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**AN INTRODUCTION TO ARABIC AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE: A BRIEF STUDY**

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**Selim Jadid Ahmed**

Research Scholar, Department of Arabic, Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam, India

**Abstract**

*The emergence of Islamic religion brought forth a need to document historical facts and the lives of significant individuals, giving rise to the importance of biographies. Prominent examples include Muawiya and Ibn Umayyah's biographies, alongside Ibn Ishaq's. Arabic literary biographies were marked by accurate impartiality, evolving further with works like al-Tabaqât and other biographical works. Through successive centuries, writers and historians resonated events of their times, such as Ibn Sina's Tarjama Ibn Sina means biography of Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali's appearances.*

*In the 20th century, Abdullah bin Balqin's "Al-Tibyan" surfaced, while modern literature in the late 19th century embraced biographies, influenced by both Western and Eastern dynamics. Rifa'a al-Tahtawi's call and "Takhlees Al-Ibriez fi Takhlees Baris" encouraged autobiographies, conveying clashes between Western and Eastern realms. Arab personalities and national sentiments were spotlighted, fostering honest literature representing people's aspirations and struggles, distinct from heritage.*

*Contemporary autobiographical books showcased Arab ideas and humanitarian crises. This trend was complemented by writers' discussions on literature, culture, and intellectual endeavours. The evolution of autobiography intertwined with the novel's emergence, notably in fictional forms like Michael Naima's "Mirdâd" and "Meeting," Taha Hussein's al-Ayyâm, and Tawfiq Al-Hakim's Al-'Auda al-Rûh (The Return of the Spirit). In fact, the Taha Hussein's Al-Ayyâm became a foundational text, articulating his personal journey, resilience, and triumph over adversity during his youth. The art of autobiographies transcended literal accounts, embracing diverse forms like notes and diaries, enriching Arabic literature's portrayal of human experiences across ages.*

**Keywords:** autobiography, literature, Arab, genre, evolution, introspection etc.

**Introduction:**

We are aware of the fact that autobiography generally represents a contemporary prose art form in which the author recounts his life's journey, encompassing various phases, diverse circumstances, and the living days. In the contents of autobiography, an author tries his level best to highlight on his honesty and truthfulness with an avoidance of fabrication at any point of his life.

Indeed, people generally enjoy autobiographies in which the writer faced difficulties and conquered significant hurdles to reach their current position. A life filled with unexpected twists is more captivating than an ordinary and mundane one because readers seek inspiration from remarkable journeys.

A prime example of this is Taha Hussein's autobiography, "Al-Ayyâm," which has captured considerable interest, gathering a wide readership and numerous fans. Taha Hussein's life was anything but typical; it stood as an extraordinary wonder.<sup>1</sup>

The art of writing an autobiography is an ancient form of literature that has evolved over time. This art was known to the Arabs even in the pre-Islamic era, indicating its presence as a well-established genre in Arabic literature. Similarly, the practice of composing autobiographies has undergone changes throughout history. It is not confined to the documentation of the lives of writers and historians; rather, it has manifested in various literary forms, including history, diaries, memoirs, confessions, stories, and novels. This art is distinguished by its incorporation of personal and psychological elements.

### **Description:**

Terminologically the word *al-Sirah* means a "biography" of a life, which a writer presents or the life of one of the famous scholars, and highlights the achievements that were achieved in his life or the life of the speaker.

As for the art of biography, in the literary definition, it is a type of literature that combines historical investigation, and it is intended for the course of a person's life and drawing an accurate picture of his personality.<sup>2</sup>

This term biography began to exist for the first time, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and it came in the Oxford dictionary dating back to 1809 A.D.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of the word *al-Sirah* (i.e. biography) has become widespread in Arabic literature, indicating the literary genre that includes the life of an individual.<sup>4</sup> The biography in literature has many forms and different types, and for this reason it has multiple definitions depending on its type and form, but the most popular and general *Sirah* i.e. biography literature appears in two types as follows:

### **Biography and Autobiography:**

This refers to the literary genre in which individuals write about other people, whether they were scholars who lived in the past or the present. Abd al-Latif al-Hadidi mentioned this matter in his book: the art of biography (*fann al-sirah*). It is a research in which the writer presents the life of a famous person, highlighting on its pages the life of the biography's subject and their achievements in detail. This has led to the spread of their fame and qualified them to be the subject of study.<sup>5</sup>

The autobiographical biography predates the autobiography, as it emerged alongside history and literature. Throughout the existence of civilizations, individuals were compelled to write about those who held positions in the courts of rulers and sultans. They documented the events of their times, including periods of growth and emergence. Thus, they penned accounts for kings and sultans, wars and warriors, and many of these works fall under the category of altruistic biography.

