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Perspectives Behind Translating House of Flesh by Yusuf Idris

Within the canon of great minds and talents that brought Egypt to a literary renaissance between 1880 and 1960, Yusuf Idris (1927-1991) is widely acknowledged as the master of the Egyptian short story. Employing a compact, terse style, charged with an energy that viscerally engages the senses as much as it does the imagination and intellect, he burst into the public eye with a prolific outpouring of work in the years directly following the 1952 Revolution. His stories from the beginning were confrontational and provocative, articulated from his firm commitment to political activism. Although his literary efforts had largely petered out by the 1970s, the uncompromising zeal and intensity he brought to his short stories left a groundbreaking impression on the history of modern Arabic fiction.

Inside the Arabic literary tradition, the short story (*al-qisṣah al-qaṣīrah*, or *al-uqṣuṣah*) is in itself a genre that bears a political dimension, first and foremost due to its having been largely inspired by foreign models.¹ Even in Europe and North America, it only achieved widespread acceptance as a literary form distinct from novels in the early nineteenth century. In the climate of French literary prestige and British colonialism encroaching upon Egypt's identity, the choice whether to adopt or reject such forms was often indicative of a wider political view. Some intellectuals were convinced that the only way to save Egypt from cultural effacement was to re-appropriate the language and forms of the great classical masters like Abu Nawas and al-Mutanabbi and inject them into contemporary literature, warding off further corruption as a vaccine wards off disease. This movement, known as the Barudi school, was entirely modernist in that it used literature to address modern topics and themes, but it did so using the familiar meters, diction, and literary artistry that had been loved and appreciated by generations of Arabic speakers; to this day, the musical poetry of Ahmad Shawqi is still widely preferred to European prose forms like the short story and the novel.²

In opposition to the Barudi school, there emerged a cadre of intellectuals who comprised what was called the Diwan school after their famous pamphlet, *al-Diwān kitāb fī al-adab wa-al-naqd* (which in fact was only published in 1921 after the formal organization had dissolved). The group's founders, 'Abbas al-'Aqqad, 'Abd al-Rahman Shukri, and Ibrahim al-Mazini, believed (not without some validity) that the very thing that had distinguished Arabic literature in classical period was its flexibility and openness to outside influence; they accordingly argued for the reading of foreign (*i.e.*, European) literature and adapting it to Arabic, in order to expand the scope of the language and afford it fluency in new themes and forms.³ Doing this required

strong ideological commitment, as the natively Arabic prose genres, the tale (*uqṣūṣah* or *hikāyah*), the treatise (*risālah*), and the dramatic anecdote (*maqāmah*), had long suffered from a poor reputation of being frivolous and morally suspect. The activists Gamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-97) and Muhammad ‘Abduh (1845-1905), who called for the radical reform of society on all fronts, provided justification and inspiration for such a commitment. The subsequent literary movement was inherently (although not exclusively) inclined towards iconoclasm and rejecting established norms: al-‘Aqqad, for example, wrote that the classical heritage was too ossified and irrelevant to be of any further “use” to society, while al-Mazini accused the neo-classicist Hafiz of “not being a poet.”⁴ The poets of the Diwan school instead turned to English romanticism, notably Tennyson, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Blake, in their efforts to revivify Arabic poetry, while prosodists like Muhammad and Mahmud Taymur, Hasan Mahmud, and Mahmud ‘Izzi made their *début* as short story writers, modeling their work on the French writer Guy de Maupassant.⁵

It is clear that both poets and prosodists of the new century believed in the social-political mission behind their work; the obsession with ‘usefulness’ kept the first Arabic novels limited to “thinly disguised and romanticized expositions on philosophical or social problems,” in the words of J. Brugman.⁶ As exemplified by the comments of al-‘Aqqad, the reformists believed that literature should enlighten the masses and bring about their empowerment and mobilization; such a task required the forging of a new, authentic literary canon that would reflect the concerns, issues, and language of contemporary Egyptians. In their search for the ‘Egyptian character’ (*al-shakhṣīyah al-miṣrīyah*) that would represent and resonate with the people,⁷ the Taymur brothers, Ahmad Khayri Sa‘id, and Mahmud Tahir Lashin (all aristocrats) turned to writing about the popular classes, especially the poor and the downtrodden. The works of Russian authors like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Pushkin, and Chekov, with their sympathetic view of the Russian underclass, were a source of great inspiration. The author Muhammad Husayn Haykal, widely regarded as the author of the first ‘Egyptian novel,’⁸ published *Zaynab* (1913) under the pen-name *Miṣrī Fallāh*, “an Egyptian of the peasantry.”⁹ Although these early efforts tended to be romantic in their outlook and were not altogether convincing as portrayals of rural life, they provided the basis for the development of the ‘New’ School (*al-madrasah al-ḥadīthah*) of the mid-1920s that adopted a more realist approach.

