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The Controversy of Sexuality and Religion in Youssef Idris's Narratives: A Cultural Reading of the Short Story Collection "A House of Flesh"

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Abstract

Religion and sexuality remain within the realm of the unsayable in Arab society, constrained by religious and social sensitivities that cultivate a persistent wariness toward novelty. Youssef Idris is among the Arab writers who, through symbolic treatment, opened these themes to public consideration with the aim of restoring respect for the human person and narrowing the scope of the unsaid in society. This research follows two paths: - A theoretical path that delineates the status of religion and sexuality as taboos in Arab society, then examines the cultural approach as the latest development in critical human thought. - An applied path that investigates the treatment of religion and sexuality in the writings of Youssef Idris.

Keywords: Religion, Taboo, Cultural Criticism, Symbolism, Youssef Idris

Introduction

Religion constitutes a fundamental dimension of human life by virtue of the role it plays in shaping diverse forms of consciousness and conduct. Nothing better attests to this than the fact that humanity gravitated toward religiosity before it had attained even the minimal threshold of awareness; its mode of thinking at that time was saturated with religion—what the history of ideas designates as religious thought, which succeeded mythic thought and ultimately paved the way for both philosophical and scientific thinking.

The human need for religion appears in the way it offers—even if by conjecture—answers to many of the questions that have persistently pressed upon humankind since its first encounter with existence. Existential phenomena such as death, grief, love, and sex, and natural phenomena such as fertility, rain, and lightning, lay beyond the explanatory reach of the human mind at that stage of its development. Hence the turn to religion, or what philosophers call metaphysics, to attain the sought-after end and to still, if only temporarily, the inner compulsion to question. From another angle,

human nature itself requires that religion have a role in existence. While the human being, moving within the order of the world, can satisfy material needs—food and drink, shelter and transport—he remains unable to fulfill the needs of the other, spiritual, dimension, because these are of an immaterial nature that does not presuppose the movement of matter. There are, for example, questions of the "beyond," of existence, and of spiritual peace—what the mystics call the "world of subtleties," as opposed to the "world of densities"—which require answers that only religion can provide, owing to the affinity of their natures.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) grasped the necessity of religion in human life, and this is perhaps what prompted him to say: **"However impossible it is for us to prove or disprove the existence of God by reason, it remains certain that the soul needs a God; and even those who have chosen atheism affirm the existence of God without realizing it, for the dictate of reason is that negation cannot be predicated of non-being"**[1]. This same consideration led Louis Pierre Althusser (1918–1990), in his rereading of the Marxian narrative, to deny that Karl Heinrich Marx (1818–1883) was an atheist in his celebrated dictum "religion is the opium of the people," interpreting it to mean that Marx **"does not intend religion as such; rather, he points to the use of religion as an ideology that lulls the herd and stands between it and enlightenment"**[2]. It is also what impelled Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) to reinterpret Nietzsche's famous pronouncement—"God is dead, and we have killed him"—thus: **"Anyone who is intimate with Nietzsche's agile language, with its continual tearing at language itself, recognizes that Nietzsche, who grew up in a milieu that nurtured religion, cannot have meant the denial of God's existence; rather, he points to God's recession in the age of the machine and industrialization, and the dominance of materialism. Otherwise, how can the figure of 'Zarathustra' in his "Thus Spoke Zarathustra"possess such** [3] **an overwhelming spirituality as at times to surpass mysticism?"**[4]. Something like this—among much else—may attest to the necessity of religion in human life. The proliferating disagreement among its partisans thus lies in the ideologization of religion and its use as an instrument of domination to serve the aims of pressure groups.

