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Religious Autobiography: *Al-Munqidh mina al-Dalāl* as an Example

Ayman Haj Yasin

Department of English Language and Literature, Taibah University, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This study examines the autobiographical nature of Abū Ḥamid Al-Ghazālī's well-known autobiography, *Al-Munqidh mina al-Dalāl*, or shortly *Munqidh*, as known in the West. The article places Al-Ghazālī's autobiography within the tradition of autobiographical writing in classical Arabic, particularly religious and mystical autobiographies. Special focus is given to the notion of 'conversion' as it is the main plot and theme of the autobiography. The study also aims to show that this autobiography is better understood in light of modern research which emphasizes that this genre, especially in medieval ages, was not only partially shaped by certain values and purposes in the moment of composition, but also was significantly crafted to achieve specific purposes and values.

Keywords: autobiography, religious autobiography, *Munqidh*, conversion

1- An overview

Al-Munqidh mina al-Dalāl is a work widely considered as the autobiography of Abu Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (1058-1111), the renowned Muslim theologian and Sufi. The book is generally taken to be a truthful personal account of the intellectual and spiritual development of this thinker, something that seems to be consolidated by the introduction of the book which was written by the author himself.

Previous research on the text has focused on its content¹ and/or highlighted its autobiographical nature, from a classical point of view, pointing to 'elements' of autobiography in the text² without giving much attention to its nature as a 'literary fiction' or to the personal and ideological agendas behind structuring it in a specific way to serve certain agendas.

¹ See, for example, Alberteni, 2005; Rayan 2005.

² See, for example, Daid, 1956, pp 67-76.

This study examines the autobiographical nature of Abū Ḥamid Al-Ghazālī's well-known autobiography, *Al-Munqidh mina al-Ḍalāl*, or shortly *Munqidh*, as it is known in the West. The study places it within the tradition of autobiographical writing in classical Arabic, particularly religious and mystical autobiographies. Special focus is given to the notion of 'conversion' as it is the main plot and theme of the autobiography. The study aims also to show that this autobiography is better understood in light of modern research which emphasizes that this genre, especially in medieval ages, was not only partially shaped by certain values and purposes in the moment of composition, but also was significantly crafted to achieve specific purposes and values. Examples of religious autobiography from classical Arabic literature, namely those which are based on a 'conversion' plot or theme, are explored to situate *Al-Munqidh mina al- Ḍalāl* within modern scholarship.

2- Autobiography as a Genre

The general meaning of the word 'autobiography' is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as "an account of a person's life written by that person". It is thus distinguished from 'biography', which the Oxford Dictionary defines as "an account of someone's life written by someone else". Autobiography is different also from diary. A diary is a daily written record of the days' activities and lacks a unified look at the past.³ Autobiography, in contrast, is written from a later perspective, and has a specific structure which is derived from the present and imposed on the past. Autobiography is also distinguished from self-portrait. Self-portrait is a description and/or critical analysis of one's personality at the moment of writing. It does not involve what autobiography involves: telling the life story of the author from the perspective of a later time. Likewise, autobiography differs from memoir. Memoir is usually defined as a description of "the great events" which the memoirist has observed or participated in, whereas the autobiographer writes about the self which he has observed and participated in during the events.

Contrary to the traditional view of autobiography as the true representation of the past of a person's life as it is or as it was, modern scholarship has emphasized the interpretive nature of autobiography. That is, the fact that in telling the story of his/her life, the author of an autobiography "recollects the dispersed incidents of his life and presents them in a comprehensive and artistic sketch" (Mullan, 2010, p. 1). Sisson (1999) expressed the same idea, arguing that autobiography is not about the past in any simple or unqualified sense, but rather is always the fruit of an interpretation undertaken by the author himself/herself at a particular moment in the present. The past the autobiography recounts, according to him, is "already a product of interpretation, apprehended and understood in a particular way even as it was first experienced" (Sisson, 1999. p. 105). The form imposed on the recorded life brings, according to Ebner (1971), the life of the autobiographer "into a coherent pattern with stages and with self-consistency of character" (as cited in Mullan, 2010, p. 3).

