

Patterns of Representation of the Self in Modern Arabic Autobiographical Writing

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Abstract

It is often maintained that autobiography in Arabic writing lacks a defined status. In light of the elasticity and the wide scope of autobiography to accommodate disparate variety of patterns of the representation of the self, the paper examines examples of diverse patterns of the interpretation of the self in four Arabic autobiographical works: Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Sijn al-Hayah* (1964) (*The Prison of Life*) and *Zahrat al-Hayah* (1975) (*The Flower of Life*), Hisham Sharabi's *al-Jamr wa-al-Ramad: Thikrayyat Muthaqaf Arabi* (1978) (*Embers and Ashes: Memoirs of an Arab Intellectual*) and *Suwar al-Madi* (1988) (*Images of the Past*). In each of the four autobiographical works, the autobiographer's idiosyncratic impulses, peculiar motivations, and contextual factors act as significant determinants of the unique structural conduct and thematic concerns of the work. The final part of the paper provides interpretation for the characteristic tendency of Arab writers of autobiography to write more than one autobiographical work.

Key words: autobiography, diverse, idiosyncrasy, patterns, unique structure.

Patterns of Representation of the Self in Modern Arabic Autobiographical Writing

It is often maintained that autobiography is a cultural product unique to modern western civilization. One of the most prominent proponents of this notion is Georges Gusdorf (1980) argues:

It would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside our cultural areas; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was their own....The concern, which seems so natural to us, to turn back on one's own past, to recollect one's life in order to narrate it, is not at all universal. It asserts itself only in recent centuries and only on a small part of the map of the world. (p.29)

Similar views are held by Roy Pascal (1960). Further illustrations of this claim abound. For instance, in his book *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, Karl Weintraub (1978) establishes links between the emergence of the genre of autobiography and the celebration of the concept of realization of selfhood in western movement of Romanticism (p.xiii).

The deeply-held view by these European authors that autobiography is essentially European may explain to us the shared subscription of the two well-known orientalist George Misch and Franz Rosenthal to the notion that autobiographical writing is a rare phenomenon in Arabic literature.

Both of these two orientalist ascribe the absence of autobiography in Arabic literature mainly to the infinite poverty of a sense of the individual in Arabic culture, that is, in comparison with western culture's peculiar concern with emphasizing the great importance of individualism

But in a recently published book entitled *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Brustad et al., (2001)), a group of prominent scholars present a survey of one hundred and forty Arabic literary works which they claim belong to a well-established tradition of autobiography in Arabic literature which dates back to the ninth century A.D. "Part I" of this book, it is of interest to note, is given the title "A Thousand Years of Arabic Autobiography." The Arabic tradition of autobiographical writing includes a host of subgenres each of which is interested in one way or another in sketching the life experiences of the autobiographer. The list of subgenres includes *sira*, *tarjama*, *barnamaj*, *fahrasa* and *manaqib*. (1)

The most outstanding pre-modern Arabic autobiography is *Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti al-Tahadduth bi-ni'mat Allah (Speaking of God's Bounty)* (1485). In the introduction to his autobiography, al-Suyuti places his text within what was for him a well established tradition of Arabic autobiographical writing. But in comparison with the recognized definition of western tradition of autobiography which is based mainly on autobiographical works of St. Augustine, Rousseau, Bunyan, Wordsworth, Benjamin Franklin, and Henry Adams, studies of Arabic autobiography do not provide a recognized defined status of the genre. Yet, in the introduction to his autobiography al-Suyuti, as a group of authors (2001) brilliantly point out, furnishes

invaluable description of the elasticity and the wide scope of autobiography to accommodate disparate variety of patterns of the representation of the self. The authors' illuminating comments are worth quoting at length:

Al-Suyuti's work does serve, however, to alert us from the outset that in exploring self-narratives of different historical periods and different cultures, we shall encounter not only different ideas about the self and about the structure of a human life but also a wide range of differing literary conventions and discourses in which these selves and lives are represented.