Although the formal organization behind the New School only lasted for a few years before its members parted ways, it was during this time that the primary ideological tenets that would provide a platform for Yusuf Idris were first articulated. It was the opinion of the New School that the novelist was to write with an unabashed realism that would expose corruption

and decay in society, however painful it may be, to bring these issues to the public eye.¹⁰ Shahata 'Ubayd, a writer from among their ranks, argued that "stories should be based on naked facts and accurate observations without any interference of the imagination."¹¹ Idris himself would later write that through observation, diagnosis, and predictions, the author functioned as a kind of prophet for society, warning his readers of the dangers and challenges they faced and offering guidance to surmount them: "We fail to understand that above all our mission is a humanitarian one. The story is not an artistic medium. It is the outcome of the author's interaction with his ideals and society."¹² Although they were committed to bringing the 'real' Egypt of laborers, farmers, and peasants to light, this singular fixation on the proper form and content for the new national literature had a major impact on the style and language in Egyptian prose in the twenties.

One would expect that the New School's iconoclastic scorn for the classical tradition and its devotion to national prestige and progress would effectively limit the choice of language to the contemporary dialect of the Egyptian people. This was not the case, however; Arabic is a language rich in dialectic registers and choosing an appropriate diction for 'literature' remained a surprisingly contentious issue between writers. For many centuries, the spoken Arabic of Egypt ('*ammīyah*) had diverged greatly from the written Arabic of the classical tradition (*fuṣḥá*), and with the Turco-Circassian leadership of the Mamluks and Muhammad 'Ali, the patronage of formal Arabic as a literary language had long ago ceased.¹³ Literary Arabic was thus a domain of its own, maintained chiefly by the religious establishment at the university of al-Azhar to teach the Qur'an and classical exegesis, with little influence outside this sphere. This maintained a long-standing stigma against writing in any kind of Arabic except for the classical language. In addition, nationalism proved to be a thorny issue for Egyptian writers; if the 'nation' was Egypt, then a case could be made for writing in '*ammīyah*, but if the author wanted his work to be intelligible to all Arabophones, he would have to forego his commitment to realism and write in *fuṣḥá*. The intellectuals Yusuf al-Sharuni and Salama Musa, who were sympathetic to both causes, eventually ended up taking the side of classical Arabic for the sake of a united Arab people,¹⁴ while many other realist writers indeed first published their stories in '*ammīyah*, only to get cold feet and republish them in *fuṣḥá*.¹⁵ This is an ongoing issue that continues to divide allegiances for writers today.

With the dissolution of the New School's journal *al-Fagr* in 1927, the nationalist realism that they endorsed fell into the background and was subsumed by a more romantic and self-reflexive style that prevailed during the 1930s.¹⁶ By the end of the 1940s, however, Egypt once again fell into popular unrest and nationalist movements began gathering steam. With the

success of the ultra-nationalist military coup headed by Muhammad Neguib and Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir (Nasser) in 1952, a new generation of writers rose to prominence, working from the ideology and heritage of the New School. Yusuf Idris was at the forefront of this generation; indeed, it can be said that his literary career mirrored the ups and downs of the new régime. After his secondary school education in the Delta cities of Zaqaq, Mansurah, and Dumyat (Damietta), he came to Cairo University in 1945 and immediately immersed himself in the world of political and social activism. He joined the Marxist “Executive Committee for Armed Struggle” (*al-Lagnah al-Tanfīdhīyah lil-Kifāh al-Musallah*) and contributed to the leftist journals *Maqallat al-Gamī‘* and *al-Kātib*. In 1952, the year of the Revolution, he began work in the Qasr al-‘Aini Hospital in and simultaneously began publishing his stories in *al-Miṣrī* the following year. His leftist connections got him briefly arrested in Nasser’s anti-Communist purges, but by and large he was an outspoken public supporter of the government. By 1956, he was among the regular contributors to the now-national newspapers *al-Gumhurīyah* and *al-Ahrām*.¹⁷ At the same time, he was employed by the Ministry of Health, a post that he held until 1966. It was during this period that his most famous works were published, among them eight collections of short stories, four novellas, and three plays. As Nasser’s star fell in the wake of the disastrous 1967 war with Israel, so too did Idris’. He was dismissed from the Ministry, quit medicine entirely, and devoted himself to journalism.¹⁸