Autobiography is, as shown by modern research, significantly influenced by a myriad of factors including, among other things, the social and cultural context in which it was produced, the process of memory and the problem of recalling sometimes distant events, the narrative forms

³ See Mullan, 2010, pp. 2-3.

or structures in which the autobiographer reports these events, the literary tradition wherein the autobiography is produced, and the values and interests of the autobiographer himself/ herself (Mattern, 2008, p. 45). In other words, the constructed and interpreted past or life story that the autobiography recounts is shaped by “the subject’s values and those of his or her audience” (p. 45). This means, according to Mattern, that autobiography as a narrative shapes the realities it attempts to recount, and that “all stories are ideological and argumentative” as they “present events in a certain way, for certain reasons” (p. 45).⁴

This conception of autobiography as involving a literary craft contradicts the traditional and still dominant conception of autobiography as simply a transparent record of the author’s life. The traditional conception is a corollary of the truthfulness or sincerity that the autobiography is required to abide by. The autobiographer is required, according to this view, to report “facts” as they are or were. On this view, readers of the autobiography assume generally that what the autobiographer recounts corresponds to “facts” or “truths” in reality outside the text itself. But as stated before, it is commonly held today that the act of autobiography is not a simply transparent record of the past because writing an autobiography is shaped by the author’s purposes and values, the particular audience to which the autobiography is addressed, the dominant narratives or conventions the autobiographer uses in constructing the story of his/her life, and the socio-cultural and political conditions within which the autobiography was produced. However, readers of autobiography expect that the autobiographer tells truth as far as possible or as McMahon put it, “the autobiographer's selection of facts distorts the truth, but only in so far as the distortion is the inevitable result of one person’s point of view” (1973, p. 8). This feature makes the autobiography different in an essential sense from fiction (for example, novels) where the author can invent whatever he/she wishes (characters, events, etc.) to suit the literary purposes of the text.

The relationship between autobiography and truthfulness is more complicated when it comes to medieval autobiographies because of the fundamental differences between our modern conception of truth and pre-modern conception of truth. It seems that the clear distinction between ‘fiction’ and ‘truth’ or ‘history’ today has no equivalent in the Middle Ages (Jean-Claude Schmitt, 2003: 33 and 45). What we, as modern readers, expect from a first-person narration in a genre like autobiography is not what readers in the Middle Ages expected from it. For example, whereas we assume today that the “events” and “experiences” narrated by the autobiographer correspond to what he or she actually experienced, it was normal for the medieval autobiographer to “appropriate” the events and experiences experienced by others as if they were experienced by the autobiographer himself.

Autobiography as a genre is rooted in early philosophical and religious autobiographies such as the autobiographies of Socrates and Augustine. The latter texts mark the start of the focus on the “inner life” or the “soul” (Mandelker and Powers, 1999: 16), the most important condition for writing about the “self”. For this reason, and for the purposes of this study, the reader may find it useful to say a word about this sub-genre.

⁴ See also Mullan, 2010, p 4.

3- Religious Autobiography as a Sub-Genre

A religious autobiography refers to any autobiography which is religious in its subject-matter and/or objective. A religious autobiography is usually, but not exclusively, written by a religious figure or scholar who reflects on his/her career and work as a religious figure or scholar, or reflects, instead, on the role of religion, as belief and experience, in shaping and motivating his/her story of life in significant ways. A religious autobiography can also be defined in terms of the religious or spiritual purpose it seeks to achieve (for example, to “arouse” up in readers specific feelings toward God or religion).

The so-called mystical autobiography can also fit in within this category. The main focus of mystical autobiographies, as viewed in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is the life story of a mystic or a Sufi. The life portrayed in these autobiographies is presented as being mainly motivated and shaped by a direct experience or knowledge of God, with the focus being more on religious “experiences” and “feelings” than on thoughts or beliefs.