1. Text and Culture

It is impossible to deny the merits of modern aesthetic methodologies in reading and developing texts, yet their shortcoming lies in persisting in the view that the literary text is a linguistic structure whose depths can be fathomed only by language itself—an assumption belied by the contexts of reality. If it is **"the product of heterogeneous temperaments across different historical stages, how could language encompass it?"**[5] .Roland Barthes raised a question of this sort when, in the course of elaborating semiotics, he concluded that **"anchoring criticism in language alone weakens descriptive language and plunges it into repetition"**[6] . Before this, Marx had asserted that the human being is the mouthpiece of his class, such that he cannot step outside the order within which he lives. These prefigurations culminated in what the philosophers of difference—especially Foucault and Derrida—proposed regarding the text. Foucault advocated substituting the term "discourse" for "text," because the stake is not the text's surface layer that "says everything," but the discourse that embodies what is unsaid, which, among other things, refers to a will to domination as a primary textual horizon. For his part, Derrida brought his deconstructive project—one that dazzled the world—to its apex in the claim that **"there is nothing outside the text"**[7], which Walid al-Zahiri notes **"may be misunderstood by some, who think Derrida means that meaning is in the text and not outside it, whereas he in fact means there is no fixed reference outside the text to which**

we can appeal to reach the true meaning; consequently, each reader of the text will apprehend a meaning of his own"[8]. In truth, what Dr. Walid articulates registers Derrida's initial gesture, through which he sought to unsettle the doctrine that the text is a complete whole. In Derrida's view, the text is not a finished entity but a fractured linguistic construction; its meanings dwell in its gaps and contradictions and are generated from within what it conceals. Deconstruction, then, is not the destruction of the text but the disclosure of what it excludes and the lifting of the veil from what it occludes within its weave. This was before he directed his deconstruction toward a critique of centrality: "There is nothing outside the text" means that everything we live, think, and understand passes through the linguistic structure.

There is no pure meaning outside language; every attempt to seize meaning leads to new layers of interpretation, and every text refers to another text in an endless chain of references. Writing is not merely a representation of speech; it is originary, and what we take as presence or truth is nothing but a trace. We do not inhabit a world of fixed meanings, but a world of continual deferral. This construal implies, among other things, that the movement of history itself is the product of language, for language is the house of Being, as Heidegger puts it. The visions of the philosophers of difference paved the way for the Frankfurt and Birmingham Schools to formulate cultural theory as an approach to texts. On the basis of the interdisciplinarity and relativity of knowledge, they maintained that since the text is the product of diverse appropriations, its reading must draw on multiple fields such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, and history. This enhances interpretive possibilities and probes more deeply the unsaid—the latent system that the texts do not declare, whose span stretches between the author's unconscious and the folds of discourse.According to such a view, the text becomes a cultural event not produced exclusively by the creator's pen but the outcome of the clash of archaic codes that translate the human unconscious—codes that assume the force of fate from a religious perspective and continue to shape human movement across different geographies.

2. Reading Strategy in Yusuf Idris's Texts

Yusuf Idris is one of the most important writers of the Arab world, and among those closest to the village and the margins of the village, he was even dubbed the "Chekhov of the Arabic short story." He was born in the village of al-Bayrum, in the Sharqiyya Governorate, in 1928. He spent his childhood with his grandmother in the village and margins, village and compound, and margins of the villagein Cairo, enrolling in the Faculty of Medicine at Fuad I University, which witnessed his political struggle against the British occupation. He joined the Wafd Party, then the Communist Party, where he was subjected to arrest. He soon joined the Algerian Revolution with the National Liberation Frontand wasawarded the "Order of Algeria" in 1961 in recognition of his role in supporting independence. Idris opposed the Camp David Accords and launched a fierce campaign against Sadat, which led to his arrest. Over the course of his career, Front wrote and received several prizes, including the "Order of the Republic" in 1963 and 1967 for short-story and dramatic writing; the "Abdel Nasser Prize in Literature" in 1969; the "Order of Science and Arts, First Class" in 1980; the "Saddam Hussein Prize for Literature" in 1988; and the "State Merit Prize" in 1990.This excerpt from the author's life is not for the purpose of introducing him in 1988 but to reveal his other side, for he grew up in a militant, nationalist ethos that does not recognize borders; he was always ready to sacrifice, and these experiences inspired a human impetus that turned into a creative impetus rich in human situations, especially those of the margins, of which his masterpiece The Sin is the clearest evidence.What matters in this study is Yusuf Idris's view of religiosity rather than religion. He drew

on his specialization in psychiatry to analyze human situations, clarify their impulses, and distinguish between religion and religiosity.

