

Aesthetics of Self-Representational Practices in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's Autobiographical Writings

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Abstract

This paper examines the nature of distinct aesthetics of self-representational practices in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's two autobiographical works: *The First Well: A Bethlehem Boyhood, and Princesses' Street: Baghdad Memories*. The former, I would argue, can be read as 'a portrait of the artist as a young man'. While it mainly sets out to capture the historical atmosphere which played a major role in shaping Jabra's personality, *The First Well* also provides insights into the young boy who would later become an artist. This is well manifested in the remarkable sensibility of the child. Fantasy, throughout the narrative, colors and shapes his portrayal of characters and his perception of reality. This aesthetic feature of self-representation practice in *The First Well* develops into a more sophisticated tendency to blur the boundaries between poetry and truth (to borrow the title of Goethe's autobiography) in *Princesses' Street*. The cross-fertilization between fantasy and truth in this second volume of Jabra's autobiography enables him to present with great scrutiny his psychological motivations, and flights of imagination. This aesthetic quality of Jabra's style can be interpreted in terms of Leigh Gilmore's theory of 'authorizing complex'. Jabra's aesthetic strategy to weave the texture of his text from disparate discourses is very well reflected in the titles of sections of this volume of his autobiography, including 'Hamlet, Ophelia, and I', and 'The Lady of the Lakes'. Just as Jabra's autobiographical writings tend to blend fact and fiction, so a reverse movement is simultaneously at play in his fictional writings in which he draws heavily on his personal experiences in his portrayal of the fortunes of fictional characters. Interestingly, in an interview, Jabra makes it clear that autobiography as a theme or motif is scattered throughout his fictional works.

Keywords: aesthetics, disparate discourses, fictional autobiography, self-representation

Cite as: Al-Mousa, N. M. (2015). Aesthetics of Self-Representational Practices in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's Autobiographical Writings. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (1).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol6no1.2>

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The First Well can lend itself for interpretation as a “portrait of the artist as a young man.” It tells of Jabra’s early years up to the age of twelve. While it mainly sets out to capture the historical atmosphere which played a major role in shaping Jabra’s personality, *The First Well* also provides insights into the young boy who would later become an artist.

Throughout this first volume of Jabra’s autobiography, the narrative is punctuated with frequent flights of imagination, dreamy visions, the young child’s moments of daydreaming, reveries, and indulgence in fantasy. All of these peculiar qualities of the personality of the child indicate unmistakable artistic sensibility. The child’s unfolding innate artistic ability finds its most subtle expression at a very early stage in his development where we can easily detect the child’s ability to describe things creatively. This is well manifested in his description of the clouds:

The clouds were white like flocks of sheep, and I followed their magical transformations. As they stretched and expanded, the sheep turned into huge whales, then into strange eagles, the fore-feathers of their wings spreading out motionless across the blue distances. I sometimes continued to observe those thin clouds till their edges turned red with the light of the sunset and then were transformed into marvellous pools of molten gold. When the full moon rose and ascended in two or three hours to its zenith, the white clouds stood in array around it in amazing concentric circles, as though they were sheep again or, now that they glistened, as though they were fine fragments of pearl oyster shells, from which we carved crosses and pictures and statues. (Jabra, 1995, p. 43)

This remarkable creative description of clouds is obviously worthy of a would be artist on whose gradual artistic development the whole narrative is based. In this particular instance, Jabra focuses the spotlight on the young boy’s peculiar capacity for painting visual images by using words in the same manner as a painter uses a brush to paint a picture. This relates to Jabra’s less recognized talent for painting- an outstanding facet of his artistic abilities.

Another equally noticeable sign of the young boy’s artistic sensibility and aesthetic orientation is very well exemplified in his peculiar obsession with words and their meanings:

More important than all that was the Arabic language I was taught by teacher Jabboor Abbood. He infected us with his love for the language and his lesson was not limited to the official syllabus of that year. Of the grammatical rules of the language, he taught me in two years, or a little over, more than I ever learned from anybody else, and what he taught me has remained basic in my dealings with writing up to the present. He was fond of parsing difficult poetic verses, and like him, I began to find pleasure in following the complex relationships between words, for these are logical and rational relationships similar to mathematical relationships between parts of algebraic equations. (Jabra, 1995, p.25)

Jabra's interest in words and their meanings is a recurring theme throughout his autobiography. The child's preoccupation with the meanings of words may well remind us of Stephen Dedalus's fascination with the meanings of words in his early childhood as a sign of his artistic precocity.