Religious autobiographies are usually compared to non-religious or “secular” autobiographies. Although religious and secular autobiographies are both about the “self”, religious autobiography originates in “a further attempt to give coherence to one’s life by seeing it as part of a greater pattern, a divine design” (Carrera, 2005, p. 165). On this view, spiritual or religious autobiography “presupposes a relationship between a particular individual living in a certain place at a given time, and a universal and timeless divine entity who gives meaning and purpose to his or her life” (Carrera, 2005, pp. 165-6). Sisson (1998) expressed the same idea, stating that “whereas autobiography generally tries to be a “mirror of the self,” spiritual autobiography tries to turn the self into a mirror of something else: a record of reference to the Bible or Providence; a sensible reflection of some larger order” (p. 99).

4- Religious Autobiographies in Classical Arabic

Despite a common belief that autobiography as a genre did not exist in Arabic before the 20th century, modern researchers have questioned this notion, pointing out that not only that there is good evidence that autobiography, as a form of self-writing, existed in Arabic, but also that the available material constitute a tradition in its own right that extended from the ninth century up to the early decades of the 20th century.⁵ For the purposes of this study, the focus will be limited here to religious and philosophical autobiographies in classical Arabic, between the ninth and the twelfth centuries.

The emergence of autobiographical writing in classical Arabic can be accounted for by several factors including, among other things, the evolution of biographical literature, the influences from the Greek and Persian traditions, and the influence of Sufism with its emphasis on the inner self.⁶ Terzioğlu (2002) pointed out the critical role Sufism and Sufi literature played in the emergence of this genre in classical Arabic. First, there is the central notion in Sufism that states that “One who knows oneself knows one’s Lord” which must have encouraged self-narratives among Sufis. The same thing can be said about another major theme within this

⁵ See Brustad and Reynolds, 2001, especially pp. 26-27.

⁶ See details in Brustad and Reynolds, 2001, pp. 63-51.

thought, that is, self-examination (*muhāsabat Alnafis*). Terzioğlu argued that the latter notion can be considered “a distant cousin” of “confessional practices” among Christians in pre-modern Europe, with its role in motivating self-narrative texts among Christians, especially in early modern times in Europe. In addition to this, Terzioğlu pointed out that a huge literature of narratives about Sufis and their lives played a central role in encouraging later Sufis to write their own autobiographies (pp. 142-143).

Although the autobiographies of those Sufis have not yet been explored in a systematic way, Shawqi Daif argued that these autobiographies focus only on the spiritual development of the Sufis as an ideal person which results in limiting other biographical elements such as childhood, family, friends, faults and wrongdoings, and so on (1991, p. 20).

The most important classical autobiography that belongs to mystical autobiographies in classical Arabic is, without doubt, the autobiography of al-Ḥakim Tirmidhi (820-905). Tirmidhi was a prominent Sufi who left a unique autobiography in this language. The structure of his autobiography is also unique. It is composed of two parts, the first is a description of his outward education, and the second is a collection of dreams that demonstrate the development of the spiritual life of the author himself. Tirmidhi’s autobiography reflects a form of religious conversion. This conversion consists of moving “from a less committed sense of Islam to a more pious lifestyle” (Brustad and Reynolds, 2001, p. 194).

Brustad and Reynolds identify another form of conversion which applies to another important classical autobiography in Arabic, that is, *Al-Munqidh mina al-Dalāl* by Al-Ghazali, which deserves to be dealt with in a separate section given its complicity and its ideological agendas. Brustad and Reynolds identify two major themes with regard to the motivations and purposes behind undertaking religious and/or mystical autobiographies in classical Arabic. The first of these is praising God for his grace through, for example, showing his good dealings with the author, and, second, using the life of the autobiographer as an example to be emulated by others (p. 3). The notion of life as an example for others is very natural in this atmosphere given the fact that this culture was, like the culture of the Middle Age in the West, fundamentally motivated by religious and social models and norms where the autobiographer is not expected to violate the social roles assigned to him/her by family, society, or God, even if this resulted in limiting fundamentally the scope of exploring the personality of the author, and turning it, instead, into a model or an ideal example (p. 39). In this context, it is not surprising that these autobiographies would serve primarily a “didactic” function (p. 39).

5- *Al-Munqidh* by al-Ghazālī as a Typical Example

The autobiography of al-Ghazālī can be considered as a typical example of a religious autobiography which was not only partially shaped by certain values and purposes in the moment of composition, but also significantly crafted to achieve specific purposes and promote certain values. Special focus will be given to the notion of ‘conversion’ in this text and how it was crafted to achieve these purposes. The ensuing paragraphs shed more light on this view.