Like the New School, Idris believed in the importance of an authentically ‘Egyptian’ literature and made its establishment the main ideological thrust of his writings. As P. M. Kurpershoek indicates, this is explicitly visible in his very first story, *Five Hours* (*Khamas Sa‘āt*). The treacherously murdered ‘Abd al-Qadir is the very embodiment of the Egyptian face and character: “His features attracted my attention. They were typically Egyptian, so Egyptian that they roused your own Egyptianness and made you love it anew.”¹⁹ However, contrary to the pan-Arabist ideals of Nasser and some of his supporters, Idris was uninterested in, or perhaps unconvinced of, the possibility of an ‘Arab’ character or literature that could span the breadth of the Arabic-speaking countries. Although he stood on the precedent of writers like Ahmad Khayri Sa‘id, Tawfiq al-Hakim and the early work of Mahmud Taymur, perhaps no other author has stuck with such devotion to Egyptianism like Idris, who was known for his public and vehement disagreements with pro-*fushā* intellectuals like Taha Husayn and Yusuf al-Siba‘i, secretary of the Higher Council for Arts and Literature.

Especially in his early works, in which his commitment to realism and naturalism kept him closely tied to the “social moment” (to follow Sasson Somekh’s terminology²⁰) like a reporter on the scene, Idris eschews any ornamentation or refinement of expression that was

characteristic of high Arabic literature centuries past, keeping his language at best at the simple, straightforward register of newspaper *fushā*. According to the realities of the situation, the characters, and the narrating voice, he blends this neutral, rather featureless prose with an assortment of colloquial registers, ranging from the conversational language of educated elites (*al-‘āmmīyah al-muthaqqafah*) to regional dialects, most notably the peasant *ša‘īdī* of rural Egypt and the slang and argot of underclass Cairo.²¹ In addition, he placed great significance in the oral traditions of the illiterate Egyptians, in their storytelling (*riwāyāt*) and jokes (*nukat*). Both his narrative prose and his dialogue are peppered with Egyptian idioms and proverbs, and even when he writes dialogue in *fushā* he incorporates colloquial structures to give the classical words the precise meaning they carry in Egyptian dialect.²² In one of his stories, *Did You Have to Turn on the Light, Lili?* (*A-kān lā budd yā Līlī an tūḍī’ al-nūr?*), Idris adopts the popular tradition of the humorous anecdote (*al-nuktah*) into a kind of short story; he furthermore locates his protagonists in the ‘popular’ (*sha‘bīyah*) district of Batiniyah, with its opium dens and hashish dealers, awarding them the memorable title “the people of the joke” (*ahl al-nukat*).²³ This is one of his most salient efforts to neutralize the foreignness of the short story by situating it within a native, popular tradition.²⁴

Idris’ iconoclasm also ventures into the realm of social mores. From the beginning, he made a name for himself by explicitly placing sex in his stories. The title story from his début collection, *Cheapest Nights* (*Arkhas al-Layālī*, 1954), is about a bored peasant man, wandering the streets of his village; eventually he gives up and returns to his wife, lying in bed surrounded by their many children. In nine months’ time, she gives birth to another child, and he wonders where all these children keep coming from! In the story *An Affair of Honor* (*Hadithat Sharaf*), a woman suffers a mortifying examination of her genitals after being caught alone with a well-known village rake; although she is eventually exonerated, the humiliation and shame the incident brought about lingers on. *The Siren* (*al-Naddāhah*), a story about a newly-wed couple from the village encountering the city for the first time, opens with a graphic depiction of the husband Hamid stumbling upon a rich city *effendi* in coitus with his wife. This preoccupation with sex, like Idris’ preoccupation with the underclass, comes from a pre-formed ideological standpoint. The sex is rarely about the sex itself—usually, it carries a moral and political message.²⁵ In the periodical *Mawāqif*, Idris wrote, “I choose woman as being the best expression of frankness in society ... I can say that I write about sex as being part of life. Sex for me equals life.”²⁶

