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Biography in Modern Arabic Literature "Al-Ayyam" (The Days) by Dr. Taha Hussein

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Abstract

Arabic literature has been renowned since ancient times, particularly from before the Islamic era, for its richness and remarkable literary works in both poetry and prose. Recent times have witnessed a notable expansion of modern Arabic literature across various academic and artistic forms, enhancing its stature compared to other foreign literary traditions such as French and American literatures. This surge has drawn substantial attention from critics, writers, and intellectuals, largely due to the rise of prose genres that have taken precedence over poetry. Key forms include the novel, short story, play, and biography, with biography emerging as the most prominent and impactful among readers, embodying significant technical depth. Taha Hussein, despite being blind, was bestowed with knowledge and discernment, achieving remarkable success in his roles as an esteemed writer, critic, historian, and Egyptian translator. His renowned work "Al-Ayyam" is considered a pioneering biography within Arab literature, setting an exemplary standard. "Al-Ayyam," authored by Taha Hussein, elucidates the life of the Arab race, and serves as a revered model in this genre.

The book "Al-Ayyam" was authored by Dr. Taha Hussein, a respected figure in Arabic literature, and is divided into three parts. The first part delves into his childhood experiences and the events that shaped them. In the subsequent section of the book, Dr. Taha Hussein reflects on his education at Al-Azhar and the knowledge he acquired in the bustling city of Cairo. The final part chronicles a new chapter in his life marked by a fervent pursuit of renewal, openness, and transition into a distinct world - the realm of Europe.

Keywords: Arabic literature, Modern Arabic literature, Al-Ayyam, Taha Hussein, Al-Azhar, period of struggle, Europe

Arabic literature has a long-standing reputation for its richness and abundance, dating back to pre-Islamic times, encompassing both poetry and prose. In recent times, modern Arabic literature has gained prominence in various academic, artistic, and critical contexts, enhancing its stature relative to foreign literatures like French and American. This evolution is attributed to the rise of prose forms such as novels, short stories, plays, and autobiographies, which have supplanted the traditional dominance of poetry. Autobiographies, in particular, have emerged as a prominent and powerful genre in terms of technical expression.

Sparking debates in Arab literary circles regarding their origins, development, and blending with other genres to create new literary forms. The resulting discussions have provided rich material for critics and researchers. It is worth noting that biography writing is not a recent innovation but has evolved over time. Arabs have acknowledged and embraced Islam since its introduction. Across generations, we have inherited a collection of significant literary works, ranging from extensive texts to those focusing on specific individuals. Examples include Ibn Saad's book named "Al-Tabaqat," Ibn Faraj Al-Isfahani's book "Al-Aghani," Ibn Hisham's "The Biography of the Prophet," and Ibn Al-Adim's "Al-Insaaf wal-Tahri." Modern times witness a vibrant aspect of Arabic literature that connects our literary heritage to Arab civilization's history, contemporary thought, and psychology. It reflects a genuine and vivid experience that has inspired exploration through various forms in Arabic literature. We have prioritized this art for its value and the insights it offers. This choice is tied to the significance of information and media.

Particularly evident in historical records like the Prophet's biography. Without the art of biography, current and future generations would lack awareness of this pivotal figure and his crucial role in Islamic history specially for Muslims and Arabs. But the biography entered a long period of inactivity and then began to flourish. In the modern era, authors produced valuable books, such as "Leg on Leg" by Ahmed Fares, and the valuable masterpiece by Taha Hussein, "The Days," which was considered the beginning of this genre and the founder, and "My Life." By Ahmed Amin and many others like that.

Our endeavor to define and establish this new literary genre, as well as shed light on aspects of Taha Hussein's biography, is of importance. Biography holds a significant place in Arabic literature, being an ancient art rather than a recent one.