Munqidh is a discourse that was written by Abu Ḥamid al-Ghazālī in the 11th century. The text is often referred to as a description of the intellectual and spiritual development of al Ghazālī and a critical review of different contemporary schools of thought. The fact that it is presented as

being an autobiography of one of the most important and influential Muslim theologians and philosophers of its classical medieval time adds to its high status. A word about the life and work of the author before we discuss his autobiography is necessary here.

Al-Ghazālī was born in Ṭūs in Khurāsān (in the north of modern-day Iran) in 1058. In 1078, he travelled to Nīsābūr (in Iran) to study theology and jurisprudence. He was then appointed as a professor by the Seljuk state at *Madrasah Nizāmiyyah* in Baghdad for four years, “lecturing on Islamic jurisprudence and refuting heresies and responding to questions from all segments of the community” (Kamaruddin, 2004, p. 113). The appointment effectively “thrust al-Ghazālī into the spotlight as a rising star within the Sunni learned community” (Kukkonen, 2011, pp. 387-388). During this period of his life, in addition to teaching students from all over the Muslim World at this prominent college, al-Ghazālī wrote and published two major philosophical works: *The Intentions of Philosophers* and *The Incoherence of Philosophers*. In 1095, as he was pursuing his career as a teacher in *Madrasah Nizāmiyyah*, al-Ghazālī went through a deep spiritual crisis for six months which, according to *Munqidh*, left him unable to lecture (pp. 103-104). A few months later, he left Baghdad on the pretext of making a pilgrimage, but in reality he abandoned his career, home, family, position, and prestige in Baghdad and went into seclusion. According to *Munqidh*, al-Ghazālī began a new life of self-discipline and meditation when he left Baghdad (p. 105). Two years later, in 1105, al-Ghazālī returned to his native town of Ṭūs devoting his time to worship, teaching and writing in a small mosque or lodge near his home. In 1106, he returned to teaching at the state-sponsored *madrasah Nizāmiyyah* in Nīsābūr where he himself had been a student. In *Munqidh*, he justifies this return to teaching by citing pressure from the Seljuk authorities, as well as his mission as a religious reformer in the face of a corrupt society (p. 121). During this period, he wrote several books, including his highly regarded autobiography, *Al-Munqidh mina al-Ḍalāl*, which can be situated as written between the years c. 1106-1109 (Garden, 2005, p. 6). Al-Ghazālī only spent two years at his new post in Nīsābūr, and then returned to his hometown of Ṭūs where he died in c. 1111.

The dominant reading of *Munqidh* in modern scholarship supports this narration. The text portrays, according to this reading, al-Ghazālī as a dedicated scholar on a quest for truth who, unsatisfied with traditional religious thought and philosophy, comes to believe that truth lies in Sufism. But his conviction that Sufism constitutes the true path of certainty and serenity was not based on a mere intellectual search, but also, and more importantly, on a ‘spiritual’ struggle. For after a deep internal struggle that lasted for nearly six months, al-Ghazālī became so ill that he could not speak, let alone teach, so he decided to leave everything behind him and travel to a new place. In *Munqidh* he recalls leaving Baghdad to travel to Damascus and from there to Jerusalem, where he applied himself to worship, meditation, and self-discipline.

The conversion that this autobiography reveals is that from a legalist understanding of Islam to a mystical understanding of Islam (Brustad and Reynolds, p. 39). It is widely regarded as a personal account in which the author describes his search for truth among different doctrines as well as his conversion or adoption of Sufism. The life of al-Ghazālī is presented here as an ‘interior drama’ of a sincere truth seeker who experienced true conversion to Sufism after vehemently and faithfully investigating the major contemporary schools of thought (theology, philosophy, esoteric thinking, Sufism) finally achieving his goal through Sufism. In one of the

first classical studies on this book in English, Duncan Macdonald (1909) describes it in the following words:

We are fortunate in that he has left us a book, almost unique to my knowledge in the literature of Islam, in which he tells us about his early doubts and struggles; how at one time all light had died out from his mind, how he gradually came back to some certainty, passed through a slow but real conversion, and reached a faith which nothing could shake. (pp. 73-74)

This interpretation of *Munqidh* is consolidated by the introduction written by al-Ghazālī himself in *Munqidh*, where he seems to suggest that it was written to explain the aims and mysteries of the sciences, how he succeeded in extracting ‘truth’ from a number of sects, why he left Baghdad and why he abandoned blind faith and sought for independent reasoning and arrived at a sort of certainty which cured all of his doubts. (p. 60).

