

**Bożena Prochwicz-Studnicka**<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1644-252X>

Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow

bozena.prochwicz-studnicka@ignatianum.edu.pl

DOI: 10.35765/pk.2020.3104.09

## Literary Representation of the Self in Medieval Arabic Autobiographies and the Cultural Barriers to Self-Cognition. The Literacy Theory Perspective. Part 2

### ABSTRACT

This article addresses the problems associated with the relationship between the influence of writing on cognitive processes and the features of the culture within which writing appears. Classical literacy theory, with the modifications that were introduced over the course of time, was embraced as the research perspective. According to these modifications, the change in the cognitive processes and content which occurs under the influence of writing is not automatic. Every culture has at its disposal a specific array of factors which influence writing and literacy and which determine the extent to which the potential of writing will be used. The aim of this article is to demonstrate the most important cultural norms and values which, by being practiced socially, could have limited the influence of writing on self-cognitive processes—the consequences of such processes can be found in the literary representation of the self in medieval Arabic autobiographies of the 12<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries. These features were referred to as traditionalism, the domination of collective awareness over individual awareness, the acceptance of social hierarchical structure, and a Quranic vision of the limits to man's freedom.

**KEYWORDS:** Arabic medieval literature, autobiography, literary representation of the self, medieval Arab-Islamic culture, literacy theory

### STRESZCZENIE

Literacka reprezentacja „ja” w średniowiecznych autobiografiach arabskich a kulturowe bariery samopoznania w perspektywie teorii piśmienności. Część 2

Artykuł podejmuje problematykę związku pomiędzy wpływem pisma na procesy poznawcze a cechami kultury, w obrębie której przyjęcie pisma następuje. Jako perspektywę badawczą przyjęto klasyczną teorię piśmienności, sprofilowaną wprowadzonymi do niej z czasem modyfikacjami. Zgodnie z nimi

**Suggested citation:** Prochwicz-Studnicka, B. (2020). Literary Representation of the Self in Medieval Arabic Autobiographies and the Cultural Barriers to Self-Cognition. The Literacy Theory Perspective. Part 2. *Perspectives on Culture*, 4(31), pp. 109–124. DOI: 10.35765/pk.2020.3104.09.

Submitted: 07.03.2020

Accepted: 24.10.2020

zmiana procesów i treści poznawczych następująca pod wpływem pisma nie ma charakteru automatycznego. Każda kultura dysponuje określonym zasobem czynników oddziałujących na pismo oraz piśmienność i decydujących, w jakim stopniu potencjał pisma zostanie wykorzystany. Celem artykułu jest wskazanie najistotniejszych kulturowych norm i wartości, które – będąc obecne w praktyce społecznej – mogły ograniczyć możliwości oddziaływania pisma na procesy samopoznawcze, a których konsekwencje obecne są w literackim obrazie „ja” w średniowiecznych arabskich autobiografiach XII–XV wieku. Cechy te określono jako: tradycjonalizm, przewagę świadomości zbiorowej nad indywidualną, akceptację dla hierarchiczności oraz koraniczną wizję granic wolności człowieka.

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** autobiografia, literacka reprezentacja „ja”,  
średniowieczna kultura arabsko-muzułmańska,  
średniowieczna literatura arabska, teoria piśmienności

This is the second part of the article which aims at considering the possible reasons (i.e. cultural barriers) for the limitation of the influence of writing upon self-cognitive processes in medieval Arabic culture from the perspective of the theory of literacy. This limitation can be traced *inter alia* through the studying of Arabic autobiographies. That is why in the first part (Prochwicz-Studnicka, 2020, pp. 135–150) of the article the most characteristic features of the literary representation of the self in Arabic autobiographies of the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> have been presented. The emphasis has been put on the manuscript type of medieval Arab-Muslim culture and its preference for oral-aural forms of conveying content which caused that the potential for change carried by writing was realised to an extent and a rate peculiar to this culture.

Nevertheless one can perceive further reasons for the limitation in question also in some cultural patterns<sup>1</sup>. We may say that culture engenders a certain kind of an imperative which translates itself into specific attitudes, dispositions and beliefs<sup>2</sup>. In medieval Arab-Muslim culture one of the basic concepts of culture (relevant to the theme of this article) that became a pillar of the ideology that interprets social phenomena is the individual (group) and freedom. The norms and models which they carried could limit the potential of the changes that were contained in

---

1 Most of them were based on the religious evaluation which pushed certain values into social practice, see Kmita, 1982, pp. 119–125.