Throughout history, eminent figures in thought, literature, and science have penned autobiographical accounts. Notable works include "Al-i'tibar" by Osama bin Munqidh and "Al-munqidh min Al-Dalal" (The Savior from the Shadows) by Imam Al-Ghazali. In modern times, many authors have ventured into writing autobiographies, utilizing a contemporary style that includes psychological analysis. Examples include "Al-Ayyam" (The Days) by Taha Hussein, "Hayati" (My Life) by Ahmed Amin, and "ana" by Abbas Mahmoud Al-Akkad. Biography, blending history and literature, has been a longstanding tradition among Arabs and is regarded as a crucial source of insight. He provided artistic stories with narration techniques, and some researchers in the Prophet's biography considered a transitional stage between the narrative form that the Arabs knew before Islam, and the form that developed later to identify Arab stories, stressing that it had a great influence on the Arab story, as it drew the attention of the Arabs to "the art of the biography". They gave it their attention, cared for it, and took many forms for it, including the art of biography, which is concerned with observing the life of its owner committed to his reality.

Yahya Ibrahim Abdel Dayem mentions that self-translation "is still absent to this day" for such care even though it has been present in our Arabic literature for a long time. "It is recognized that there are few" studies that have dealt with literary works that fall under this genre (Autobiography)¹ That is, devoting the efforts of researchers to poetry, stories, and theater arts. There are many names for this term, and some researchers have called it translations and autobiographies. Memoirs, translations, and autobiographies can be classified into two categories: the autobiographical or private ones. These types typically focus on the author's personal experiences, including challenges faced, upbringing, education, travels, interactions with contemporaries, and reflections on significant events. Examples of such works include Taha Hussein's "Al-Ayyam" and Ahmed Amin's "Hayati"². On the other hand, self-translation involves authors expressing their own struggles, experiences, knowledge gained, and significant life events. There are differing views on the origin of this genre, with interpretations ranging from attributing it to historical Arab influences, to the impact of Western cultural interactions, and even considering it a modern literary form. Arab critics have debated extensively about the origins of this genre, some viewing it as among the oldest literary forms, while acknowledging the significance of Shawqi Deif in its development. Which confirms that the first signs of biography were for nations before the Arabs, but Abdul Rahman Badawi denies the possibility of the existence of an autobiography among Arabs, but Shukri Mabkhout does not do so, and acknowledges the existence of an origin for this art in Arabic literature, while Tahani Abdel Fattah Shaker believes that autobiographies have existed in Arabic literature since the first century AH, the seventh century AD.³

Exploring the ancient Arabic literature legacy reveals initial signs of this literary form, historically perceived by most Western critics as recent.⁴ The classification or blending of literary genres has posed significant challenges due to its diverse and contrasting nature. This flexibility and elusiveness arise from incorporating various literary forms and genres, drawing from history, diaries, memoirs, confessions, and letters. These elements converge closely with autobiographical works, resulting in novel forms like autobiographical novels, fictional autobiographies, and experiential autobiographical novels. In poetry, one encounters poetic autobiographies and autobiographical poems. The proper understanding of these genres varies based on their origins.

The correct concept of autobiography:

The concept of literary genres evolves based on the reasons for their emergence. The "art of autobiography" holds deep roots in Arab heritage, generating significant interest among researchers. Linguists are currently working on refining the concept of autobiography from a linguistic and terminological perspective. The term has various definitions that vary based on different viewpoints provided by researchers and linguists. According to the Dictionary of Novel Criticism Terms, an autobiography is distinguished as a narrative that sets it apart from a novel.

1 Yahya Ibrahim Abdel Dayem: Self-translation in modern Arabic literature, Dar Revival of Arab Heritage, Beirut, 1975 edition, p. 1.

2 Maher Shaaban Abdel Bari: Literary taste: its nature, theories, components, standards, and measurement, Dar Al-Fikr Publishing

3 Samia Baba: The autobiographical component of the novel, My Story is a Long Explanation by Hanan Al-Sheikh, Ghaida Publishing House

4 Jalila Al-Tariter: Elements of Biography in Modern Arabic Literature, Research in the References, p.288)

This type of text is recounted in the first person and does not involve fictional elements; instead, it reflects events as experienced by the narrator (the writer) in reality. It's acknowledged that the depiction in a biography might deviate from the true life of the narrator, either due to memory limitations in accurately recalling past events or because of a tendency to enhance or conceal the truth.