Before we understand what an autobiography is, let's learn about its history. Back in ancient Rome, a new kind of writing called biography started becoming popular. This type of writing focused on people's lives and had a big impact on literature, especially in Arabic literature. Scholars studied this kind of writing and came up with different ways to describe it, but there's

still no one clear definition for it. Autobiography is different from other types of writing. In this connection, one reputed scholar, Abdul Azîz Sharaf, tried to explain it by saying that autobiography means telling someone's life story from their own perspective.<sup>6</sup>

The autobiography pertains to reality as it discusses and narrates an individual's life, presenting the trajectory of their thoughts and emotions. Using this premise, Philippe Lejeune termed it the "autobiographical pact." The prerequisite for the existence of a biography is the autobiographical pact, ensuring that a biography includes a alignment between the author, the narrator, and the subject.<sup>7</sup>

In linguistic dictionaries, the term "biography" (السيرة) encompasses the manner, tradition, form, and historical aspects of an individual's life. This linguistic definition closely aligns with the conventional interpretation, establishing a robust connection between the two.

Scholars have exerted significant effort in exploring autobiography. For instance, George Mayo (d. 1949) remarks, "One of the challenges that autobiography presents in modern critical theory is the historical curiosity surrounding its nature and the initial stages of its emergence as an art form in both Arab and Western literature. This involves identifying its attributes among various literary genres and striving to formulate a suitable definition that corresponds to the preliminary boundaries for categorizing autobiographies as a distinct genre with its own identity. Definitions and terminology have varied in expressing the concept of autobiography along with its numerous synonyms."<sup>8</sup>

George Mayo (d. 1894) suggests that arriving at a comprehensive definition of autobiography is challenging to a certain extent. This difficulty arises because autobiography represents a relatively modern literary genre, and it might even be considered the most recent literary genre.<sup>9</sup>

It is a fact that studies have not unanimously agreed on the reasons behind the challenges in defining autobiography. This is evident in the case of Philippe Lejeune (born 13th August 1938), who, in his writing on autobiography, retracted from the definition he had previously established. He instead attempted to formulate a new definition through a series of texts published among various proposed readings. Philippe Lejeune employed several restrictions in this process, aiming to arrive at a comprehensive and definitive definition of autobiography. As a result, he ultimately acknowledged the necessity of having texts to which scholars can refer, whether those texts take the form of stories, poems, or biographies.<sup>10</sup>

Autobiography exists within every literary genre, making it challenging to separate from any specific genre, as it emerges from the innovator's recollections of their memories.

The term "autobiography" originated in England in the early nineteenth century. The word "biography" carries two closely related yet distinct meanings:

The first meaning, as described by Larousse (1866 AD), pertains to a person's life being written from their own perspective. It differs from memoirs, which recount events that might be disconnected from the narrator's experiences.

The second meaning encompasses any text where the author appears to discuss their life or emotions, regardless of the author's intention. This interpretation aligns with Faberoa's usage in

the Universal Dictionary of Literature (1876 AD), where he defines biography as a literary work, encompassing novels, poems, or philosophical essays, wherein the author implicitly or explicitly aims to narrate their life, express their ideas, or depict their existence.

Philippe Lejeune's perspective on autobiography aligns with this, stating that it encompasses works meeting both linguistic and objective conditions, relating to the narrator while not encompassing similar forms to autobiography.<sup>11</sup>

Based on the aforementioned definitions, it becomes evident that biography encompasses an explanation of the writing process. Biography is an art that constructs and nurtures a foundation of trust between the author and the reader. Consequently, the author must uphold honesty while composing their biography, fostering a sense of proximity to the reader's perspective.