At a later stage of the narrative, the child's obsession with words and language acquires more sophisticated intellectual dimension corresponding to his unfolding aesthetic development:

What I was really obsessed with was the reading of books, school texts as well as others. I filled my brains with Arabic and English words, with dates and events, and with diverse information which, as time went on, began to assume a certain pattern that had its own intellectual dimensions and gave me real pleasure. (Jabra, 1995, p. 161)

Coupled with his interest in words as a means of translating something physical into artistic form, we recognize the child's remarkable power of observation. The second paragraph of the first section of the autobiography provides a typical example of this power- an essential requirement for his future development as an artist:

Between our door and the street, there was a small wooden gate used as an entrance to the building. It was likewise a later addition to the building, meant to separate it a little from the street. Whenever we crossed the high threshold of this entrance, we faced the door of the khan about six or seven steps away. To the left, in the open space, there was an uncovered stairway leading to the upper floor, which consisted of a single room with a green door.(Jabra, 1995, p. 26)

The child's peculiar curiosity to observe objects and things combined with his remarkable capacity for physical description of people – two aesthetic attributes essential for his eventual development into a fully-fledged artist. The following passage in which Jabra describes a disabled young child provides a concrete evidence of this artistic attribute:

He had a large body but his face was a child's, despite his fourteen years of age. His left arm was almost paralyzed, the forearm always raised to his waist. His left hand appeared as though it was merely suspended from his wrist, its fingers twisted and shriveled into the palm, and it was smaller than his unimpaired right hand. Day in and day out, he wore a long striped qunbaz which reached his ankles and acquired a new patch now and then. When he walked, he dragged his left foot, which was not as able as his unimpaired right foot. And so he was obliged to stagger as he walked, yet he advanced forward with amazing speed. In fact, one of his favorite games was to challenge us to race him, and he won most of the time. (Jabra, 1995, p. 27)

The child's capacity for observation of things and people is considerably enhanced and fostered by his peculiarly active imagination. The child's power of imagination is such that he is able to produce a fantastic image of 'angels' with whom, by virtue of his flights of imagination and day dreaming, he is even able to mingle:

Seeing the angels remained an unfulfilled desire. Making me sometimes imagine I saw them in some ghostly form creatures that were midway between birds and women. I imagined I could play with them and invite them to a dish of rice-and-milk pudding. Angels would be able to eat as we liked because my mother would not see the angels, and perhaps she would not see me, either, because I was in their company. (Jabra, 1995, p. 28)

The passage highlights the young boy's susceptibility to fanciful thinking and peculiar capacity to live in an imaginary world peopled with ghostly creatures and forms. All of this fits in with Jabra's keenness to place the spotlight on the aesthetic development of the young boy throughout the first volume of his autobiography.

The discussion of the aesthetic devices employed in *The First Well* in this part of the paper has hopefully provided sufficient justification to label it as a portrait of the artist as a young man. Jabra's style in depicting the stages of the young boy's aesthetic development invites comparison with James Joyce's portrayal of the stages of Stephen Dedalus's aesthetic development in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* – the most outstanding artist novel, or, to use the German term, *Kunstlerroman* for this distinct type of novel.

Throughout *The First Well*, the child demonstrates his imaginative power which occasionally takes the form of dreams or sometimes daydreams. He continues to make keen observations and displays an acute sensitivity which eventually causes him to realize (in the manner of Stephen Dedalus) that his destiny is to create, to become an artist and to define his artistic soul. Interestingly, just as Joyce's novel concludes with the impression that the young hero of the last part of the novel qualifies to be its author, so *The First Well* concludes with the child's writing of his first long story when he was only twelve years old. However, the young child is not unaware of his artistic calling. Hence his tendency to identify himself with poets, which as later discussion would reveal, becomes more pronounced in the second volume of Jabra's autobiography *Princesses' Street: Baghdad Memories* (2005). In this second part of Jabra's autobiography the narrative is mainly devoted to recording his adolescence and early adulthood.