2 In the context of European culture, in order to explain the manner in which the worldview which determines social practice in a given period develops, Aaron Gurevich (1985, pp. 13–14, *passim*) introduced the concept of a “category.”

writing. These patterns are above all: traditionalism, the domination of the collective consciousness over the individual, the acceptance of a social hierarchic structure and the Quranic vision of the limits imposed on man's freedom. They intertwined and were co-dependent from each other. The distinguishing of them here has above all the purpose of introducing an arrangement.

## Cultural Barriers to the Influence of Writing

### Traditionalism

In the context of the issue discussed here, I understand traditionalism as a mental attitude according to which the leading tendency (which is perhaps most visible in the legal and religious sphere) was to conserve knowledge instead of creating it. In other words, emphasis was placed on transmission instead of innovation (Robinson, 2007, p. 86; Ong, 2005, pp. 40–41). Thus imitation—in contradistinction to originality—was a completely acceptable creative method.

The most precious body of knowledge which was remembered and transmitted by subsequent generations in the world of Islam was the knowledge which arose around the time of the revelation. Therefore, according to Chase F. Robinson (2007, p. 88), the standards for traditionalism were “established” by Muhammad, although it is difficult to say exactly when his opinions became authoritative (acquired the status of revealed knowledge). One of the traditions of the prophet Muhammad says the following: “The best people are my generation, then those who follow them, then those who follow them” (Robinson, 2007, p. 86). The knowledge recorded and transmitted by pious ancestors, the people who belonged to the closest companions of the Prophet or their successors in subsequent generations was the “true” knowledge. It was represented above all by sciences developed on the basis of the Quran and the tradition of the prophet Muhammad (the *shar'īyya*-type sciences).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, historiography took over the ethos of traditionalism in its subdisciplines (chronography, prosopography and biography).<sup>4</sup>

---

3 Their status resulted from the strict relationship (present in Islam) between faith and knowledge (according to the Quran, knowledge is given to man by God). At certain stages of the development of scholarly thinking, this peculiar attitude toward faith as a source of knowledge was a barrier not only to rationalism and experiment but also to new, critical opinions.

4 This is an instance of native writing whose emergence is associated with the emergence of Islam: the Quran, *ayyām al-ʿArab* (Days of the Arabs) stories and the ḥadīths are mentioned as

The strong mark of traditionalism brought about a peculiar form of organising thematic material. A narrative consisted of largely independent units furnished with (at least in the first centuries of Islam) a chain of transmitters. The chain confirmed the veracity of the relation. At the same time, some descriptions of events or statements functioned in a number of variants. They were frequently put next to each other without any activity on the author's part and no attempts at verification were made. This knowledge (in the form in which it was transmitted and imitated) constituted the perfect source of knowledge and the foundation of the legal and religious order. Therefore a crucial role was played by authority (rationalism was an idea which belonged to the Greek and Hellenistic heritage which, over time, was adapted by speculative theology, philosophy, and also—to a certain extent—by the theory of law).

It was traditionalism, among other things, that precluded the development of narratives on a broad scale, a narrative which the author would dedicate to himself (as I have mentioned earlier, in comparison with other forms of literary activity, autobiographical works were marginal). In very rare cases it constituted a contemporary history. It was difficult to accept a situation in which attention was focused on an individual person. A representation of individual life could not vanquish the attachment to tradition and the following of tradition. This was the case especially in milieux whose opinions were determined by religious piety. Therefore, single autobiographies were usually written by philosophers or mystics—i.e. people who were not strictly associated with *shar'iyya*-type sciences. It was not until after the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century that relatively more autobiographies were written, also by people who stemmed from the circles of the ulama, including people who were historians. Due to the biographical genre which was well-established in tradition, there were cases when such works were written in the third person. The purpose of this was also to distance oneself from the object of description—i.e. oneself (Robinson, 2007, pp. 96, 101).