These encounters should provoke a series of complex questions concerning any specific culture or time period: What were considered the fundamental elements of a human individual? What were the purposes and motivations for the written representation of an individual life? Was the individual self deemed more truly represented by an account of an individual's personality (a set of psychological idiosyncrasies, habits, and internal emotions) or by an account of a person's acts and works? (p. 5)

Al-Suyuti's views on the elasticity of autobiography, its wide range of patterns of self-representation, and the multiplicity of motivations and purposes behind writing the self, provide a theoretical framework for examining diverse patterns of writing the self in four modern Arabic autobiographical works: Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Sijn al-Hayah* (1964) (The Prison of Life) and *Zahrat al-Hayah* (1975) (*The Flower of Life*), Hisham Sharabi's *al-Jamr wa-al-Ramad: Thikrayyat Muthaqaf Arabi* (1978) (*Embers and Ashes: Memoirs of an Arab Intellectual*) and *Suwar al-Madi* (1988) (*Images of the Past*). Tawfiq al-Hakim is the most outstanding Arab playwright and Hisham Sharabi is a well-known intellectual and political activist. The crucial differences between the titles of these authors' autobiographies are a reflection of the peculiarly undefined status of autobiographical writing in Arabic literature.

In each of the four autobiographical works, the autobiographer's "idiosyncratic" impulses and peculiar "motivations" for writing his autobiography act as the main determinants of the unique structural conduct and thematic concerns of each of the four works under consideration. Hence, I will deal with each one of them separately beginning with *The Prison of Life*.

The Prison of Life

In the opening paragraph of *The Prison of Life*, al-Hakim makes it clear that the main motivation behind his writing of his autobiographical work is self-interpretation:

These pages are not merely the history of a life. They attempt to account for, to interpret, a life. I am taking the lid off my human apparatus in order to investigate this 'motor' which we call 'nature' or 'character' - this motor which determines my ability and controls my destiny. (1964, p.3)

Throughout *The Prison of Life*, al-Hakim places particular stress on the impact of heredity as the main factor which determines his 'destiny' - his "nature or character". This is mainly what gives *The Prison of Life* its idiosyncratic quality. From his mother al-Hakim inherits

imagination and story telling, whereas from his father he inherits discipline, thrift, and sense of humor. Al-Hakim's numerous moments of self-revelation, which punctuate the constant process of self-scrutiny at work throughout his autobiographical essay, have led to his realization at a very early stage of his life that he is destined to be an artist. Simultaneously, he is attracted to drawing, music, songs, poetry, fiction, and drama. But it is the "demon" of drama as he describes it, which finally has had its grip on his soul. In his attempt to interpret and to explain how his attraction to drama gains the upper hand against rival inclinations in the course of his search for his genuine artistic mission, al-Hakim attributes his eventual option to become a playwright to hereditary factors: "But the question to be asked here is:

Why did I start my writing career with a play? Perhaps it is the essence of drama - i.e. the creation of a character through dialogue, not description, through his own words not those of another- that suits my temperament. Why? Is it a matter of heredity? Is the spirit of disputation, of logic, of concentration, of putting the right word in the right place, the inner debate, the judicial concern and balance found in my father- is all that closest to the essence of drama? I do not know. (1964,pp.154-155)

Al-Hakim is a prolific and versatile writer: his literary production includes several novels, short stories, and essays, but he wrote more than seventy plays of remarkable variety; he is considered the most prominent playwright in the Arab world. It is as a playwright that al-Hakim provides valuable reminiscences about the Egyptian theatre in the first quarter of the twentieth century in *The Prison of Life*. Al-Hakim's reflections and insightful comments on the development of the Egyptian drama and theatrical activities in the early decades of the twentieth century give *The Prison of Life* its lasting importance as an autobiographical work. The whole of section 10 of *The Prison of Life* is taken up with documenting the establishment of theatrical companies in Egypt. In sections 11 and 12, al-Hakim provides a precise record of theatrical activities undertaken by various companies, presenting invaluable insights into, particularly, the practice of adaptation of foreign plays to be put on the Egyptian stage:

The practice of adaptation rendered a worthwhile service to the Egyptian theatre in its earliest stage, for it trained writers in the most difficult aspect of play writing, which is characterization. The theme adapted was not in itself of major importance. Shakespeare, Moliere, and Goethe borrowed themes. What is truly important in the theatre is inventing the dialogue and recreating the characters in a live, new, original way. The Egyptian 'adapter' had not yet reached that stage, which in the theatre is among the highest reaches of creativity. His efforts were directed to another aspect, also important in his artistic development. That was just weaving an Egyptian atmosphere and tinging the foreign character with a local color. The effort that 'Uthman Galal exerted in Egyptianizing Moliere's *Tartuffe* into his al -Shaykh Matluf, for example, is sensed by the spectator from the first moment. (1964, pp. 154-155)