Indeed, he sounded the alarm more than once, warning against the excesses of the wave of extremism sweeping the Arab world, which most often leads only to destruction. He undertook to critique the dogmatic structures that close the gate of ijtihad and prevent free thought, and he employed the tools of historical, anthropological, psychological, and philosophical critique to deconstruct religious and ideological discourses, whether within Islamic or Western culture, in a bid to liberate thought from closure. Idris also sought to dismantle the system of religiosity and to try to build bridges between Islam and Enlightenment, because he sees that Islam is not at odds with human values such as freedom, coexistence, and acceptance of the other. Idris's views met fierce resistance from the religious establishment represented by al-Azhar; one cannot forget those heated debates that took place between him and Shaykh al-Sha'rawi.All this made his narrative production a genuine exception, charged with enlightenment, freedom, and struggle on behalf of the margins, without regard for the ruling authorities or consideration of the consequences**. "The reader of Idris's narrative ought not to stop at a priori theses entrenched by different historical phases; rather, he should summon the present state of global thought and its transformations, for Idris finds no alternative but for his discourse to be humanistic, transcending the barriers of religion and ethnicity"[9]**. He does not hesitate to engage with causes beyond borders when he perceives the oppression of their people and ethnicities, nor does he shy away from writing about the triad—politics, religion, and sex—which caused him countless problems with various circles, reaching to excommunication and death threats. Critics consider Idris a school unto himself, in view of what he produced, and a pioneering experience that captivated many writers who came after him. He used his virtuosity in language to delineate different sectors of Egyptian society and their various sensibilities, beginning with "Anshudat al-Ghuraba'" in 1950 in the magazine "al-Qissa." After that came his collection "Arkhas al-Layali," followed by other short-story collections such as "Hadithat Sharaf," "al-Naddaha," and "Uqtulha." He also wrote novels such as "al-Haram," "La Waqt lil-Hubb," "al-'Ayb," and "Qa' al-Madina," most of which were adapted into films, as well as plays such as "al-Mukhatitin," "al-Farafir," and "al-Bahlawan." And in thought: "Faqr al-Fikr wa Fikr al-Faqr," "Ahmiyyat an Natathaqaf ya Nas," and "Intiba'at Mustafizza."However, what draws attention in Idris's works is his focus on the theme of sex and religion, where he presents sexual scenes and often links them to religious figures—an issue that will be addressed in what follows of the study.

3. Sexuality as a Religious Sensibility

in Arab Society: Sexuality constitutes one of the most important human dimensions; hence the attention to this culture since antiquity, and nothing better attests to this than the invention by ancient civilizations of gods of desire, fertility, and sexuality. In Greek civilization we find "Eros," the god of love, son of the goddess Aphrodite; the Romans created "Cupid"; and in Mesopotamia we find "Ishtar," the goddess of love and beauty, while the god "Min" in Pharaonic civilization represented desire.After the emergence of philosophy, thinkers' views on sexuality diverged: some tied it to ethics; others championed pleasure and considered the curbing of instinct a curbing of human freedom; and still others disparaged pleasure and the enjoyment of the body. What matters here is that sexuality remained an inquiry extending to the far reaches of human thought and thus appeared in the interstices of creative writings, whether as a symbol, an allusion to a given phenomenon, or a plunge into the depths of the human self.And since we are tracking the phenomenon of sexuality in

an Arab corpus, it is necessary to note that sexuality has continued to constitute a sensitivity within the Arab social fabric for several reasons, foremost among them the religious consideration, which **"undermined all the old forms of sexuality, while keeping sexuality within the framework of marriage and family, with exceptions imposed by certain circumstances, such as intercourse with those whom the right hand possesses."**[10] In the same context, there is no avoiding reference to those representations perpetuated by Orientalism, which depict the Arab as a being afflicted with sexual frenzy through the phenomena of polygamy and slave-concubines. The orientalist Shelomo Dov Goitein (1900–1985) says, **"At the very moment the Arab extols his excessive jealousy over his women, he does not hesitate to have relations with other women."**[11]. This means that the Arab self lives a severe split, doing what contradicts its convictions, and this vision seeped into the modernist current and became its mainstay in mitigating the weight of the domination of the religious establishment, both official and popular.

4. The Practical Aspect:

In this section of the research, we attempt to trace some of the models presented by Idris in his stories, where he linked the practice of sex to the religious man represented by the mosque imam or the Qur'an reciter. In doing so, he offered the reader glimpses of the contradictions and schizoid fractures experienced by the religious institution, along with the resulting social issues such as repression and depression. He also tried to provide a different image of the religious man, unlike the traditional one enshrouded in an aura of sanctity.