6. A New and Critical Reading of *Munqidh*

Based on what has been said about autobiography in section two and religious autobiography in section three, this section analyses how al-Ghazālī significantly crafted and used this text, especially the notion of ‘conversion’, to promote specific personal and ideological agendas. It presents a new reading of this text, challenging the dominant reading, explored in section five, which assumes largely that autobiography is simply a transparent record of the author’s life.

In fact, the idealized presentation or image of al-Ghazālī’s *Munqidh* is described by Garden (2011) in this way:

In the *Munqidh* he presents a largely decontextualized and disembodied life. The drama of the *Munqidh* is almost exclusively mental and spiritual. Al-Ghazālī weighs different intellectual positions, comes to doubt them, lapses into radical scepticism, recovers, investigates various schools of thought, separates their wheat from their chaff, settles on one of them (namely Sufism), practices it for some ten years in seclusion, and concludes that the unique fruits of this trajectory have made him indispensable to his troubled age. (587-588)

Within this picture, *Munqidh* is often understood as the expression of this conversion or turning point in al-Ghazālī’s life and career. The fact that the book was written after his alleged conversion to Sufism, the seclusion he went through in the Levant and in his birthplace, and the fact that the book was written a few years before the death of its author consolidates this interpretation and idealized image. But since the first half of the 20th century, and even earlier, the accuracy and sincerity of *Munqidh* has been questioned. Firstly, it was revealed that the structure or plot the author of this text used is literarily crafted through the use of other styles attributed to different authors including Galen (129-200 A. D.), al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857), ‘Umar Khayyām (d. 1131) and Nāṣir Khisraw (d. 1088).⁷ For example, the trope of the four seekers of truth was borrowed originally from ‘Umar Khayyām (Garden, 2011, p. 593). His narrative that he sought for certain knowledge of Truth, religious truth, through examining the work of theologians,

⁷ See Garden, 2011, p 581.

philosophers, the Ismā'īlī group and the Sufis respectively while he was in Baghdad and found only the latter group satisfying was crafted to serve personal and ideological purposes. For example, Garden (2005, 2011) argues that the key to understanding the increasing scepticism toward the idealized image of al-Ghazālī, as portrayed in *Munqidh*, is better seen in the so called 'Nīsābūr controversy'. This was a campaign launched against al-Ghazālī when he returned to teaching in Nīsābūr in 1106. His opponents in Nīsābūr accused him of different things, but the most serious of which was that he held views that were not in accord with the literal prescription of Islam. Al-Ghazālī responded to these accusations by publishing *Munqidh*, criticizing, on one hand, theologians, philosophers and the Ismā'īlī, and defending a synthesis of Sufism and orthodoxy, on the other hand. Josef van Ess was one of the early scholars who points out that al-Ghazālī “wrote his famous autobiography not in a flight of introspection in his autumn years, but in response to a campaign against him that erupted after his return to teaching in Nīsābūr in 499/1106” (as cited in Garden, 2011, p. 582).

Along similar lines, Garden (2014, p. 65) posits: “The *Deliverer from Error*, far from a transparent account of al-Ghazālī’s life and intellectual development, was an effort to deny the very real connection of his thought to philosophical tradition in the face of enemies who accused him of exactly this”. Thus, the image of al-Ghazālī as a fierce critic of philosophy and the Ismā'īlī thought, and his image as “a solitary seeker whose spiritual motives were unsullied by worldly aims or even worldly connections” (Garden, *ibid*: 64), and his image as “a selfless and otherworldly figure who had interrupted a life of seclusion only to guide his fellow men to the salvation that he, uniquely, had discovered” (Garden, 2011, p. 595) seem to be crafted and used to respond to these accusations.