Al-Hakim goes on to draw instructive analogies between the act of adaptation as is practiced in Egypt and similar acts of "redrafting or acclimatization" of plays in Europe and America:

Yet adaptation in Europe and in America, which is called redrafting or acclimatization or 'new version,' is confined to changes in the dialogue necessitated by differences in the sense of humor or the character of irony or similes and proverbs and the like

between one country and another. Adaptation or redrafting or acclimatization there is limited to making the original text acceptable to the receiving country. It does not extend to altering the atmosphere or the names of characters, because the atmosphere in Europe and America are broadly similar.

Theatrical adaptation with us is therefore, in some circumstances, more complicated than it is abroad. It can be half-creation, especially in those distant days when we were writing before the abolition of the veil. In the sexually segregated society of our time, we had to alter the social relations which existed between men and women in an unsegregated one. (1964, p.155)

The first phase of al-Hakim's literary career was mainly based on his adaptation or redrafting of foreign plays to suit Egyptian's taste and interests. Through his acquaintance with masterpieces of world literature, al-Hakim was able to develop and improve his creative writing only after his travel to France.

Al-Hakim's direct experience of European culture played a major role in the formation of his intellectual make-up-the pivotal issue in *The Flower of Life*:

Yes, my thinking, my intellectual formation, this is where all my freedom resides. Man is free in thought and a prisoner in his nature. I do not know whether it is by sheer coincidence that I wrote about intellectual formation in *The Flower of Life* after I wrote about natural formation in *The Prison of Life*. The flower of our life is thought, and the prison of our life is nature. (p.201)

In his book *al-Tarjama al-dhatiyya fi al-adab al-arabi al-hadith (The Autobiography in Modern Arabic Literature)*, Yahya Ibrahim Abd al-Dayim (1975) argues that while *The Prison of Life* concerns itself with dramatizing the impact of heredity on the formation of al-Hakim's selfhood, *The Flower of Life* chronicles the influence of environment on his intellectual development. (p.127) Environment, as our following discussion of *The Flower of Life* reveals, is based in the main on al-Hakim's exposure to European culture during his stay in Paris.

The Flower of Life

Throughout this autobiographical work which is written in letter form, al-Hakim sets out to define his intellectual views and to describe the phases of his intellectual formation and development in a large number of letters written to his French friend Andre. The majority of the letters deal with the theme of the encounter between the East and the West. Al-Hakim experiences acute self-division between the East and the West. This conflict has already found its way as a major literary theme in al-Hakim's novel *Bird of the East* (1944). Mushin, the hero of this novel, is cast as a fictional representative of his creator. Al-Hakim passes on his own self-division between the East and the West to Mushin. While in *Bird of the East* al-Hakim deals with the East- West dichotomy in a fictional autobiographical form, *The Flower of Life* handles the issue in a pure autobiographical form. In the novel the action gravitates towards achieving reconciliation between the East and the West within the framework of what al-Hakim describes as a universal human civilization where barriers between cultures collapse and boundaries based

on ethnical differences can be transcended, whereas in *The Flower of Life*, al-Hakim's description of the impact of what can be described as European cultural environment on the construction of his intellectual orientation seems to be inspired by the self-representational practices which characterize the narrative in Arabic travelogues.

In this type of writing in Arabic literature, the author/ traveler records his observations of people and life in the foreign country viewing things from a cross-cultural perspective. The bifocal nature which characterizes the narrative in travel literature provides the reader with the traveler's image of the other and the self-image of himself which emanates from his reflections on the other. Travelogue in Arabic literature came into being as a result of the initial contact between the East and the West in the aftermath of Napoleon's campaign to Egypt. The most prominent practitioners of this type of literature are Ahmad Faris al-Shidyak, Ahmad Zaki, and Yaqub Sanu. (2)

Richard van Leeuwen's comments on the function of travelogue may illustrate the point I am trying to make:

The function of travelogues becomes especially significant in periods when contacts between more or less segregated communities are intensified. Obviously, when cultural exchange becomes more frequent and far-reaching, the need to reconfirm one's identity and to re-evaluate the mutual positions within the cultural framework becomes acute. Since in this process the 'other' serves as a mirror to construct a self-image, this 'other' would probably not be described as a total alien, but rather as a kind of alter ego, contrasting with the self-image in some respects, but supplementing it in others. By being described in this fashion, the other incorporated into the self-image; he is related to it and eventually becomes an inseparable component of it. Ultimately, the self-image cannot exist without some related image of an 'other' Although these influences may seem to belong to different categories, they are still part of the same mutual process of incorporating images of the other in an effort to formulate and refine definitions of identity. (1988, pp. 27,29)

In so far as it concerns itself with the "definition" of al-Hakim's intellectual "identity" in a typical autobiographical fashion, *The Flower of Life* derives a great deal of its representational practices, and its peculiar use of the other as a tool to a construct self-image from the trajectory of travelogues as it is described in this quotation. Suggestively enough, in one of his letters to Andre in the first part of *The Flower of Life*, al-Hakim writes:

It is only the shock generated by the encounter between East and West that will contribute to opening closed eyes in both, the East and the West.... Each time they came into contact of each other they produced light illuminating the whole world, and each time their faces have met their eyes served as mirrors of each other. (p. 63)

For a full discussion of the distinctive narrative features of travelogue in Arabic literature, see Richard Van Leeuwen, *Autobiography, travelogue and identity*. In Robin Ostle, Ed de Moor and Stefan Wild (eds.) . *Writing the self : Autobiographical writing in modern Arabic literature*. (London : Saqi Books,1998), PP. 27,30

The course of events throughout *The Flower of Life* seems to bear out this dictum. In other words, *The Flower of Life* furnishes a concrete dramatization of the impact of the encounter between the East and the West on al-Hakim's private life as he tries to define his identity and to construct his self-image.

For al-Hakim his encounter with the other (mainly as a symbol of modernism) contributes to his recognition of the necessity of his liberation from the powerful clutches of tradition which characterizes the mode of life and style of writing in Arabic literature. Al-Hakim's embracing of modernism is presented in *The Flower of Life* as the apogee of his intellectual and aesthetic development as an artist.

Al-Hakim's major concern with presenting the theme of the encounter between the East and the West in the context of tradition versus modernism dichotomy compares and contrasts with Hisham Sharabi's overwhelming preoccupation with handling the theme of the encounter between the East and the West in his two autobiographical works to which we shall now turn.

Embers and Ashes: Memoirs of an Arab Intellectual

As is the case with al-Hakim, Sharabi's treatment of the theme of the encounter between the East and the West has close affinities with the handling of the same theme in the travelogues.

As the full title of Sharabi's work reveals *Embers and Ashes* presents a record of the author's intellectual history. Sharabi's experiences at Chicago University as a student are marked with moments of reflections brought about by his initial exposure to Western culture. During his residence in America, Sharabi developed the habit of viewing things from a cross-cultural perspective.

Section (7) of *Embers and Ashes* presents a revealing description of Sharabi's initial reaction to his exposure to a foreign culture in the United States of America:

When I joined the University of Chicago, I discovered that there were English expressions whose meanings I understood but that I seldom used such as: *probably, somewhat, to some extent*. These expressions are used to lessen the absolute certainty or decisiveness of a statement and to lend it a measure of moderation and poise. Yet our professors at the American University of Beirut rarely used expressions of that sort in their lectures. I became aware of the phenomenon, in fact, only several weeks after I arrived at the University of Chicago. I noticed that my professors and classmates there never spoke without using modifiers. I also noticed that whenever I took part in a conversation I used decisive and categorical expressions of absoluteness and finality. (1978, p.6)

Sharabi even makes no secret of his overwhelming admiration for the westerners' mode of living, particularly their highly developed sense of independence and freedom hardly barred by inhibitions and patriarchal conventions which, as Sharabi repeatedly points out throughout *Embers and Ashes*, characterize life in the Arab world:

Tom and Lemming had a powerful influence on me, regarding not only vodka, but also many other things. They were the first foreigners

of my age group I was acquainted with who rebelled against their families and their milieu and began searching for a new life that they could shape as they wanted. I especially admired their freedom and their ability to live their private lives without any inhibitions. There was no subject that was forbidden to speak about as far as they were concerned. And perhaps what I admired most about them was their permanent thirst for every kind of new experience. (1978, p.34)