4.1. A House of Flesh—The Thirst for Pleasure:

The story "A House of Flesh"[12] is about a widow in her fifties who lives with her three spinster daughters in absolute silence after the provider of the household passed away. Following the Egyptian custom, she hires a Qur'an reciter to chant verses so that the reward may reach the deceased. The reciter's visits become frequent, and eventually, the mother reaches an agreement with her daughters to marry the blind reciter who comes every Friday evening to read some of the Revelation for the soul of the departed. According to their belief, this is the only way to attract suitors to the house, since the presence of a man would make it desirable. Once the mother marries the reciter, her spirit is revived, and her vitality returns. Since the reciter is blind, he can only identify his wife—the mother—by the ring she wears on her finger. The nights pass in a single-room house, while the daughters listen intently to what happens between the couple. There they discover another world filled with sighs, moans, and the hissing of breaths born of intimacy:"... from each of them poured beams of spotlights aimed precisely at the space between them—spotlights of eyes, spotlights of ears, spotlights of senses."[13] Desire overtakes the daughters, who have never experienced sexuality. They then deceive their mother into letting each of them wear the ring in turn, turning both the mother and the daughters into co-wives of the blind reciter.In this text, Idris presents the tyranny of sexual desire as a supreme existential order that no self can deny, regardless of the level of consciousness it attains. The narrative exposes the human self—embodied in the mother and daughters—as desiring sex, yet hindered by custom and taboo, which suppresses their desires and prevents them from voicing them. Desire thus becomes part of the unspoken—transmitted across generations as something immoral. This reveals a complete schizoid condition or a state of existential alienation, where the self harbors one thing and acts out its opposite.A deeper level of this schizophrenia emerges when the mother discovers what happens between the blind reciter and her daughters, realizing that she is but one among his harem

and not his wife. Faced with this truth, she can do nothing but remain silent—firstly to protect the family's reputation from the shame of incest, whose monstrosity in a closed Eastern society cannot be described, as such a society commits the most heinous crimes in the name of defending its so-called honor. This means that—culturally—we face a "systemic pretext" invented by the mother's unconscious in order to preserve the bed of pleasure, which primarily extinguishes the fire of desire. As for maintaining the social façade sanctified by the Eastern self, it is nothing but systemic distortion, for it is not necessarily true that daughters must marry simply because there is a man in the house.Here, the reader confronts a patriarchal logic deeply ingrained in the unconscious of the Eastern self, a logic that obliges the family to secure the presence of a male in the house. This is the systemic mask, while the deeper truth is a systemic ailment, through which the self finds a way to dismantle the structures that obstruct pleasure. It is the alternative order legitimized—according to their view—by religious law, keeping the throne of pleasure intact. For societies under the weight of repression, the explicit declaration of a woman's need for pleasure is deemed incompatible with morality and religion and destructive to the fabric of identity itself. In fact, such societies might even tolerate undermining a sacred religious constant if it ensures the survival of their traditional conventions and customs in their original form.Thus, women in such communities invent a set of pretexts—such as finding "solace in singing"—through which they express their repressed desires and the groaning of a body torn by the blade of tradition, releasing with every word of song a sigh of the old warmth."[14] Singing becomes the sole democratic mode of expression through which a woman can voice her need for pleasure. Had she expressed this need in any other context, her fate would have been to fall victim to an honor killing.On the other side of the story, we see that desire was not exclusive to the widow and her daughters but also extended to the reciter himself. He did not object and continued his pretense of ignorance. This points to the existential inevitability of sexual desire, which cannot be suppressed but only organized. It also alludes to the phenomenon of religious ritualism that permeates Eastern society—"where the order of form dominates religious life, without such form having any effect on reality."[15]

4.2. The greatest of mortal sins: destructive repression

Man differs from other beings in that he is a creature who seeks religion—or invents it. His inability to explain phenomena led him to plunge into metaphysics; likewise, the quest for inner peace and deliverance from all manner of vexations led him to invent an unseen power to protect him. In return, he acknowledges its supremacy and authority, sanctifies it, and goes to great lengths to fashion the rituality befitting its majesty. This is what al-Tahāwunī alluded to—in a way—in his definition of religion when he says that it is "a divine ordinance that drives those endowed with reason, by their choosing it, to reform in the immediate and the ultimate."[16]