The text, as those researchers convincingly showed, should be seen as an apologetic autobiography which was written to respond to the attack on al-Ghazālī when he returned to teaching in Nīsābūr rather than as a transparent introspective autobiography that was written in the autumn of the author’s life to describe al-Ghazālī’s life before and after conversion to Sufism.

Even al-Ghazālī’s claim that he agreed to return to teaching at Nīsābūr to combat the corruption of society is better seen from this perspective. Garden argues that al-Ghazālī presents himself in *Munqidh*, as a revivalist of religion insofar as his appointment to teach at the Nizāmiyyah of Nīsābūr “would allow him to promote the agenda of his Revival of the Religious Sciences” (2011, p. 587), that is to say, “to revive a religious scholarly tradition he portrays as dead” (p. 583).

This different reading of *Munqidh* is supported by a biographical passage in a letter which al-Ghazālī wrote in Persian in the same context in which he wrote *Munqidh*. The brief passage gives differing details about al-Ghazālī that are not found in *Munqidh*. In this passage, details of Ghazālī’s life begin to emerge. There is no reference in this new account to a period of spiritual crisis in Baghdad before finding the resolve in Sufism:

Know that 53 years of the life of this supplicant have passed. For forty of these, he plunged into the sea of the religious sciences, until he reached the point that his words remained closed to the understanding of the majority of his contemporaries. He lived for twenty years in the days of the martyred sultan (Mālik Shāh), whose favor was

bestowed upon him in Baghdad and Isfahan. He was often a messenger in important matters between the Sultan and the Commander of the Believers and wrote some seventy books about religious sciences. Then he saw the world as it was and rejected it utterly. He spent some time in Jerusalem and Mecca, and swore at the grave of Abraham, the Friend of God—may God’s prayers be upon him—no longer to go to any sultan, not to take the money of a sultan, and not to practice theological disputing or fanaticism He was true to this oath for twelve years and the Commander of the Believers and all sultans knew him to be excused. (translated and cited by Garden, 2011, p. 590)

What this new reading reveals is that this classical autobiography is not about the past in any simple or unqualified sense, but rather is the fruit of an interpretation undertaken by the author himself/herself at a particular moment in the present. The past recounted is, as Mattern (2008, p. 45) argues, shaped by “the subject’s values and those of his or her audience” (p. 45). Through this autobiography, al-Ghazālī aimed at creating an image about himself as a true seeker for truth, to promote a point of view and way of life (Sufism) and to respond to suspects and critics coming from his opponents. It is thus true that when we, as modern readers, expect from a first-person narration in a genre like autobiography is not what readers in the Middle Ages expected from it. For example, whereas we assume today that the “events” and “experiences” narrated by the autobiographer correspond to what he or she actually experienced, it was normal for the medieval autobiographer to “appropriate” the “events” and “experiences” experienced by others as if they were experienced by the autobiographer himself/herself. al-Ghazālī seems to ‘appropriate’ others’ experiences and literary crafts in order to serve specific purposes.

However, whatever the purposes behind writing the text and to what extent its structure was crafted to serve specific purposes, its autobiographical nature cannot be ignored or downplayed. The fact that the text does not give many details about the age of al-Ghazālī, his family and friends, his ties to his home city of Ṭūs, his career, his relationships with political figures, among other things, should not lead to its dismissal as a genuine autobiography because the Eurocentric or Western concept of individuality imposes criteria that are not necessarily the same as those found in pre-modern and non-western autobiographical writings (Ramy, 2014, pp. 16-17).

Conclusion

This study has shown the importance of analyzing the autobiography of al-Ghazālī in light of modern research which discloses how the structure and plot of this text was intentionally crafted to consolidate a certain reading of the text. The text was, this study has shown, intended to respond to accusations and justify the personal agendas of its author, namely his returning to teaching at a state-run school and the promotion of himself as a revivalist of religion. It ‘appropriates’ certain experiences and literary crafts to achieve certain purposes, personal and ideological.

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