In the early stages of his residence in the USA Sharabi's fascination by American culture conflicts with his patriotic defense of the Arab culture. But gradually he becomes more critical of Arab culture, especially the conservatism and rigid values of patriarchy. This newly-developed mode of thinking culminates in a key statement made by Sharabi towards the end of *Embers and Ashes*: "My experiences in Chicago hastened my intellectual maturity: I became capable of critical thinking and more realistic in facing difficulties". (p.103)

For al-Hakim, as we have been seeing, exposure to European culture served as a stimulus for his construction of a new cultural and intellectual identity as well as the adoption of a new style of writing based on modernism. But for Sharabi, the exposure to western culture is utilized for developing his critical thinking, which lies at the heart of his intellectual formation.

In his description of his intellectual formation, Sharabi pays a great deal of attention to the impact made on him by two university professors at Chicago University who are presented as if they were his mentors. Charles Morris, professor of philosophy, helps him to get rid of all of the negative aspects of his previous education in the Arab world including the American university of Beirut where education, according to Sharabi, is marked with traditional, conventional mode of thought in compliance with the dictates of patriarchy. The other professor, Arnold Bergstraesser, professor of German history, directs his attention to the significance of objectivity and dialogue—the two main principles of critical thinking, as Sharabi repeatedly points out. Recording the impact of these experiences on his intellectual transformation, Sharabi writes:

In time, the objective methodology which I began to grasp in the first months after entering the University of Chicago enabled me to recognize and rid myself of the stains of my past education, and by means of it I took big intellectual steps forward. (p. 90)

Sharabi conceives the development of objectivity and critical thinking as two important prerequisites for seeing and understanding things from different perspectives and diverse viewpoints:

Hidden shackles that fettered my mind began to fall off. The darkness of many years began to disperse. My way of seeing things changed, not only regarding the content but also methods of understanding and analysis. It became possible for me (perhaps for the first time) to see matters from various viewpoints and in the light of different criteria and values. I suddenly felt I had penetrated an intellectual barrier that had prevented me from seeing things as they really were. It became possible for me to see my social self (perhaps for the first time also) from the "outside" and with an increasingly objective spirit. (p.103)

As this quotation seems to suggest, the function of “the other” in the course of Sharabi's reconstruction of his identity is comparable to its role as a self-representational device in *The Flower of Life* - a fact which suggests some form of generic coherence in autobiographies written by Arab intellectuals who happened to have lived between two cultures. It has been already pointed out that travelogues have provided a prototypical pattern of the function of “the other” operating in some of the autobiographies in question in this paper.

Sharabi's exposure to western culture during his stay in America gives his narrative throughout *Embers and Ashes* a bifocal nature. By viewing all of his life experiences from a cross-cultural perspective, Sharabi highlights his victimization by the rigid conventions and constraints of Arab patriarchal society. In no small degree *Embers and Ashes* can be read as a kind of a sociopolitical critique of the state of affairs in the Arab world during the second part of the twentieth century. The sociopolitical discourse which characterizes Sharabi's reflections on his personal life experiences testifies to the flexibility of the autobiography genre to accommodate self-representation in a sociopolitical context in which private experiences blend with public state of affairs.

As is the case in all of autobiographies *Embers and Ashes* sets out to recapture Sharabi's past in the light of which he tries to reconstruct the history of his intellectual development. Sharabi's recollection of the past is characteristically marked by his keen awareness of being victimized by the hegemony of the norms of the patriarchal society. Hence, we are told, his urgent need to transcend the past – as one of the main motives for writing his autobiography: “Reconstructing the past is a difficult proposition. But there is no escape from it. And if we want self-liberation, a return to the past is necessary- in order to expose it, and then transcend it”. (p.19)

To further expose his past and consequently to be more able to achieve a more satisfactory measure of its transcendence, so to speak, Sharabi wrote his second autobiography which has the suggestive title *Images of the Past*, the subject of our next discussion.