'With the advent of modernity, secularism emerged as the most ferocious intellectual antithesis of religion, founded on the maxim, 'Hang the last king with the entrails of the last priest.' It soon turned into a creed that rivals religion and seeks to displace it. Yet major reconsiderations in the history of thought have shown that humanity's tragedy stems, at its core, from the erosion of the religious: modern man forfeited a vast expanse of his humanity when he ignited two world wars with no justification other than gratifying his individualism at the expense of religion. Nietzsche perceived this when he sensed the receding of faith in favor of the folly of the individual, as he has Zarathustra say: 'Is it possible! This old saint in his forest has not yet heard that God is dead?'[17]. This was an extraordinary premonition by Nietzsche—rare in its kind—of the state to which the world would

devolve in the absence of belief, and it is perhaps what 'postmodernity' discerned a century later when it saw no reason for man to abandon faith as the foremost existential dimension of the human.In a later phase, man would find himself facing many predicaments and would redouble his veneration of a particular form of religiosity, as can be observed, increasingly, in the daily life of societies. This religious discourse would then mature and raise its pitch, becoming itself a practitioner of the exclusion from which it had once suffered. Hence, we witness the eruption of many violent behaviors—whether at the level of states or of individuals. However, this does not furnish a justification for violating human nature by abolishing religion, for such abolition is, in truth, the abolition of the spiritual dimension of man. Through pitch-black irony, Idris recounts in 'The Greatest of Mortal Sins' the story of Muhammad Husayn, a peasant of twenty years who has nothing to do with civilization. He has spent his life transporting the goods of notables on his beast of burden, which obliges him to walk fifty kilometers every morning. When his thirst was ablaze, he deemed that 'a real drink could only be had from the house of (Shaykh Sadiq) and from the clean jar of (Umm Jad al-Mawla).'[18] . In a moment of absence and pursuit of pleasure, while helping 'Umm Jad' pour out what remained of the water in the jar, he brushed against her body, and the forbidden occurred. The rendezvous recurred while Shaykh Sadiq was absent, absorbed in circles of devotion and in the festivals of saints, roaming in the kingdom of the Presence.The first thing the story 'The Greatest of Mortal Sins' reveals—as already indicated—is Idris's benefit from his specialization in psychiatry, which made him adept at portraying human psychological states, and more than that, brilliant at inscribing these psychological phenomena on the page. It suffices for the reader to follow those precise scenes he sketched as an external environment for his narration, as well as the various human emotions unleashed all at once.It was a shrewd move by Idris to construct the dimensions of the character of Muhammad Husayn as a peasant with a flat personality, in the sense of E. M. Forster's typology—a Sisyphean human being who has neither goal nor horizon, submerged in poverty, backwardness, and ignorance: **'an eighteen-year-old lad who looked thirty-eight'**[19]. Such absurdity often leads the self to behaviors akin to nihilism, marked by non-thinking: whence is belief in values and religion to come amid the backwardness in which such characters live, whose utmost aspiration is a morsel dipped in stew and onions? Indeed, his first experiences '**began with animals, all the animals from goats to cows.'**[20] .By contrast, Idris depicts the character of Umm Jad al-Mawla as a woman—wife to a faqih—who suffers the thirst of pleasure. She had married the jurist Sadiq, who had little interest in intercourse with women, especially in the last four years, when he devoted himself to festivals and circles of remembrance. Umm, Jad accepted the matter with narrow reluctance at first, then with patient reluctance, then with the despair of resignation[21]. Faced with such a situation, she chose a ritual religiosity resembling dervishism, but her feminine human depth remained awaiting its opportunity for pleasure—which Muhammad Husayn provided.Thus the reader of the story stands before a complete scene of critique of masked religiosity. 'Umm Jad's stalking of the moment of pleasure is, in truth, a violent behavior in its latent aspect, for it is the trader-in-religion awaiting the moment of violence and killing—with benediction from heaven. Before and beyond this, however, the recipient will be pressed by the overarching question that has long troubled the grand narratives, especially the ethical one: What is the extent to which a human being is entitled to insist on the pursuit of pleasures, or, in the philosophers' idiom, the 'pleasures'? In addition, can pleasure and ethics share the same sanctity, such that demanding and guarding it becomes parallel to the moral duty in a Kantian sense? These are major problematics; what followed them in philosophical debate is not important here. Yet one can find explicit intertwinings of them within the story. It is evident that the beginning