Taha Husayn, the great critic of Arabic language and literature, once wrote of Idris, “It is impossible to remove a single superfluous word from the sentences of Idris’ stories.”²⁷ This was a

characteristic of Idris' that he developed over time. In the later years of his writing career, Idris slowly lost his enthusiasm for photographic-like realism, narrated through a decidedly non-literary voice. His language tightened and grew more economical. As his words grew sparer, each one had to be compensated through expressiveness in its sound and density in its meaning. Although he remained devoted to the language of 'Egypt' as a nation, he grew more and more interested in the psychological, the subconscious, and the unexpressed facets of its people and culture. Somekh describes this later phase as the moment of contact with "shattered reality" and "nightmares."²⁸ Reading this prose aloud can resemble the reading of poetry; anadiplosis (repetition and duplication), synthaesthesia (the use of one sense-impression to refer to another), asyndeta and parataxis (the stringing together of clauses without any joining words), onomatopoeia, inversion, rhyme, and paranomasia (punning and other wordplay) are all distinctive features of the later period.²⁹ The focus on the imagistic and the sensory, the language for language's sake as it were, almost erases the narrative presence and leaves the reader alone with the sights, sounds, and smells of the story as if he or she was in it. Somekh illustrates this technique in the story *The Sparrow and the Wire* (*al-'Asfur wa-al-Silk*), which removes all explication from the narrative and leaves only verbs, which function more as sonic images than they do as bearers of technical meaning:

فجأة شقشق . فجأة تلفت . فجأة رفف . فجأة صوصو . انتش فجأة . طار . حام . حوم . حط . تشبث . تلفت .

Fag'atan shaqshaq. Fag'atan talaffat. Fag'atan rafraf. Fag'atan şawşaw. Intashsha fag'atan. Tār. Hām. Hawwam. Haṭṭ. Tashshabbath. Talaffat.

"Suddenly chirped... suddenly turned... suddenly ruffled... suddenly peeped... fluffed out, suddenly. Flew. Glided. Hovered. Fell. Alighted. Turned."³⁰

It is in this sparse, semi-poetic style that Idris wrote his last collection of stories, *House of Flesh* (*Bayt min Lahm*), which was published in 1971. Politically, it occurs in a moment where Idris' devotion to the Nasserist cause had greatly slackened. After the war of 1967, he had grown much more critical of the government and lampooned Nasser in his stories *The Trick* (*al-Khud'ah*, 1969) and *The Journey* (*al-Rihlah*, 1970).³¹ In *House of Flesh*, Idris criticizes authority through problematizing and deflating the aura of respectability that surrounds the shaykh, an enduring symbol of prestige and power. In *Did You Have to Turn on the Light, Lili?*, an eager young imam comes to the Batiniyah district to win the hearts of the residents back to religion. Yet the charms of Lili, a local prostitute, cause his own sincerity to waver even as the people of Batiniyah begin to respond to his call. The story ends with a joke, "in the joke that it is not a joke"³²—while leading the morning prayer, the imam loses his self-control and slips out the window of the mosque to visit Lili, who tells him that she has found recorded sermons to be just

as useful as a live imam in his case, and to get lost. The men praying, meanwhile, are stuck in the middle of the *sujūd* prostration, foreheads to the ground, unable to look up and see what has happened to the imam.

There is no doubt that the title story of *House of Flesh* is among his most famous, largely due to the sophisticated technique Idris developed over ten years of creative output, as well as its provocative plot. The basic story is of a young widow whose husband has died from illness. She is left in crushing poverty with three daughters to feed. The only way out of this trap is through marrying off her daughters, but because they are both poor and unattractive, no suitors come calling. Finally, the daughters convince their mother to marry the blind man who comes to their house to recite the Qur'an every Friday in memory of the deceased. The idea is that with a man around, it will be possible for other men to come and visit, and this will surely lead to propositions down the road. This, however, does not happen, and as there is only one room to accommodate all five people, the girls are driven frantic by the sounds of their mother's love-making; finally, one of them steals the ring while the mother is away from the house and, wearing it, sleeps with her step-father. The secret eventually gets out; overwhelmed by the despairing certitude that they are too poor and too ugly to be married, the girls begin taking turns with the ring to satisfy their desire.

