasser-led Egyptian government. Although more comical in tone, his late play *al-Bahlawan* also addresses political and social issues. In this work, Idris humorously depicts the decay and disintegration of Egyptian society, which he directly links to the "open door" political policy created to encourage private foreign investment in the country. Idris was a unique figure in Egyptian theater, in part because his plays were among the only works to depict shifts in Egypt's political and social atmospheres at that time.

His use of colloquial language, sometimes criticized in his works of fiction, was naturally suited for the stage, as well, and generally appreciated by audiences.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Idris first came to the attention of readers and critics in Egypt with the 1954 publication of his first volume of short stories, *The Cheapest Nights and Other Stories*. Because of its groundbreaking content and realistic formal style, the novel was heralded as a landmark work of fiction, and has since been credited with introducing realism to Arabic fiction. Among the author's earliest supporters was the celebrated Egyptian writer Taha Husayn, who introduced the collection and declared that Idris was an outstanding writer with considerable talent. Husayn also wrote the introduction to Idris's second short story collection, *Jumhuriyyat Farahat*, which secured the author's reputation as a master storyteller, eventually becoming one of his most renowned works. Although a supporter of Idris's work, Husayn nevertheless recommended that he abandon his use of colloquial Arabic and adopt modern standard Arabic for his future writings. In response Idris insisted that he could not adequately provide a realistic portrayal of his characters without using vernacular diction, a decision which drew criticism throughout his career.

The political themes of the author's work also sparked controversy, particularly within the Egyptian government. The play *al-Lahzah al-harijah*, in which Idris criticized Egypt's policy regarding the Suez Canal, is credited with contributing to a government crackdown on publishing houses in the country. Censorship issues prompted the author to publish his next collection of short stories, *Hadithat sharaf*, in Lebanon. Despite such opposition Idris achieved considerable success during the 1960s and 1970s.

His work began to reach wider audiences during this time, as he altered his style and broadened his subject matter, and began composing more works for the theater. His most famous play, *al-Farafir*, was popular with audiences, though it also sparked a lively critical debate after it was produced in 1964. In 1965 Idris was awarded the Hiwar International Literary Prize, presented by the Lebanese journal *Hiwar*, although the author refused the award after he became convinced that the journal was financially backed by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States.

Since the 1960s scholars have continued to probe the thematic and formal attributes of Idris's writings. Many have also assessed the author's work as a novelist, short story writer, and playwright, with most championing his short stories over his other writings. Louis 'Awad, while describing the play *al-Lahzah al-harijah* as a "genu-

inely profound" study of fear, nevertheless has argued that the work betrays "a haste and lack of genuine understanding of the artistic dimension of drama." Roger Allen has acknowledged that Idris's novels demonstrate his concern with political and social problems but concludes that "the artificial nature of their narrative thread often seems subordinated to the overt political or social message, suggesting that we are dealing with a writer whose sense of commitment is most forcibly and effectively conveyed in the shorter genres."

Other commentators have reassessed Idris's use of colloquial Arabic in both his fiction and dramas. Sasson Somekh has asserted that the author "resorts to vernacular items as part of his efforts to portray 'local reality'" and concludes that "in so doing he is definitely enriching the language of fiction, rather than damaging it, as certain critics seem to imply." Idris's treatment of sexuality and gender issues has also dominated the attention of a number of critics. Hilary Kilpatrick has acknowledged that the author's "concern with sexual morality and with women is genuine" but argues that "despite passages where he writes with great insight he is still a prisoner of the attitudes with which he grew up." Catherine Cobham, however, has maintained that Idris "shows his most shrewd understanding of Egyptian society and its changing values through his stories of sexual relationships and his exploration of the nature of love, need, desire, repression, frustration, and masculinity and femininity themselves within these relationships." Likewise, Dayla Cohen-Mor has asserted that "human sexuality transcends his realistic, impressionistic, symbolic, and surrealistic stories, to serve as a unifying feature, a common denominator, or an artistic marker of his literary work," adding that his "literary gifts are evident in his skillful handling of the subject."

Considered both groundbreaking and influential, Idris remains a respected figure of twentieth-century Egyptian literature. According to M. Akif Kirecci, who has praised Idris's "genius and powerful pen" as well as his "role as a participant in the events of history," the author is "indispensable in understanding Egyptian culture and the plight of the Egyptian people in the grip of societal transformation." Kirecci concludes that Idris's "literary works as a whole reflect Egypt's culminating experiences and struggles along the path to becoming an independent modern nation."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Arkhas layali [*The Cheapest Nights and Other Stories*] (short stories) 1954
Jumhuriyyat Farahat [*Farahat's Republic*] (short stories) 1956

Malik al-qutn [*The Cotton King*] (play) 1956
Alaysa kadhālika [*Isn't that so?*] (short stories) 1957
al-Batal [*The Hero*] (short stories) 1957
Hadithat sharaf [*An Affair of Honour*] (short stories) 1958
al-Lahzah al-harijah [*The Crucial Moment*] (play) 1958
al-Haram [*The Sinners*] (novel) 1959
Akhir al-dunya [*The End of the World*] (short stories) 1961
al-'Askari al-aswad [*The Black Soldier*] (short stories) 1962
al-'Ayb [*The Sin*] (novel) 1962
al-Farafir [*The Stooges*] (play) 1964
al-Mahzalah al-Ardiyyah (play) 1965
Lughat al-ay ay [*The Language of Pain and Other Stories*] (short stories) 1966
Qissat Hubb [*City of Love and Ashes*] (novel) 1967
al-Mukhatatin (play) 1969
al-Nadahah (short stories) 1969
al-Bayda' [*The White Woman*] (novel) 1970
Bayt min lahm [*The House of Flesh*] (short stories) 1971
al-Jins al-thalith (play) 1971
Ana sultan qanun al-wujud [*I am the Lord of the Law of Existence*] (short stories) 1978
Nyu-Yurk 80 [*New York 80*] (novel) 1981
Uqtulha [*Kill Her*] (short stories) 1982
al-Bahlawan (play) 1983
Rings of Burnished Brass (short stories) 1984
al-'Atab 'ala al-nazar (short stories) 1987
A Leader of Men (novella) 1988
Selected Stories (short stories) 1991
The Piper Dies and Other Stories (short stories) 1992

CRITICISM

Louis 'Awad (essay date April 1961)

SOURCE: 'Awad, Louis. "Yusuf Idris and the Art of Drama." In *Critical Perspectives on Yusuf Idris*, edited by Roger Allen, pp. 159-67. Colorado Springs, Colo.: Three Continents Press, 1994.