In fact, Ihsan Abbas asserts in matters of writing a biography that there should have complete honesty to find out every aspect of life in biographical account. Needless to mention that self-truth constitutes a form of relative honesty, irrespective of the author's earnestness in faithfully conveying it as it stands.<sup>12</sup>

### **Autobiography in Modern Arabic Literature:**

In the modern era, we encounter the presence of this biographical art within the poetry of the nineteenth century AD, following Bonaparte's campaign against Egypt in the year 1797 AD.<sup>26</sup> The modernists adopted the approach of our predecessors by engaging in self-translation after studying and mastering foreign languages, particularly Arabic.<sup>27</sup> In this context, Muhammad bin Umar al-Tunisi (d. 1857 AD) authored his book "Share the Minds with the Biography of Arab Countries and Sudan" in 1832 AD. The preface of this book includes a biography of the author himself. He subsequently delved into the various positions he held and then chronicled his journey to Sudan.<sup>13</sup>

Rifa'a al-Tahtawi wrote a book called *Talkhīṣ al-Ibrīz fī Talkhīṣ Bārīz*, which he wrote around the time he lived (died in 1873). This book is important because it's one of the first autobiographies. Interestingly, the book was kept hidden from the public for a while. Rifa'a wrote it to talk about his trip to France. People who wanted to travel to France or England could learn from it.<sup>14</sup>

Ihsan Abbas (d. 2003), in his assessment of Taha Hussein's (d. 1973 CE) book "al-Ayyām," (الأيام) asserts that it stands as the pioneer among modern biographies. No other work in our Arabic literary tradition can rival its significance. It is distinguished by its latent emotions and its capacity for satire.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, we come across Ibn Hazm Al-Andalusi's (d. 456 AH) autobiographical account within his book "The Dove's Collar in Intimacy and Thousands." This work is adorned with historical occurrences, inviting the reader's imagination to conjure scenes akin to those played out in films on a screen.<sup>16</sup>

In the modern era, we observe certain publishers intertwining their translations with elements of fiction. Notable among them are Al-Shidyaq (d. 1887 AD) and Tawfiq Al-Hakim (d. 1987 AD). It is worth mentioning that Taha Husayn was openly influenced by Rousseau (d. 1778 AD) and acknowledged this influence.<sup>17</sup>

However, Taha Husayn excelled not only in this realm but also in the field of literary criticism. Moreover, his talents extended to the domains of storytelling and novel writing.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Ahmed Amin drew inspiration from Taha Husayn's book "Al-Ayyâm," and he followed Taha Husayn's example when he penned his own autobiography entitled *Hayâtî* means "My Life". This influence wasn't solely due to Ahmed Amin's literary renown, but his personality also left a deep impact on his psyche.<sup>19</sup>

Regarding the work of Ahmad Amin (d. 1954) *Hayâtî*, it portrays his relationships with people and places abroad and strives to unveil the truth. In a similar vein of modern literature, we encounter the biography of the writer Tawfiq al-Hakim in *al-‘Uşfûr min al-Sharq* (i.e. A Bird from the East).<sup>20</sup>

As for ‘Abbâs Mahmûd Al-Aqqad (d. 1964 AD), his approach to writing his autobiography diverges notably from the methods and styles of Taha Husayn and Ahmad Amin. In Al-Aqqad's work, an analytical and explanatory approach prevails, a style that he also employed in his articles.<sup>21</sup>

We also perceive differences in the technical construction, deviating from the methods of Taha Hussein and Ahmed Amin.<sup>22</sup>

Taha Hussayn's "Al-Ayyâm" is a remarkable autobiographical book within Arabic literature. In contrast, works by others often take the form of pure stories, exemplified by authors like Tawfiq al-Hakim and al-Mazinî (d. 1949 AD). In these works, elements of self-expression and personal reflection are present, similar to what Aqqad incorporated in his writing. Additionally, prominent figures such as Naguib Mahfouz (d. 2006 AD) incorporated their biographies into narrative frameworks that delve into depth and subjectivity. Similarly, Muhammad Shukrî (d. 2003 AD) narrated his life in the book titled *al-Khubz al-Hâfi*, while Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (d. 1994 AD) detailed his autobiography in "al-Bi'r al-Aulâ". Faisal al-Hûrânî (born in 1939 AD) documented his experiences in *al-Watan fî al-Dhâkira*, and Muhammad Al-Qaisî (d. 2003 AD) conveyed his life journey in the book *Thulâthiya Hamda*. In these works, contemplation is juxtaposed with genres inherent to poetry, such as poetic storytelling and autobiographical poetry.<sup>23</sup>

### **Characteristics of autobiography in the Arabic language:**

The ancient Arabs did not know the term "autobiography", so whoever wants to know this literary art among the ancient Arabs must search for what is called "self-translation", and the ancients wrote about themselves writings that belong to what It is called autobiography, but they did not know this term until the seventh century AH, when Yaqût included it in his dictionary meaning "a person's life."