The emphasis on the aesthetic development of the 'young artist' in *The First Well* (as is reflected in the child's precocious talent for description, his obsession with the meanings of words, his remarkable capacity for observation, and active imagination) receives more attention in *Princesses' Street* in which the main bulk of the narrative is taken up with relating Jabra's personal story as an adult who demonstrates unmistakable signs of artistic talent. For instance, in section two of *Princesses' Street* entitled 'Hamlet, Ophelia, and I', we read:

At the University of Exeter, I was preparing myself to enter the University of Cambridge the following year to specialize in English Literature. My concentration was to be on poets, especially modern ones, in addition to my two favorites, Shelley and Keats; and I also had a great interest in novelists. My wide-ranging interests made me very sensitive to the sounds of words and the importance of metaphors, allusions, and symbols, something that had been a part of me since my school days at the Arab College. (Jabra, 2005, p. 15)

The title of this section of *Princesses' Street* reveals Jabra's tendency to employ intertextuality as a means of shedding light on specific experiences in his personal life. That is in light of well known self narratives and personal revelations presented in the world of fiction.

According to Debbie Cox, it is not uncommon on the part of autobiographers to employ intertextuality in writing their narrative of the self: "Clearly this [employment of intertextuality] has implications for all autobiographical writing in the sense that if all writing is a reworking of other writings, traced through by other meanings, the attempt to write a narrative of the self is already written through by other narratives, other selves." (1998: 233)

Jabra's explanation of his self-identification with Hamlet sums up what he (in his attempt to write a narrative of the self) has already found written in Shakespeare's play :

Hamlet was one of Shakespeare's plays I was especially interested in at that time. As it would for any other young man in conditions like mine, the play made me feel that I too carried with me the tragedies of my country wherever I went. Palestine was never out of my mind for a single moment, nor were my family's worries in that difficult period – and when were we Palestinians, ever since I was born, not passing through difficulties as individuals or as a nation? For it was as though we were trying daily to overpower a fate that never ceased to oppress us. Perhaps it gave me pleasure, as it did many other young men whom I came to know as the war escalated in its violence and destruction, to find ideas in some of Hamlet's situations and monologues that seemed to relate to me personally, as in his famous saying: To be, or not to be: that is the question. (Jabra, 2005, p. 15)

Jabra's perception of himself as a Palestinian Hamlet exemplifies one of the basic principles of autobiographical writing highlighted by Ramon Saldivar (1985): "Because of its fundamental tie to themes of self and history, self and place, it is not surprising that autobiography is the form that stories of emergent racial, ethnic and gender consciousness have often taken in the United States and elsewhere" (p. 25).

In his introduction to the book entitled *Writing the Self: Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature*, Robin Ostle (1998) argues (p. 22) that the above quotation highlights one of the main features of Arabic autobiographical writing in which links are always established between history and the self. To a large extent, this holds true for Jabra's autobiographical writings. Yet, Jabra's self writing practice has a great deal in common with autobiography in the western tradition that is in so far as it tends to focus on the process of artistic individuation and romantic self reference.

Just as Jabra's self-identification with Hamlet enables him to provide deep insights into his own fortunes as a miserable Palestinian young man, so his reference to Ophelia furnishes a very effective fantastic context for reflecting deeply on his love relationship with Lamia' his muslim beloved who later became his wife after his conversion to Islam .

Ophelia's turbulent love relationship with Hamlet seems, I would argue, to parallel the state of affairs between Jabra and Lamia'. The course of love relationship between the two doesn't run smoothly due to faith differences between them. Full fictionalized details of this relationship can

be found in Jabra's novel entitled *Hunters in a Narrow Street* (1996). In this novel Jameel Farran (a fictional representative of Jabra) falls in love with Sulafa a muslim Iraqi girl who, in her turn, represents Lamia', because of faith differences between the two lovers their love relationship is beset with all kinds of hardships and difficulties. Jabra's fictionalization of his love relationship with Lamia' enables him to express indirectly his agonies and the hardships he encountered in his love relationship with Lamia'. In *Hunters in a Narrow Street*, Jameel Farran is even threatened that he would be deported to Palestine his original country, if he didn't sever his relationship with Sulafa. Here we are strongly reminded of Jabra's admission that his life story can be found not only in his autobiographical writing, it is also scattered in his fictional works. This comes out in an interview included in Jabra's book *Coexistence with the Tigress; or the Joy of Reading and Writing* (1992). In the same interview Jabra adds that because he was not planning to write an autobiography he used some of his personal experiences in weaving the texture of his fictional works and in his portrayal of main characters. Thus when he decided to write his autobiography he avoided recording personal events which have been already dealt with in a fictional context: "When I started writing my first autobiography *The First Well*, I realized that I have talked about some events in my life elsewhere (that is in my fictional works). In my novels those events are more effectively and profoundly presented" (Jabra, pp. 290-291). Jabra quotes Andre Gide who maintains that fantasy is more expressive and truthful than history (1992, p. 291) that is to support his decision to consign some important personal events to fiction, such as his love relationship with Lamia'.