[In the following essay, originally published in Arabic in the journal *Al-Katib* in April 1961, 'Awad examines Idris's play *al-Lahzah al-harijah*, praising it as a "genuinely profound" study of fear but ultimately claiming that it betrays "a haste and lack of genuine understanding of the artistic dimension of drama," mainly as a result of Idris's depiction of his hero.]

I read Yusuf Idris's play, *The Crucial Moment*, two years ago when it was still in manuscript. The author had not yet decided what to call it. To be more precise, at that point the author was calling it *The Door*, but when it was published, it appeared under the title, *The Crucial Moment*. That is the title being used for the production at the National Theater.

Yusuf Idris has changed the course of the action more than once as well as the title, and for a variety of reasons. Some of the alterations have worked, but, even with all these changes, we can still look at the work as a whole and suggest that there is still room for more. The reason is that Yusuf Idris has chosen to treat a topic that is at once subtle, profound, and ticklish. It is a quintessentially dramatic theme, but one that is beyond the capabilities of average playwrights; it may well be beyond that of Yusuf Idris himself. And, because that is the case, the author should have realized that he should finish with it before the entire structure was put in final form.

Yusuf Idris deserves to be saluted for embarking on such a theme, namely fear. This is not fear in its simplest sense, but fear as a complex; not the fear cowards feel, nor that of heroes, but instead something even more complicated; something like the courage of cowards. As we examine the course of events in the play, it will become clear why Yusuf Idris merits our salutations.

Sa'd, the hero of the play—if indeed it has one at all—is a typical young man going to university; to be precise, he's an engineering student. He's been brought up in a family that can be described without exaggeration as being like thousands of others within the lower middle-class. The pillar of the family is al-Hajj Nassar, who owns a small but successful business. Beginning his life in abject poverty, he has managed by dint of sheer effort, economic sense, endurance in the face of humiliation, and courageous resistance to hunger, destitution and misery over a period of some thirty years to go from being a wretched laborer to a successful small businessman. He is the proverbial local success-story. Al-Hajj Nassar is married to Haniyya. He has an elder son named Mis'ad, a younger son named Sa'd, and a daughter named Kawthar. Al-Hajj Nassar's innate practical sense has made him realize that he has to make a choice between his two sons; that way one of them and perhaps the entire family can escape the clutches of poverty. He has chosen the eldest, Mis'ad, to be the victim and has deprived him of an education. He has made him part of the business and trained him to be a worker who will strive and struggle so that the family income will grow. He has married Mis'ad off to a girl named Firdaws from the same class in order to put him in his natural environment. It is the younger son, Sa'd, who is selected to complete his education and be gradu-

ated as a big-shot engineer on whom the family can pin all its hopes and aspirations. . . .

This then is the family whose inner life we get to see very closely. Everything proceeds quite naturally. The family bothers about the daily problems that no family is ever without. Kawthar, the daughter of the family, is always arguing with Firdaws, the wife of the working son, Mis'ad, about living in her father-in-law's house. Rightly or wrongly, Firdaws gets the impression she is being treated like a servant, even though neither al-Hajj Nassar nor his wife are unkind to her; indeed, they are particularly kind to her. But Kawthar gives her a tongue-lashing morning and night. There is something else that is even more irksome. She realizes that her husband, Mis'ad, is working very hard, not to build a family home for the two of them, but rather to pay for his brother to finish his education. She notices that he seems quite content with this constant work-load and justifies it with considerable enthusiasm and magnanimity; in fact, he justifies all effort aimed at the general good in the same way. He finds the very greatest pleasure in helping someone else along and envisages his own success as lying in that of his own brother. Firdaws on the other hand uses the bitter logic of life itself: she is thinking of their children who are being deprived by their father of opportunities in life because of his younger brother. She realizes that in the end all this effort of Mis'ad will only lead to his children remaining those of a poor laborer while Sa'd's children will be those of a big-shot engineer. In spite of all her husband's efforts, she still feels a guest in someone else's house rather than the mistress of her own; or, even more so, a servant who spends her time sweeping and washing for other people. It is hardly surprising therefore that there is continual quarreling between Firdaws and Kawthar, or that Kawthar snubs her nose at everyone. Firdaws demands that her husband move out of his father's house and set up house on his own where his efforts will be for the two of them and their children alone. She threatens to leave her husband and return to her father's house because he never listens to what she is saying and subjects her to all kinds of hardship that she cannot endure.

This then would seem to constitute a big enough problem for the family, but before long we discover that there's another issue that is much more profound. Sa'd, like many other young men of the time, has felt himself constrained to participate in the nationalist struggle to throw the British out of Egypt. Along with a group of his colleagues in the National Guard or a youth organization somewhat like it, he is secretly in training to carry weapons. All this is supposed to be in preparation for the major confrontation between us and the British. I say "training secretly" because he realizes that neither his father nor mother understand the kind of "abstractions" that young people involve themselves in, things