The ethical dimension of knowledge and certainty is carefully explored in this story. Right from the beginning, we see some interesting language choices that interweave the senses of sight and hearing as our basis for certainty: "Silence prevails; ears cannot see...Darkness consumes all. In darkness, eyes cannot see."³³ Silence and darkness take the central roles of this story, carefully and willfully placed at the right moments so as to blind the sighted and deafen the blind from what happens. Just as the women turn off the light before putting on the ring, as if not to see their own actions, so too does the husband accept their silence and joins them in it. He knows from touch that the woman he is sleeping with *feels* different every night, but without the blessing of sight, he cannot be entirely sure; and as he comes closer and closer to realizing what is going on, the more desperately he seeks refuge within this "edifice" of silence. The fragility of the situation is carried to a ludicrous extent, for they are all aware that even a single misplaced word or noise would be enough to prove the reality of their situation; the only refuge is absolute, crushing silence. This is what Idris calls the strongest kind of silence, "that which comes about with any agreement,"³⁴ as the very articulation of such an agreement would be enough to break it.

As M. Mikhail notes, the use of minimal, abrupt language integrates this motif of silence into the story in its very texture and form.³⁵ I felt that it was important to keep the sound of

Idris' language as expressive as it is in Arabic. We have seen that simply through a string of verbs, he can paint a whole picture and scene of action. A great deal of this is accomplished through his use of onomatopoeia or words that are just as effective as sounds as they are as bearers of meaning. If we take the first line of the story, "Al-khātim bi-jiwār al-muṣbāḥ," probably the most neutral way to translate it would be, "The ring is beside the lamp." This is linguistically correct, and is the approach Denys Johnson-Davies takes.³⁶ However, the sound of the Arabic is very bare; it only gives us 3 stressed sounds: *khātim*, *jiwār*, *muṣbāḥ*. I attempted to mimic this sparseness by keeping my English as minimal as possible, ideally resulting in the same count of three stressed syllables, thus: "The ring, beside, the light." I try to maintain this semi-poetic sound throughout the story. If I could find a single word to explain an Arabic verb, I would use it, even if it meant the word might lose some of its secondary connotations in Arabic. To imitate Idris' pauses, ellipses, and sound-streams, I used short sentences with dashes and semicolons, anything to keep the text staccato and punctuated. Ideally, one should not feel comfortable reading it too quickly and digest the language as though one were reading a poem.

The theme of guilt and complicity is carefully managed in *House of Flesh*. There is no one person who dreams up this idea and then presents it to the others. Rather, they all find themselves falling into it as a unit, with no one member willing to give up their personal stake in the arrangement to turn on the light or to break the silence. This is handled through Idris' use of passive forms, verbs without subjects, and gender ambiguity. In this line for example, Idris only uses the feminine verb without any sure referent to establish which woman he is talking about: "The mother's heart beats and its beating increases as *she* asks *her* to wear it for a day, just for one day, no more" (*yadaqqu qalb al-umm wa-tazdād fī daqqātihi wa-hiya ṭatlub minhā an taḍa'hu li-yawm*, emphasis mine). In Arabic the subject of asking is unclear, because the initial subject of the paragraph is the eldest daughter who is contemplating her mother's ring, and the next subject is technically not the mother but rather her heart beating. The question is thus left open to discussion: is 'she' the daughter, since she is the only feminine subject thus far mentioned, or is 'she' the mother, since she is the nearest antecedent one could pin the verb to? Because English is more syntax-dependent than Arabic, I felt that keeping the mother as the opening subject of the sentence would cause all the following *she*'s to be logically referred back to her, so in this case I reversed the order of the phrases: "She asks her to wear it for a day, just for one day, no more. The mother's heart is racing."

We have already seen the mother's willingness to take a fall for her daughters' sake. When the idea of marrying the Qur'an reciter first comes up, the mother turns to her daughters to see which one will take the lead. This is the logical step because it is the daughters who need to be wed, and considering the gross and hyperbolic representation of the girls' figures