The Biography:

Technical self-translation involves crafting a coherent narrative structure set in a specific temporal and spatial context. Through this, the narrator transforms personal experiences into a significant and cognitive domain, offering a profound richness that delivers valuable insights to readers, enriching their understanding of life. The candidate's unique life story necessitates the production of a biographical work able to contribute to this narrative art form. This demands exceptional narrative skills to create an artistic piece that captures essential elements, narrative flow, and stylistic nuances.⁶ Furthermore, this form of narrative centers on portraying human existence, reconstructing the past, and infusing vitality, movement, and emotion into events and personal stories to engage readers and provide enlightenment.

The literary genre referred to here can be best defined by Dr. Yahya Ibrahim Abdel Dayem as follows: "Technical self-translation is the translation devised by the author in a coherent manner, built upon the author's original work, ensuring

unity and consistency in both form and essence, presented in a literary style that effectively conveys the intended content through an account rich in personal anecdotes and diverse experiences. It emphasizes the art of presentation, structural organization, eloquence of expression, and literary charm."⁷ This definition underscores the notion that not every literary creation can be classified as a biography unless it serves as a portrayal of human life. Muhammad Abd al-Ghani Hassan further clarifies this notion by indicating that translations constitute a form of literature composed in Arabic. Such works delve into depicting the essence of human existence, a task that may entail diverse depths depending on factors such as the historical context, cultural influences of the translator—who is essentially the author of the translation — and the proficiency in capturing a vivid and accurate portrayal of the subject matter.⁸

Origin and upbringing:

Arab critics have expressed divergent views on the origins of ShawqiDeif's biography.

Deif asserts that the earliest incarnations of personal narratives can be traced back to pre-Arab nations. He posits that ancient forms of self-representation include the epitaphs found on tombstones, serving as a means for individuals to delineate their identities and perhaps recount notable actions they undertook. Notably, the Egyptians, renowned for their elaborate hieroglyphics on tombs and pyramids during the Pharaonic era, showcased a penchant for memorializing aspects of their lives and achievements. Various intellectuals and philosophers,

5 LatifZitouni: *A Dictionary of Novel Criticism Terms*, Lebanon Publishers Library, An-Nahar Publishing House, 2002, 1st edition.

pp.110,111

6 Muhammad Saber Obaid: *Poetic Autobiography, a reading of the biographical experience of Arab modernist poets*, p. 109

7Yahya Ibrahim Abdel Dayem, *Self-Translation in Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 10

8 Muhammad Abd al-Ghani Hassan: *Biographies and Biographies*, Dar al-Maaref for Publishing and Distribution, 3rd edition, (ed. T, p. 9).

such as the eminent figure Galen, used writings to document significant aspects of their existence, laying bare their circumstances and accumulated wisdom.⁹ Contrastingly, Tahani Abdel Fattah Shaker holds the viewpoint that "autobiographical works have been present in Arabic literature as early as the first century AH."¹⁰ This assertion underscores a longstanding tradition within Arabic literary spheres, suggesting that self-representation and personal narratives are deeply ingrained in the historical fabric of Arab literary expression. Where |concluded that the biography of "Salman Al-Farsi," a prominent companion, is considered the starting point of Arab biographies and has influenced subsequent literary eras worldwide. This type of literary writing in Arabic heritage also encompasses scientific and intellectual biographies. Emulating this model can be beneficial, as authors of these works portray their subjects' attributes while conveying talents and preferences. Well-known figures in this genre include "Al-Hallaj," "IbnArabi," "Ibn Al-Farid," "Al-Suhrawardi," and "Al-Shaarani," whose works are found in translation and biography sections.¹¹ These compositions hold significant value in preserving the cultural and literary heritage. It's important to note the distinction between translations and biographies. Despite recent trends, the term "translation" gained prominence. ScholarTahani Abdel Fattah Shaker concludes that ancient Arabic literature lacks modern biography features and characteristics due to each era having its own unique literary elements and forms in continuous development.