Images of the Past

In the introduction to this second autobiography, Sharabi points out that it is not meant to be a continuation of *Embers and Ashes*, it is rather an attempt to reflect on the formation of his personality retrospectively on the basis of his past private and public experiences. In another part of the introduction, Sharabi goes on to add that his decision to write a second autobiography came as a response to his physicians' diagnosis that he had prostate cancer. In these terms one is tempted to suggest that Sharabi's new autobiographical project may have been inspired by his hidden psychological attempt to deny or to defeat death. Here we are strongly reminded of the opening paragraph of Edward Said's preface to his autobiography *Out of Place: A Memoir*:

Out of Place is a record of an essentially lost or forgotten world. Several years ago I received what seemed to be a fatal medical diagnosis, and it therefore struck me as important to leave behind a subjective account of the life I lived in the Arab world, where I was born and spent my formative years, and in the United States, where I went

to school, college, and university. Many of the places and people I recall here no longer exist, though I found myself frequently amazed at how much I carried of them inside me in often minute, even startlingly concrete, detail. (1999, p. ix)

The following remarks made by an anonymous author seem also to be applicable to Sharabi:

The reader of autobiography makes a grave mistake to examine an author's self-defining endeavor without first considering the looming finitude that each person seeks to supercede. This literary genre takes its honorary place among the human race, for it allows reader and writer to both embrace and elude death; the autobiographer purposefully creates a representation of his life and times, impulsively thwarts his own demise, and frees his soul from extinction (www.gradesaver.com/classicnotes/titles/words/essay1.html. retrieval date 17/08/2006).

My argument that one of Sharabi's motivations for writing *Images of the Past* was his attempt to deny or defeat death is inspired by his tendency to identify himself with Ivan Ilych the hero of Tolstoy's short novel *Ivan Ilych* (1935) which provides an outstanding classical example of humans' attempts to defeat or deny death by illusory means. (3)

Images of the Past is divided into eight chapters each of which is devoted to reflecting on specific past events in Sharabi's life pointing out their role in shaping the intellectual, spiritual, and social aspects of his personality. The multiplicity of aspects from which Sharabi views his life is announced in the table of contents.

As is the case in *Embers and Ashes*, in *Images of the Past* Sharabi dwells at length on the impact of the conventions of patriarchal society on the development of certain negative aspects of his personality, describing how he managed by going through a prolonged process of psychological self-analysis and scrutiny to liberate himself from those negative aspects such as metaphysical idealism, lack of critical thinking and objectivity.

In other words, *Images of the Past* represents not so much an attempt to set down the record of Sharabi's life for others as it provides him with an opportunity to understand the meaning of his present self in the light of his past. Indeed he is interested less in providing a dispassionate account of outer events—reality—than in undertaking a reappraisal of his inner growth. A great deal of Sharabi's inner growth is brought about by his exposure to the writings of prominent western writers and intellectuals during his stay in America. The epiphanic experiences and moments of revelation which mark important stages in the course of his inner growth are described in terms of the immediate impact these writers and intellectuals had on him. For instance, under the influence of his readings of the writings of Karl Marx, Sharabi has developed intellectual interest in establishing relationship between abstract ideas and concrete reality. This, we are told, marks a tremendous shift from his early attraction to Kierkegaard's abstract philosophical views. Moreover Sharabi's gradual acquisition of the capacity for critical analysis which he never tires to point out is extremely essential for his development of a modern intellectual self, is nurtured and enhanced by his reading of the writings of Freud and Marx.

Sharabi's discovery of what he refers to as his natural self is inspired by his exposure to the writings of the French essayist Michel de Montaigne whose views, according to Sharabi, stand in sharp contrast with the mystical notions of Mikha'il Nuayma who in turn has had a tremendous impact on the construction of Sharabi's spiritual orientation. Sharabi's frequent references to prominent authors and philosophers in *Embers and Ashes* play a crucial role in giving his autobiography its distinct self-representational quality. The authors Sharabi refers to help him to arrive at a better self-knowledge-one of his main motivations for writing a second autobiography (Sharabi 12-13). Another important motivation for Sharabi's writing of a second autobiography is his attempt to atone for his lack of involvement in an active social or political role in the Arab World during his stay in America, the period which witnessed the establishment of the state of Israel. In many places throughout *Images of the Past*, Sharabi expresses his sense of guilt on account of his travel to America to take up higher studies instead of staying in Palestine to fight against the Jewish occupation of his country (Sharabi 20, 22).