Linguists are interested in tracing the stages of development of autobiography, as there are many forms of historiography. For the individual among the Arabs, except that the most prominent of them was the "biography", which is the life of the Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him, and this did not prevent the existence of other translations, such as the biography of "Muawiyah and the Umayyads", and the biography of "Ibn Ishâq", and then there were many types of translations after that, so it was "Al-Jarh". And the amendment" and "classes", then the translations that followed the era of the novel and blogging.

It is worth saying that some of the biographies that were in those eras had artistic and literary elements that brought them closer to autobiography in the modern era, such as that written by Al-Mu'ayad And "Ibn Al-Haytham", "Al-Râzi" and "Ibn Khaldûn", as we find in them many factors that achieve literary pleasure; Because of its multiple characteristics, we mention the following:

1. Clarity and ease of style.
2. The airtight brevity and the sweet phrase.
3. Presentation is good.
4. Smooth storytelling.
5. Frankness, honesty and impartiality.
6. Taking care of proving the elements of time and place, and revealing the names of personalities and places.
7. The ability to recreate the past and give life, movement, and heat in portraying events, experiences, and personalities.

### **Features and Characteristics of Autobiography in the Modern Era:**

The art of writing autobiography in the modern era goes to reading the reader's psyche, and to investigate what increases his literary pleasure, without prejudice to the general characteristics or objectives of the literary work. Because of its honesty, objectivity, and daring to reveal and confess, some have described it as a full-fledged biography, as it is characterized by the following:

1. It bears references to new thought and culture.
2. Pay attention to the importance of learning about new patterns of life in the West that are different from those in the East.
3. Presenting the important events. The goal is not to trace the details of the writer's life, but rather to shed light on the details of valuable meanings.

Critics and analysts conclude that autobiography in the modern era has conditions that should not be underestimated. Because it works to achieve and highlight the characteristics of the modern biography, including the following:

1. It should have a clear structure, so that the writer arranges the events, situations, and personalities that he went through, and formulates them in a tight literary formulation.
2. The presence of conflict in the biography, and this means that judging that biography is related to the depth of the internal conflict and the intensity of the external conflict; Which attracts the reader and increases his sympathy.
3. Attempting to be honest, frank, trustworthy, and impartial in depicting the past.
4. The presence of motives in the autobiography is certain, whether the writer declared it or not.
5. The hero of the autobiography must be a person of clear distinction in one aspect.<sup>24</sup>

### **Best Autobiography books in Arabic Language:**

The field of writing autobiography is one of the most difficult fields of writing for authors, because it represents a large aspect of their lives and their personalities, as they review during their writing



positive and negative attitudes so that the reader can know them, and get closer to the true personality of the writer. Each reader has his hobbies in reading, some tend to read books related to legends and tales, others tend to read cooking books, and some like to read memoirs and biographies of famous Arab and foreign writers and intellectuals. Here an attempt has been made to mention the best autobiographical books of intellectual personalities in the world as follows:

1- *Kitâb waqfa al-Munhadar*

In fact, its author Alâ' al-Dîn Hubb Allah al-Dîb is a great Egyptian writer and he is one of the most famous of the Egyptian intellectuals. Indeed, he is considered one of the most important literary figures in the arena of Arabic literature. This autobiography has employed very wonderful Arabic language through which he was able to touch the hearts of his book readers.

2- *Kitâb Hayâtî*

This book is written by the Egyptian writer and thinker Ahmad Amîn, as it is considered one of the best autobiographical books in the Arab world, where the writer tells his simplified story of his life in a literary and eloquent form of Arabic literature.

3. *Kitâb Rihlatî al-Fikriyya fî al-Budhûr wa al-Jadhûr wa al-Thamar*

This book is considered one of the best autobiographical books. It is written by the great author and writer Abd al-Wahhâb al-Masirî, where he was able to convey his autobiography in a distinctive way, so it was a non-autobiographical and non-objective biography, as he lists in writing a set of historical events and facts that took place during his life and how he faced them with his thought. He was one of the greatest Arab thinkers in the face of many events.