The biography found in heritage books serves as the foundational elements and core of personal biographies.¹² It is essential to acknowledge that there is evidence challenging the notion that the autobiographical genre was absent in ancient Arabic literature, though it may have initially manifested in rudimentary forms that progressed over time. Reem Al-Issawi suggests that modern autobiographies have strayed from traditional norms, breaking free from strict conventions to candidly display personal reflections.

While some authors demonstrate a commitment to portraying their imperfections and desires truthfully, they tend to avoid the level of complete vulnerability and revelation typical in Western autobiographies like "The Confessions" by Rousseau and Andre Gide.¹³ This distinction highlights the reluctance of Arab literature to openly expose and unveil the depths of the soul. Such characteristics underscore the nuanced nature of self-representation in Arab culture, showcasing a tendency towards guardedness rooted in the tradition of privacy and discretion.

The book "Al-Ayyam" by Taha Hussein is widely regarded as a pioneering work in the genre of Arab autobiography, setting a standard that subsequent writers have sought to emulate. This literary masterpiece is often seen as a reflection of modern Arab biography through the lens of Western literary conventions and structures. As it successfully achieves its artistic objectives, it also marks an initial exploration into the fusion of self-reflection and fictional storytelling, a blending that adds layers of complexity to the work. Critics have engaged in spirited debates surrounding the nature of the literary genre of "Al-Ayyam," particularly due to Taha Hussein's

9 ShawqiDhaif, *Personal Translation*, Dar Al-Maaref, 1987, 4th edition, p. 8

10 Tahani Abdel Fattah Shaker, *Autobiography in Arabic Literature*, p. 32

11 The autobiographical component of the novel *My Story is a Long Explanation* by Hanan Al-Sheikh, p. 50

12 Tahani Abdel Fattah Shaker, *Autobiography in Arabic Literature*, p. 64

13 Reem Al-Issawi, *FadwaTouqan, self-criticism, reading biography*, Egyptian Lebanese House, Dr.I, 1998, p.22

strategic narrative approach, which serves to obscure the authorial persona. Notably, the absence of a traditional autobiographical framework within the book has added to the ambiguity surrounding its classification, prompting comparisons to historical writing rather than conventional life narratives. By linking the days chronicled by Taha Hussein to broader historical contexts in the Arab world, the text underscores the interconnectedness between the author, the reader, and the cultural milieu, thus challenging established notions of biographical writing and ensuring its continued relevance within this dynamic literary landscape.¹⁴

The periods of transformation and societal changes give rise to suffering, becoming a significant and influential element in the creation and composition of autobiographies. Pain, under these circumstances, serves as an effective tool that enhances the spiritual richness of our existence and contributes to the refinement of our character.¹⁵ A person's psychological needs are not limited to the request to adapt to the surrounding circumstances only, as a person may have some experiences that make him need to readapt with himself as well. When a person is exposed and suffering from severe pain, he may feel the desire to reconsider all the events that he experienced, and the same feeling may happen to a person if he believes that he has completed his mission in life.¹⁶ Renowned critics, such as Taha Hussein, are credited with pioneering the art of autobiography in contemporary Arabic literature, particularly in its conventional form, notably exemplified by his work "Al-Ayyam," regarded by many as one of his most remarkable achievements. Taha Hussein's ascent in literary circles established him as a mentor to emerging writers and garnered acclaim from a multitude of scholars in the field. During the 1980s and 1990s, Taha Hussein's book "Al-Ayyam" garnered significant attention from critics and researchers. This followed a period when the renowned figure in Arabic literature faced a crisis that led to his expulsion from the Egyptian University (Fouad | University) due to his controversial views expressed in another book titled "On Pre-Islamic Poetry."

