**Idris, Yusuf (1927-91)**

An influential modernist short story writer and playwright, Egyptian writer Yusuf Idris was one of the most important contemporary writers of his age. He is basically a modernist whose literary output is inherently associated with the contemporary modern life in Egypt then. His main concern was the poor villagers and the hard socio-economic conditions pertaining to the period of time during which he lived. He is best remembered for his short story collection *Arkhas Layaly* (1954, *The Cheapest Nights*), his novel *Al-Haram* (1959, *The Sin*), and his play *Al-Farafeer* (1964, *The Farfoors* or *The Flipflops*).



Yusuf Idris

<http://www.syrianstory.com/y-edrisse.htm>

Idris was born in Al-Bayroum village, Al-Sharqia Governorate in Egypt 19th May, 1927.

After attending schools in Al-Sharqia, Idris joined the School of Medicine, Fouad I University (now Cairo University) in 1945. He practiced medicine for some years after graduation only to discover that his interest was not in his field of study as much as it was in politics. He supported the nationalist struggle at that time; which is evident in his writings, whether his newspaper articles or fiction. Idris was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature more than once, but was never granted the award. He thought this was due to his anti-Israel views. In 1997, Yusuf Idris won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature for his novel Madinat Al-Hob Wa Al-Ramad (1990, City of Love and Ashes).

Idris was a committed leftist who supported President Nasser and his rise to power in 1952. However, when he spoke out his opposition to Nasser's policies in 1954, he was imprisoned. This happened at around the same time when his first short story collection, *Arkhas Layaly*, was published. This collection was followed by other writings (short story collections, novels and plays) in which he tackled contemporary life in Egypt at the time. His main concern was the poor villagers and their impoverished conditions, and to unveil the aspects of life in Egypt's villages and rural areas that were not known to the majority.

In his short story *Arkhas Layaly* (*Cheapest Nights*, bearing the name of its collection), Yusuf Idris portrays the poor villagers' unrelenting pursuit of life pleasures amidst an atmosphere of extreme poverty through the character, Abd Al-Karim. It also shows his concern with one of Egypt's pressing poverty over people with sexuality, as an escapist tactic.

*The Farafeer* is one of Idris' most important plays due to the fact that it marks his success to set the foundations of a modern Egyptian theatre based on popular traditions and folklore. He believed that the character of the farfoor (a folkloric character) should be the pivotal character on stage, i.e. placing the marginalised centre stage and mocking figures of power. He used that character in this play to scrutinise President Nasser's regime and its involvement in the civil war in Yemen by mocking the master-servant relationship and holding it up to ridicule. Actually, the significance of the character of the farfoor is further highlighted in Idris’ article *Nahw Masrah Misri* (*Towards an Egyptian Theatre*) wherehe suggests that in order to discover purely Egyptian theatrical characters – or farfoors – not only do we have to open up to foreign theatres, but to have our characters deeply rooted in our literary heritage.

**Key Works Published During Lifetime:**

(1954) *Arkhas Layaly* (*The Cheapest Nights*)

(1958) *Jumhuriyat Farahat* (*Farahat's Republic*)

(1964) *Al-Farafeer* (*The Fliplops*)

**References and Further reading**

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