throughout the story, a blind man would be the perfect match. Ironically, the girls refuse with, “Do we fast and break it on a blind man?” (*a-naṣūm wa-naftur ‘alá a‘má?*). This is a pun off the lovely Egyptian phrase, “*aṣūm wa-aṣūm wa-iftar ‘alá baṣalah,*” (I fast and fast and break it on an onion), indicating one’s disappointment in what one receives after ages of waiting. Idris then goes on to explain that they are still dreaming of their bridge-grooms (*‘ursān*), which should be imagined as the English “knight in shining armor.” The girls’ prejudice against the blind man ultimately keeps them as unmarried as ever while the mother reaps the benefits. Like many of Idris’ poverty-stricken heroes, there is a certain bittersweet attitude towards these girls, that despite their harsh circumstances, they still have room to dream, even though their dreams may ultimately keep them from their goal of getting married. His invocation of the folk saying “*al-amānī tunāl; aḥyānan, tunāl ‘alá ṭūl al-bāl,*” which roughly equates the English phrase “good things come to those who wait,” is surely a comment of the futility of hope through salvation for the impoverished underclasses of Egypt. When translating this and other colloquial phrases, I generally strove to find an authentic phrase from the heritage of the English language that could equate it; when this was not possible, I attempted to create a phrase that captures the contents in a proverbial tone that, while not authentic, at least sounds like it could be.³⁷

If the girls are the sympathetic, tragic figures of the story (and such a point is debatable), the young man, as representative of both religious and patriarchal authority, is the most vulnerable for censure. The involuntary blindness of his eyes is only rivaled by his voluntary blinding of his other senses. He even exploits the Qur’an to justify his actions. The story closes with a verse from Surat al-Nūr, “There is no blame on the blind man” (*laysa ‘alá al-a‘má ḥarajun*, Q24:61), which is significantly in the context of establishing the *maḥram* rules that define who can see what part of the other sex; there is no burden on the blind man, as he cannot see the woman in front of him. Yet does this mean that his inability to see exempts him from utilizing his other perceptions? Idris inverts the phrase with a question, “Is there blame on the blind man?” (*am ‘alá al-a‘má ḥarajun?*)³⁸ By this ending, the very text that gives the reciter authority is subverted, its passages twisted to justify that which it explicitly prohibits. It is possible to read this ending as critiquing both the reciter and the Qur’an he recites from, just as religion and its representatives are chided in *Did You Have to Turn on the Light, Lili?* Such qur’anic references are probably best approached and explained by means of footnotes or an introduction; it would not be appropriate to exchange it with a biblical passage to make the religious undertones apparent for a non-Muslim reader.

The overarching question of approach raised by translation theorists like Lawrence Venuti in *The Translator’s Invisibility* must also be addressed. Translations always take place within a particular context, one that is subject to the same political positions that affect other

arenas of human interaction. A translator can seek to “foreignize” or “domesticate” the text into the new language. A crude example of this is the changing of names or unfamiliar concepts into words that will be more familiar to the target audience, thus making the text seem as though it was actually written in English instead of Arabic.³⁹ A more surreptitious version of the same thing can occur when translators intentionally select a particular reading of a multivalent word or passage, on the basis of their own biases and opinions, and present it as the authoritative text.⁴⁰ I generally prefer to keep translations challenging as a genuine encounter with a writer from another cultural context, and would thus lean towards a literalist approach that seeks a word-for-word approximation. Perhaps it is a matter of belief more than it is of evidence substantiation, but I disagree with those who say that there is no way to find English equivalents to the thick clusters of meaning embedded in Arabic vocabulary; of course it is true that English words are not Arabic and they carry their own connotative weight and history, but part of the pleasure of reading literature is in the existence of open-ended diction for the reader to create in his or her own mind what is on the page. A bold choice of rich English vocabulary will give the story a new dimension of expressiveness while maintaining its creative vitality. Any translation that supplies five words for every one in Arabic has not preserved multivalency—it has rather explained itself into meaninglessness.

This issue, fortunately, was not a very striking one in this particular story. There were times when I felt I could not find the right word that delivered the full impact of what I felt in Arabic; for example, in the simple phrase *al-zulām ya‘umm*, I would really need to say something like “the darkness spreads and overflows, filling out every nook and cranny, every crack and crevice, eking out every last remnant of light” to really portray the pervasiveness conveyed by the verb *ya‘umm*. As fun as that is to write, it completely changes the tone of the story, and more importantly, its tight, percussive musicality, and I am left to seek a single term. “The darkness prevails” is the obvious choice, being the automatic English phrase, but it is a bit clichéd, while Idris’ use of the word *ya‘umm* is a bold, unexpected choice, concordant with his taste for powerful and poetic language. I ultimately opted for a stronger phrase of my own, “Darkness consumes all,” with the hope that its brevity and diction would maintain the poetic language and comprehensiveness that Idris attains.

