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**Idris, Yusuf**By: [Emad Abdul-Latif](#)Source: *Dictionary of African Biography* ?[Bibliography](#)**Related Content**[Hussein, Taha](#)**Idris, Yusuf****(1927–1991),**

writer and columnist, was born in the Sharqiya Province of Egypt to an agricultural engineer, Idris Ali, and a housewife. He studied medicine at Cairo University and graduated in 1951. After working as a physician in a government hospital for a decade, he devoted himself entirely to writing. As a member of Egyptian leftist organizations, Idris became involved in political patriotic activities early in his life. In 1951 he was appointed executive secretary for the Committee of Students' Defense, then secretary for the Students' Committee, which had a deep impact on Egyptian political life in the period between the end of World War II and the 1952 July Movement, which ended the monarchy ruling in Egypt. During that period, Idris was arrested four times because of his political activities, but he was never detained for more than a few days. However, he was imprisoned between August 1954 and September 1955 for criticizing the politics of Nasser. In 1961 he joined the Algerian revolutionaries and fought with them against French colonialism for six months. He married Ragaa' Al Ref'aiein 1957 and had a daughter and two sons.

In 1954 Idris's first collection of stories, *The Cheapest Nights* (أرخص ليالي), was published with an introduction by Taha Hussein. The collection was well received by readers and critics alike, and it made Idris famous at the age of twenty-seven. With its realistic atmosphere, colloquial language, marginalized characters, and sympathetic tone toward the characters' difficult lives, *The Cheapest Nights* was considered a new beginning for the Arabic short story. Idris enhanced his literary reputation with thirteen additional collections published over nearly a quarter of a century. The most important among them are *Farahat's Republic* ((جمهورية فرحات) 1956)), *Isn't It?* (1957) (اليس كذلك), *An Incident of Honour* 1958) (حادثة شرف), *The Language of Screams* (1965) (لغة الأي..أي), and *A House of Flesh* (1971) (بيت من لحم). His short stories influenced Arabic story writing to the extent that Idris's work is usually considered the most prominent turning point in the history of the Arabic short story.

Besides his collections of short stories, Yusuf Idris wrote six novellas. His first and most creative one, *The Sin* (1959) (الحرام), tackles the harsh lives of migrant workers in the Egyptian countryside. As was his habit, Idris's subsequent novellas, including *The White* (1959) (البيضاء) and *The Disgrace* (1962) (العييب), shifted from the rough lives of peasants to the conflicting values of the Egyptian middle class. In his other three novellas, he shifted his concern from the Egyptian city and countryside in favor of Europe. *Men and Bulls* 1964) (رجال وثيران) deals with bullfighting in Spain, while *Mrs. Vienna* (1977) (الآنسة فيينا) and *New York 80* (80 نيويورك) (1980)) tackle the relationship between Arab man and Western woman. Idris's novellas are usually considered less creative than his short stories; he had limited impact on the course of Arabic novel. Yet his novellas tackled thorny political and sexual issues and encouraged social and political debate.

Although Idris had the greatest impact on the short story, his contribution to Arab theater was no less radical. In 1957 he published two one-act plays, *The Cotton King* (ملك القطن) and *Farahat's Republic*, wherein he criticized the deteriorating status of the Egyptian peasant. He published seven more plays, the most significant of which are *The Critical Moment* (الحرجة الحرة) (1958) (اللحظة)), which deals with the Suez War; *The Harlequin* (1983), which is a satirical

parody of the Egyptian press; and *Al-Farafir* (1964) (الفرافير), which was inspired by the idea of the popular entertainer. *Al-Farafir* addresses the issue of power in traditional societies and is based on an intimate interaction between actors and audience. Because Idris was well aware that his play was experimental, he wrote a long prologue to it, titled "Towards an Egyptian Theatre (نحو مسرح مصري)," wherein he explained his ideas about expanding the horizon of Egyptian theater and about theoretical and aesthetic issues posed by *Al-Farafir*.

In addition to his distinguished short stories and plays, Idris wrote thousands of columns in Egyptian and Arab newspapers. His articles elicited widespread feedback, and many of them were published collectively in nearly eighteen books, the most important of which are *Not Very Frankly Speaking* (1968) (بصراحة غير مطلقة), *Poor Thoughts and Thoughts of Poverty* (فقر) (الفقر) (1985) (الفكر وفكر), and *Islam with No Banks* (1989) (إسلام بلا ضفاف).

Idris won the Egyptian State Incentive Award in 1966 and the Egyptian State Distinction Award in 1991. His works have been translated into more than twenty-four languages. The majority of his short stories were translated into Russian. More than eleven of his works were made into movies, some of which, such as *The Sin* (1965), *The Disgrace* (1967), and *The Summons* (1975), are considered classics of Arab cinema. He died of a heart attack in England.

[See also [HUSSEIN, TAHA](#)]

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