It is in this context, I would argue, that we should interpret the peculiar emphasis Sharabi places on his engagement in politics which led to his joining of the Syrian Nationalist Party under the leadership of his political mentor Anton Saadah. However, Sharabi is not attracted to Saadah only as a political leader but also as a symbol of liberal modernism in comparison with the conservatism of Arab patriarchal society, the epitome of which, according to Sharabi, is Charles Malik, a professor of the American University of Beirut at which Sharabi got his first degree in history. For each one of these two important figures who play very significant roles in his life, Sharabi in *Images of the Past* devotes a whole chapter. A similar chapter is devoted to describing Sharabi's spiritual attraction to the well-known Lebanese writer Mikha'il Nu'ayma. While Sharabi expresses his spiritual attraction to the mystical philosophy and Sufism of Nu'ayma, he emphasizes the fact that he was at the same time keen to safeguard against embracing his Sufism which runs contrary to his political activism. Expressing his unwillingness to fall under the spell of Nu'ayma's spiritualism in unequivocal terms Sharabi writes:

I have no desire to achieve salvation by returning to that super spirit in accordance with Nu'ayma's philosophy... all what I aspire to be is to live the rest of my life accepting my self which knows me as I know it. (p.36)

This remark provides another motivation for Sharabi's writing a second autobiography, that is, his attempt at self reconciliation. As Stephen Shapiro (1968) rightly observes: "Men who had always felt at peace with themselves and the world around them would have no need to write autobiography". (p.448)

However, it is not uncommon on the part of autobiographers to write more than one autobiography. In his book *Autobiography and Imagination: Studies in Self-Scrutiny*, John Pilling (1981) writes:

James wrote two volumes of autobiography and an unfinished third; Yeats wrote four (some critics would say three or two); Pasternak rejected his first attempt at the genre and tried to substitute a second; Nabokov's autobiography was 'revisited' at least twice; and so on. Nor is this an exclusively modern

phenomenon: Franklin, Thoreau and Whitman (among American writers) and Stendhal and Tolstoy (among Europeans) were always going back to their self-portraits and retouching them. These examples, together with those considered in the bulk of this study, remind us that autobiography is always a transformational or metaphorical act, in which a version of the self, rather than the self per se, is being attempted. (pp. 118-119)

Sharabi, however is not unaware of the sterling value of writing a second autobiography as a vehicle for reconstructing the autobiographer's identity anew in light of a fresh perception of his past private and public experiences. In the introduction to *Images of the Past* we read: "The past is not mere memories, it is rather rereading of history both on the private and public levels. The contours of the self and the features of events change each time they are newly viewed." (Sharabi 12-13). Al-Hakim's *The Flower of Life*, in its turn, introduces new 'contours' of its author's self which have not been given sufficient attention in *The Prison of Life*.

To conclude, while the examination of the four autobiographical works under consideration reveals "universal" qualities of autobiographical writing in the sense defined by Gusdorf, they also demonstrate peculiar qualities emanating from each of the two authors' idiosyncratic mode of regard. Yet, in weaving the texture of their narrative both of the two autobiographers draw heavily on native cultural factors, mainly trajectory of travelogues, the theme of encounter between the East and the West, and the tendency to view things from cross-cultural perspectives as a means of achieving better self-knowledge and self-interpretation- the ultimate goals of autobiography.

The wide range of discourses employed by the two authors and their characteristic tendency to rely heavily on native cultural heritage in their portrayal of their life stories seem to bear out Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti's theory of the flexibility of autobiography to accommodate diverse and multiple self-representational practices.

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Endnotes

- (1) For a full discussion of these sub-genres in Arabic literature, see Kristen E. Brustad (2001) et al., *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in Arabic Literary Tradition*, ed. Dwight F. Reynolds, Berkeley: University of California Press, 38 – 44.
- (2) For a full discussion of the distinctive narrative features of travelogue in Arabic literature, see Richard van Leeuwen, (1998) "Autobiography, Travelogue and Identity," in *Writing the Self: Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature*, eds. Robin Ostle, Ed de Moor and Stefan Wild (London: Saqi Books, 1998). 27-30.

- (3) For a fuller discussion of this point, see Al-Mousa, Nedal M (2005). A critical study of the theme of death in Don DeLillo's *White noise* from an intertextual perspective." *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, 21, 65 – 76.

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