4- *Kitâb Kanâsa al-Dukân*

The book was written by Yahya Haqqi (died in 1992), who is known as a leading figure in Egyptian short stories of the 20th century. He stood out for using simple language and expressions, making him a symbol of Arabic literature. Many of his novels were adapted into Egyptian movies. He created his autobiography, which covers the initial part of his life. He initially published it as articles before compiling them into his own book.

5. *Kitâb al-sîrah al-îrah*

The book belongs to Palestinian writer and poet Ibrahim Nasrallah. He skilfully shared his life story in the book "Biography of the Airplane," which has become one of the most admired autobiographical books in the Arab world. In the book, Nasrallah discusses his life alongside other intellectuals, poets, and novelists. He also engages in important dialogues, particularly about significant topics like the Palestinian issue.

6. *Kitâb Anâ wa al-Sûryâliya*

This book is among the biggest autobiographies and is about one of the most significant artists of the 20th century. He was a crucial figure in the surrealism movement, known for his unique artistic style that explored the surreal.

7- *Kitâb Hûs al-'Abqariya*

Barbara Goldsmith wrote this book, which tells the life story of the renowned scientist Marie Curie. The book follows Curie's journey from a difficult childhood to achieving worldwide recognition and success.

### 8- *Kitāb al-Ayyām*:

We must mention the book "Al-Ayyām" by Taha Husayn, a prominent writer, thinker, and leader in Arabic literature. He skilfully wrote his autobiography with honesty and objectivity. The book is divided into three parts. In the first part, he discusses his challenging childhood due to his blindness and the difficulties he faced in the rural areas of Egypt. The second part covers his time at Al-Azhar and his completion of university studies. The last part talks about his life in Paris.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Discussion:**

The concept of autobiography in Arabic literature has evolved over time, with its roots in pre-Islamic times and a strong presence in the modern era. In contemporary prose, autobiography serves as a form where authors share their life's journey, aiming to convey honesty and avoid fabrication. People are drawn to autobiographies that recount struggles and triumphs, as extraordinary experiences inspire readers. Taha Hussein's "Al-Ayyām" stands as a notable example of such a captivating autobiography, garnering wide attention due to its unique and remarkable nature.

The term "al-Sīrah" refers to a biography of an individual, detailing their accomplishments and life. Biographical literature has evolved, encompassing history, diaries, memoirs, confessions, stories, and novels, enriched by personal and psychological elements. The relationship between an author, narrator, and subject is essential in autobiography, ensuring honesty and reliability.

Autobiography's emergence dates back to ancient Rome, influencing modern Arabic literature. Rifa'a al-Tahtawī's "Talkhīṣ al-Ibrīz fī Talkhīṣ Bārīz" is an early example. Taha Hussein's "Al-Ayyām" remains a groundbreaking work, while other authors like Tawfiq al-Hakim and al-Mazini also embraced autobiographical elements. Notably, autobiography is interwoven with various genres, such as narrative frameworks, storytelling, and autobiographical poetry.

Autobiographies from different authors, including Ahmad Amin, Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqqad, and Naguib Mahfouz, highlight diverse approaches and styles. The term "biography" historically referred to a person's life written from their perspective, distinguishing it from memoirs. Autobiography encompasses personal expression and reflection. Linguistically, the term "al-Sīrah" broadly signifies an individual's life, spanning various forms of historiography.

In the modern era, autobiography caters to readers' preferences and delves into internal and external conflicts. Honesty and impartiality are paramount, presenting valuable insights rather than exhaustive life details. Autobiographies often highlight connections between Western and Eastern cultures. Overall, autobiography in Arabic literature evolves to cater to readers' interests while maintaining its roots in authentic storytelling.

#### **Conclusion:**

In fact, autobiography is a rich and ever-evolving literary genre that offers readers an intimate glimpse into the lives, thoughts, and challenges of its authors. From ancient Arab traditions of self-expression to the modern era's intricate narratives, autobiographies have maintained their appeal by weaving personal experiences with broader societal contexts. The genre's ability to inspire, motivate, and resonate with readers remains undiminished, making it a timeless art form that bridges cultures and generations. As a testament to human introspection and the power of



storytelling, autobiography continues to enrich literature and connect individuals through shared experiences and remarkable journeys.

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