Introducing the Writer and Scholar Taha Hussein:

Taha Hussein, the renowned Egyptian writer, critic, historian, and translator, he was born in the village of Kilo in the Minya Governorate of Upper Egypt on November 14, 1889. He hailed from a large family of humble beginnings. Unfortunately, he lost his sight because of ophthalmia,

14 Hanan Al-Sheikh, *The Autobiographical Component in the Novel My Story is a Long Explanation*, p. 58)

15 Sharaf Abdel Aziz: *Biographical Literature*, Egyptian International Publishing Company, Longman, 1st edition, p. 17

16 Tahani Abdel Fattah: *Autobiography in Arabic Literature*, p. 25 (26)

Adding to the hardships faced by his family in the countryside.

This experience deeply influenced his early work, notably in the first part of his book "The Days" (1929), where he reflected on the bitterness of rural life. His father Hussein Ali was an employee at an agricultural company linked to sugar production.¹⁷ Taha Hussein born seventh out of thirteen children, conflicting reports exist on the exact age he lost his vision, some stating it happened when he was only three years old.¹⁸

The scientific life of Taha Hussein:

Taha Hussein's early education began with studying under Sheikh Muhammad Jad Al-Rab to learn Arabic, arithmetic, and to recite and memorize the Holy Qur'an. Before the age of nine, he had already absorbed a diverse range of knowledge including songs, stories, poetry from the Hilalists, supplications, and various Sufi chants, all while successfully memorizing the entire Qur'an.¹⁹

Having grasped the fundamentals of reading and writing from the book, he later moved to Cairo in 1902 to further his studies at Al-Azhar. While teaching literature lessons at Al-Azhar under the supervision of Professor Al-Marsafi.

Taha Hussein chose not to engage in jurisprudence and belief classes. Instead, he focused on studying jurisprudence, logic, and legal principles without being swayed by these subjects. He was quick to establish himself but eventually paused his literature studies due to financial constraints, causing his benefactor to withdraw her support.²⁰ As our writer progressed, his intellectual horizons expanded towards reformist ideologies sparked by the influential works found in the prominent periodicals of the era-Al-Hilal and Al-Manar. Through the writings of prominent figures like Qasim Amin, Rashid Reda, Muhammad Abdo, and notably Ahmed Lotfi Al-Sayyid, who was considered the educator of the generation during that period, his worldview began to shift.²¹ Then he went to France in 1915 to continue his studies. Taha Hussein translated many texts from Greek and French literature, then published his book on pre-Islamic poetry in 1926 AD, which caused a great uproar in all circles and prevented its circulation. They erected a final barrier between Taha Hussein and all representatives of the traditions, Taha Hussein translated many texts from Greek and French literature, then published his book on pre-Islamic poetry in 1926 AD, which caused a great uproar in all circles and prevented its circulation. They established a final barrier between Taha Hussein and all representatives of the traditions.

Dr. Taha Hussein obtained several positions and ranks, including dean of the university in 1936 AD. He became an advisor to the Ministry of Education and president of Fouad University. He joined scientific institutions inside and outside Egypt. He also obtained several honorary titles from different universities. He was the supervisor of Dar al-Katib in Egypt and the magazine issued by it. He was a member of the Arabic Language Academy.

17 Sameh Karim: *What remains of Taha Hussein?* Edition: Dar Al-Ilm, Beirut, Lebanon, p.16

18 Shawqi Deif: *Contemporary Arabic Literature in Egypt*, 3rd edition, Dar Al-Maaref, Egypt, 1971 AD, p.277))

19 Taha Hussein: *Al-Ayyam*, 58th edition, Dar Al-Maaref, Egypt, 1979 AD, p.27

20 Taha Hussein: *Memoirs*, 2nd edition, Dar Al-Adab, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 1721 Al-Sadiq Qassouma: *The novel, its components and its origins in modern Arabic literature*, p.255

The Book of Days was written by the Dean of Literature in three parts. The first part is about childhood and the events that took place in it, and about his primary education and his memorization of the Holy Qur'an and his sheikh, and the Saidi house in which he grew up, and the fence, and the farm where he used to play with his brothers, and the canal to which his world ends, and he mentions that He was the seventh of his father's children, and they were thirteen children. He found difficulty in his life and became silently sad because of his blindness, and this sadness appeared in his actions.