of Umm Jad's suffering started at the moment when her husband, Shaykh Sadiq, chose ascetic celibacy—a culture widely entrenched in many societies, especially Christian and Buddhist ones, and one that also has manifest representations in what is known as Eastern gnosis, as in Sufi thought. Here, Shaykh Sadiq eminently plays the role of power—in Foucault's perspective—**'which seeks to subjugate and discipline the body'**[22]. (Umm Jad), or rather her body, responded to this disciplining; her conduct came to conform, steadily and entirely, to what the authority of Shaykh Sadiq imposed, with all the accompanying religious rites: lengthening the fast, multiplying the prayers, and all that is described as works of charity. This conferred upon her a new identity—(al-Shaykha Sabiha)—so as to imagine she had become a 'subaltern' in Gayatri Spivak's sense.[23] But in truth it was a phase of identity transformation — or the awaiting of an opportunity to exercise a counter-power—which is what occurred when the peasant (Muhammad) entered her life, becoming the means of her identity shift.The symbolic space of the characters Idris presents is nothing but the seasoning with which to narrate the peril of the role religions play in the lives of people. Like all creeds and ideologies, religions begin as ideals in their principles; yet, because they must touch the borders of other ideologies, their full extension reveals what lies latent within them—forms of buried violence. Hence, it is unwise—in the manner of Shaykh (Sadiq)—to confine one's life to the religious dimension and to try to impose this idea on others. This is, in a sense, symbolic violence against the other that necessarily calls forth counter-violence. Such is what Umm Jad did when she moved to satisfy instinct outside the bounds of marriage, fashioning for herself a systemic pretext, indifferent to the religion that had, in her eyes, become a means of violence.If some cultures can find justifications for such pretexts, then in a closed society—such as the one (Umm Jad) inhabits—such behavior may well cost her her life, even if modern legal codes have addressed such cases, granting women the right of khul' if they fear for themselves temptation.The point is that it is no longer possible to ignore the theme of sex, which has expanded widely in closed societies. It has even come to stand on equal footing with the 'constants' in terms of medical and media attention. This bespeaks the intelligence of feminist thought and its success in building discursive bridges with many fields of knowledge, enabling it to seep—like a susurrus—into many arenas of life. This is what the world of the third millennium witnesses in demonstrations that have moved from equality in rights to equality in biology.

Conclusion

A number of points can be drawn from this research:

- The critical approach remains the most successful achievement of critical thought, due to its alignment with the values of relativity and intertextuality. It is not possible to approach texts solely through the mechanism of language when discourses conceal more than they reveal.
- Sexuality represents a human condition that cannot be ignored; otherwise, this leads to countless social problems such as repression, schizophrenia, and the spread of crime.
- Yusuf Idris sought to link religion and sexuality through symbolic gestures aimed at restoring the value of the human being and at shifting the concept of sexuality from the realm of taboo to that of a natural human phenomenon that can be regulated.

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[2] Noha 'Abd al-Masih, "Between Althusser and Marx," article, Ibdā'āt (Creative Works), United Arab Republic, no. 22, 1977, p. 401.

[3] Zarathustra: some regard him as a prophet, others as a Zoroastrian cleric; he is the founder of the Zoroastrian religion. He most likely lived in present-day Iran, and his teachings and religion remained dominant over a large part of Asia until the advent of Islam. Nietzsche adopted him in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, in an epic mode, as an objective correlative for the Overman whom he envisaged as supplanting God.

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[18] Yusuf Idris, A House of Flesh and Other Stories, p. 42
[19] Ibid., same page
[20]Ibid., same page
[21] Ibid., p. 44
[22] 'Ammār Belhaj, Reflections on the History of Society, p. 119
[23] An Indo-American critic credited with formulating the concept of the subaltern through her essay: 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'