Another way of “distancing from oneself as the object of description” was to introduce the motivation that drove the author in the description of his life (Enderwitz, 1998, p. 7). The theme that was used most frequently had to do with recounting God's bounty, which was understood as a religious duty resulting from the Quran (93:11): “[...] talk about the blessings of your Lord (*ni'mat rabbika*).” At the same time, such a reason was supposed

---

the probable factors which influenced the formation of a historical mode of thinking and therefore also of the organisation of works. Arabic historiography developed since the 1<sup>st</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century. Basically until the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century there developed three main modes of organisation of historical narratives which were mentioned above—although the distinctions between the particular historiographical genres were not always clear.

to attenuate the impression of self-aggrandizement and fostered the modesty of the author (the author wrote about his achievements, exploits and features—but he did so to demonstrate “God’s blessings” (*ni‘mat Allāh*). For example, Aṣ-Ṣuyūṭī explains the motivation for the writing of his autobiography in the following way: “[I] have written this book in order to speak of God’s bounty and to thank Him, not out of hypocrisy, nor for my own credit, nor out of pride. God is our source of help and to Him we entrust ourselves” (Aṣ-Ṣuyūṭī, 1975, p. 4; translated by: Reynolds, 2001, p. 3).

The author thus became an instrument in the hands of God, his humble servant. Abū Shāma offers the following explanation:

These dreams and other things have been recorded here to testify to the grace of God, as He commanded in His words—may He be exalted: “And as for the bounty of your Lord, speak!” [Q 93:11]. Moreover, the Prophet said—may God bless him and grant him peace—“All that will remain of the glad tidings is a true vision which the faithful person will view, or which will be shown to him.” O God, give us thanks that we might thank You for these blessings, seal them with goodness, protect us in this life and in the next, help us to have faith in Your well-conceived plan, and let us not forget Your mention (Abū Shāma, 1974, p. 39; translated by: Lowry, 1997, p. 322).

This tendency which accompanied the writing of autobiographies (and other kinds of texts as well) did not result exclusively from a traditionalistic approach but also from a collectivistic model of Arab-Muslim culture.

## Collectivism

In religious cultures, and such was medieval Arab-Muslim culture, collective awareness dominated individual consciousness. This was conducive to a unification of worldview-related norms, and the interests of the group was set above the interests of an individual. In a collectivistic culture, for we are discussing such a culture, adherence to a given group becomes the main source of identification and basis of identity; the self is above all an interdependent self. It is a self that is connected by many interpersonal relations, within which it is difficult to determine a boundary between the self and the non-self. The cognition and expression of the self is irrelevant, and the experience of the interrelationships entails the perception of one’s behaviour as interrelationships determined, dependent, and to a considerable extent organised by the thoughts, feelings and activities (presupposed by an individual) of those with whom the self is linked (Turner, 1982, pp. 18–21; Pilarska, 2012, pp. 23–24).

The origins of the collectivism of the medieval Arab-Muslim culture date back to pre-Islamic times (*jāhiliyya*). In this period the basic form of social organisation was tribal organisation. The majority of the Arabs of the central and northern part of the Arabian Peninsula led the life of nomads; few of them inhabited urban centres. The chances of survival for an individual in harsh natural conditions were practically none, and he or she could feel safe only in a group. Life within a tribe ensured safety and was somewhat of a necessity. The most important social link was *aṣabiyya* (tribal solidarity), which was based on a readiness to offer help to fellow tribesmen should their welfare be threatened. *Aṣabiyya* was associated with the *lex talionis*—i.e. retaliation for the harm that was done and the principle of blood ransom (which enabled one to be redeemed from revenge), and which ensured the possibility of avenging the member of a family or a whole tribe, should they be harmed.

A tribe was also consolidated by the idea of a common historical memory. Each tribe had its own eponym from which the name of the tribe was usually derived. The tribe was also unified by the memory about important events, heroic deeds, and battles which were fought etc. This memory was transmitted from one generation to another and—along with the customs, modes of behaviour, thinking and feeling that were developed—it contributed to the tradition of the tribe, fostering its separation in reference to other tribes. This tradition, transmitted to subsequent generations, remained unchanged and impervious to any kind of novelty. One could say that the mental world of an individual was identical to the mental world of his tribe: the ideas of an individual member of a tribe were ideas which were shared by the entire tribe, the opinions of an individual were the opinions of his tribe, recognised by an individual as his own (Mrozek, 1967, p. 136).