The second part is in the book (Al-Ayyam), in which Dr. Taha Hussein writes about his educational life at Al-Azhar and what he acquired in this knowledge environment in Cairo. The life, affairs, and morals of living people are no less dangerous than the knowledge he acquired in his Al-Azhar environment. With jurisprudence, monotheism, grammar, and logic, he criticized the sheikhs of Al-Azhar and their adherence to everything old and their contempt for everything new. Therefore, he felt in his depths the need for freedom

As for the third part of "Al-Ayyam," Taha Hussein tells us about a new period in his life, which is the period of struggle for renewal and the pursuit of openness, the period of movement and transition to a new, different world, which is the world of Europe. Then he traveled to France, focused on study and academic achievement, and faced life. There in Paris, where he was suffering from great difficulties and remained so until he met the girl who sympathized with him and who was in his life his sight and his wife and loyal companion, and he returned to Cairo after obtaining his second doctorate

The doctor died on October 28, 1973 AD and left wonderful books, including:

- 1) The days in its three parts.
- 2) In biographies and biographies: on the margins of biography.
- 3) Othman
- 4) Ali and his sons
- 5) The two sheikhs
- 6) The caravan's supplication
- 7) Memory of Abu Al Alaa
- 8) Renewing the memory of Abu Al-Ala
- 9) The religious phenomenon in Greece, the development of the gods and their impact on the city
- 10) Al-Wajib by Jules Simon, in its four parts
- 11) Selected newspapers of representative poetry

We reached the following results through the article:

1. Modern Arabic literature has spread in various studies and artistic and critical forms, which has influenced this field and raised its level compared to other foreign literatures, such as French and American literature, and presented it to the circle of major interest of critics, writers, and thinkers.
2. The art of biography is not one of the innovations of the current era, but rather it has been known since ancient times. The Arabs have known it since the launch of Islam and they accepted it, and we have taken from it in successive generations a number of books.
3. In the modern era, many writers have turned to writing autobiography in a modern and interesting style of psychological analysis, including: "The Days" by Taha Hussein, "My Life" by the writer Ahmed Amin, and "I" by the writer Abbas Mahmoud Al-Akkad. Autobiography is an art that combines History and literature have been known to Arabs since ancient times.
4. The book "The Days" by Taha Hussein is considered the beginning of the Arab biography and an ideal model for it, as it reflects the modern Arab biography according to Western standards and foundations when it fulfills the purpose from an artistic point of view.
5. Taha Hussein was blind, but God granted him knowledge and insight. He achieved great success in his life. He was a great Egyptian writer, critic, historian, and translator.
6. The book "The Days" by Taha Hussein is considered the beginning of the Arab biography and an ideal model for it, as it reflects the modern Arab biography according to Western standards and foundations when it fulfills the purpose from an artistic point of view.
7. The Book of Days was written by the Dean of Literature in three parts. The first part is about childhood and the events that happened there, and the second part is in the book (Al-Ayyam), in which Dr. Taha Hussein writes about his educational life at Al-Azhar and what he acquired in this knowledge environment in Cairo, the life, affairs, and morals of the living life. The knowledge he acquired in his Al-Azhar environment is no less dangerous. As for the third part of "Al-Ayyam," Taha Hussein tells us about a new period in his life, which is the period of struggle for renewal and striving for openness, the period of movement and transition to a new, different world, which is the world of Europe. Then he traveled. To France, he focused on studying and academic achievement.