The section entitled 'The Lady of the Lakes', in turn, can be interpreted along the same lines. On the level of reality, the reference to romantic poets such as Shelley and Keats reflects Jabra's romantic idealism, on the level of fantasy the reference to Keats's famous poem "The Lady without Mercy" seems to have provided Jabra with a fictional context which enables him to reflect more deeply on the identical hardships, disappointments, frustrations which beset the courses of love in the poem and in Jabra's love relationship with Lamia'. The analogy between the two love affairs stops here. For, while Keats's persona experiences despair and alienation as a result of his failure to consummate his love relationship, Jabra's love affair was happily consummated. Against this background, it might be argued that Jabra's references to Keats's poem suggest his reflections on what could have happened to him had he failed to consummate his relationship with Lamia'.

Jabra's novel *The Ship* (1995) furnishes another good example of the reverse movement in which he draws heavily on his private life experiences in his portrayal of the fortunes of fictional characters.

I am referring here to Jabra's description of the childhood of Wadi Assaf (one of the main narrators in *The Ship*) in Jerusalem. Commenting on this section of the novel Adnan Haydar and Roger Allen (1995) write:

One of the most moving sections of the novel describes Wadi's childhood in Jerusalem, where the tragedy of Palestine is depicted in vivid and painful detail through the great love which unites Wadi and Fayiz and separates them through an act of even greater love, martyrdom. Jabra's intense affection for the scenes of his own childhood brings reality into fiction (mine italics). The moving descriptions of his house and the environs of Jerusalem which we find

in an article [written by Jabra]* on Jerusalem have an uncanny resemblance to Fayiz Attallah's house as described in *The Ship*; the various districts of the city in which Jabra describes himself as living during the fighting of 1948 from the backdrop to Wadi's graphic portrayal in the novel. Reality and fiction coalesce even in the surname Atallah, Albert Atallah being one of Jabra's dear friends who was killed during the fighting in that fateful year. For Jabra, then, no less than for Wadi, the land, Palestine, is the dream which awaits fulfilment. (pp. 8-9)

Stefan Wild (1998) argues that in their attempts to reinvent themselves, autobiographers always tend to combine fact with fiction: "The reader of an autobiography expects an autobiographical work to be different from pure fiction, though, naturally, all autobiography contains the two elements that Goethe's autobiography combined in its title: *Dichtung and Wahrheit* (Fiction and Truth)" (p. 82).

According to Leigh Gilmore (1994), the autobiographers' tendency to employ multiple discourses relates to the unfixed generic entity of autobiography as well as to their characteristic awareness of the restraints of one discourse to accommodate the profundity of their subjectivities:

For both its writers and its critics, autobiography is driven by an authorization complex. Its writers attempt to situate themselves in relation to discourses of "truth" and identity while recognizing, in various ways, the insufficiency of any single discourse to express the "subject" of their writing. In the absence of a single, unified model of "autobiography," they weave testimonial texts from disparate discourses. (p. 71)

This characteristic generic aspect of autobiographical writing is further emphasized in the Introduction to a co-authored book entitled *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (2001) where we read:

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. (p. 5)

Conclusion

The conceptual generalizations about the peculiar nature of autobiographical writing presented in the last two quotations apply to a certain extent to the mode of presentation employed in *The First Well* and *Princesses' Street*. In the two works, as we have been seen, the narrative is marked with fertilization between truth and fiction, the use of fantastic context, employment of intertextuality, the use of poetic style and the deployment of dreams and daydreams to delve deeply into the subconscious of the young boy.

Endnote

*I am referring here to an article written by Jabra (1979) entitled “Jerusalem the Embodiment of Time” in his book *The Eighth Journey*. A great deal of the description of Jerusalem in *The Ship* is based on its description on the above mentioned article (pp. 115-120).

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Professor Nedal Mousa Al-Mousa holds a PhD in English and comparative literature from Essex University (1984) and an MA in comparative literature from the American University in Cairo (1977). His research areas include comparative literature, cultural studies, translation and literary criticism. He served as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the Hashemite University between 2005-2008. At present he teaches at the Arab Open University / Jordan branch.

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