Another issue that commonly occurs in Arabic translation is the use of specific terminology, particularly in the realm of religious practice. The Qur’an reciter is called a *muqri’* in Arabic, a common profession (and one particularly associated with the blind). The afternoon and evening prayer-times are referred to by their formal designations *maghrib* and *‘ishā’*. Recitation of the Qur’an, *tilāwah*, is a specific word that is explicitly different from either reading (*qirā’ah*) or singing (*ghinā’*)—I thus was limited to the rather repetitive use of the word

‘recitation’ to describe both the man and the action, but if the reader is put off by this, that is better than obfuscating the singular role that Qur’an recitation takes in Muslim daily life by translating *tilāwah* as ‘reading’ or ‘singing’ for the sake of variety. If the story had been longer or if there had been more terminology like this, I would have probably attempted to familiarize the reader with these terms in their Arabic form and incorporate them into the English prose. This is the ideological goal of translation in my view; when given enough exposure, foreign words can and will enter new languages, enriching them and giving them a precision they previously lacked. If English has become comfortable enough with terms like nirvana, zen, Kabbalah, and chakra that they no longer need to be italicized, why not strive to see the same occur with *adhān*, *takbīrah*, *sujūd*, and *fajr*? This opportunity presents itself in a translation of a story like *Did You Have to Turn on the Light, Lili?*, which is essentially written from the model of a popular joke. In order for it to be funny, the audience must be familiar with such Islamic terms, which occur throughout the story.

This may be the next step in a project that seeks to introduce Yusuf Idris as a writer of the ‘Egyptian short story’ to Anglophone audiences. Through a translated collection of his work, the English-speaking reader would not only encounter the ‘other’ culture in the myriad of specific characteristics, the food, the jokes, the social relations, the stereotypes and prejudices, and the language that Idris sought out to define his work against the normalizing model of Western European literature; the themes of poverty, shame, corruption, exploitation, uncertainty, and unlikely hope and humor in the face of it all that his realist ideology brought to light would also remind the reader of the fundamental body of humanity that all people form a part of.

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Endnotes

1. Kurpershoek, P. M. *The Short Stories of Yūsuf Idrīs*, 3.
2. Brugman, J. *An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt*, 64.
3. Brugman, 96.
4. Brugman, 94-95.
5. Kurpershoek, 4.
6. Brugman, 206.
7. Kurpershoek, 11.
8. Following the lead of H. A. R. Gibb; see Brugman, 210-211.
9. Brugman, 238.
10. Kurpershoek, 10.
11. Kurpershoek, 13.
12. Kurpershoek, 53.
13. Brugman, 14.
14. Kurpershoek, 119.
15. Kurpershoek, 14, and Brugman, 257.
16. Kurpershoek, 15.
17. Kurpershoek, 23-25, 31.
18. Kurpershoek, 35.
19. Kurpershoek, 71.
20. Somekh, Sasson. *Dunyā Yūsuf Idrīs: min khilāl aqaṣīsih*, 8, 17.
21. Somekh, Sasson. *Lughat al-qiṣṣah fī adab Yūsuf Idrīs*, 41-43.
22. *Lughat al-qiṣṣah*, 107.
23. Idrīs, Yūsuf. *Bayt min laḥm*, 15.
24. Kurpershoek, 103.
25. Kurpershoek, 132.
26. Allen, Roger [ed.]. *Critical Perspectives on Yusuf Idris*, 19.
27. Allen, Roger (ed.). *Critical Perspectives on Yusuf Idris*, 98.
28. *Lughat al-qiṣṣah*, 8.
29. Kurpershoek, 170-175.
30. *Lughat al-qiṣṣah*, 25.
31. Kurpershoek, 157.
32. *Bayt min laḥm*, 15.
33. *Bayt min laḥm*, 5.
34. *Bayt min laḥm*, 13: “*fa-huwa al-ṣamt al-muttafaq ‘alayhi, aqwā anwā’ al-ittifāq, dhālik alladhī yatamm bi-lā ayy ittifāq.*”
35. Mikhail, Mona N. *Studies in the Short Fiction of Mahfouz and Idris*, 126.
36. Johnson-Davies, Denys. *Egyptian short stories*, 1.
37. Cf. Gregory Rabassa, “No Two Snowflakes are Alike,” in *The Craft of Translation*, 11.
38. *Bayt min laḥm*, 13.
39. Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator’s Invisibility*, 13.
40. Venuti, 28.