Muhammad was raised in a collectivistic environment. By proclaiming a new religious idea, he maintained the model of an individual dissolved in a group.<sup>5</sup> The fact that this model was well-established in the culture was determined by the religious sanction which this model acquired. On the basis of Muhammad's teaching, Islam was developed and this assumed the role of a unifying element for fellow believers. The function of tribal solidarity was replaced by religious solidarity, and the religious community—*umma*—replaced the tribal community. Subordination to the rules of the collective became tantamount to subordination to God, which is indicated

---

5 The Quran basically embraces an impersonal form of addressing people which emphasise the indistinction of these people (e.g. 2:104, 172, 178, 183, 254, 264, 267, 278, 282; 5:1, 2, 6, 8, 11, 35, 54, 57, 87, 90, 94, 95, 101, 105, 106; 9: 28, 34, 38, 119, 123).

by the etymological meaning of the word “Islam.”<sup>6</sup> Because God presented to man precise rules of behaviour by his law, the subordination to the laws of the collective became tantamount to submission to divine law (*shari‘a*), whereas insubordination to divine law entailed harsh punishment (Nasalski, 2006, p. 117). The basic task of a believer was to replicate tradition-sanctioned forms of behaviour, attitudes and opinions (Nasalski, 2006, p. 118). The prophet Muhammad became a supreme authority, and even the most trivial instances of his behaviour preserved in tradition became the perfect model for imitation (*imitatio Muhammadi*). It was not only the Prophet but also the early *umma*, distinguished figures began to constitute the main point of reference for modes of life and activity. Thus the entire vital energy of man was focused on the imitation of authorities, on the more and more perfect replication of the tradition-enshrined norms, as previously discussed.

One of the cultural consequences of such a vision of life was the depreciation of originality and invention in scholarly and literary discourse along with the formalisation of all kinds of human activity. Emphasis was placed not on the individual features that distinguished a given author, which shed light upon him as a unique individual but on the contrary—on typicality (Robinson, 2007, p. 62). In literature (not only in autobiographical literature) one may perceive some depersonalising tendencies.<sup>7</sup> The individual was reduced to a type—e.g. a scholar, a neophyte, a mystic or a politician. He ascribed to himself peculiar features of a certain serial model (von Grunebaum, 1971, p. 223; Aş-Şuyūṭī, 1975, p. 137). The way he experienced himself, understood his own feelings was relevant to the extent to which it illustrated a feature peculiar to a given type. Instead of indulging in potential considerations about personal development, the author assimilated with the patterns sanctioned by tradition. He aspired to attain the highest degree of compatibility with the ideal type in reference to the social role that was played.

This point is clearly visible if we consider the example of the attitude to knowledge. Education was an important stage in one’s life. Frequently it lasted many years. Great significance was attached to knowledge not only

---

6 The root *s-l-m* conveys *inter alia* the idea of submission and resignation, hence *islām* is “the manifesting of humility or submission, and outward conforming with the law of God, and the taking upon oneself to do or to say as the Prophet has done or said” (Lane, 2003, s.v. *aslama*).

7 Here the point is mainly about self-stereotyping—i.e. such a form of depersonalisation whereby “the self comes to be perceived as categorically interchangeable with other ingroup members” (Haslam, 2004, p. 30). This has to do with ascribing to oneself features similar to the features of the remaining members of the group, the perception of oneself as a representative of a specific category. Under these conditions the process of understanding oneself occurs when one omits individual features.

due to the fact that it was supposed to lead eventually to God (in the case of legal and religious sciences), but also because it ensured recognition and respect in one's own milieu. However, the recognition and respect offered was not a result of distinguishing oneself by individual qualities, but on the contrary—due to the identification with other representatives of this milieu.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, the autobiographies of scholars—*curricula vitae*, for example, by Al-'Asqalānī, Aṣ-Ṣuyūṭī, Abū Shāma and many others—also situate these figures by providing information about their education, teachers, positions or works as links in the chain of transmitters of knowledge. A similar case involved At-Tirmidhī (who was mentioned in Part 1 for the sake of a digression); even though he describes his spiritual transformation, he seems to be of a type peculiar to Sufi tradition. An exemplification of this point may be furnished by the experience of *ṭawba* (contrition, regret) during the pilgrimage to Mecca: “In my heart there occurred true repentance (*ṭawba*) and the decision to abandon [worldly matters] whether large or small. I performed the pilgrimage [rites] and departed for home” (Radtke & O’Kane, 1996, p. 16). *Ṭawba* is an idea which became well-established already in the early Sufi discourse as the first station (*maqām*)<sup>9</sup> on the mystic path—necessary for each Sufi apprentice who embarked upon such a path. Some of the topoi in At-Tirmidhī’s autobiography were also derived from the prophet Muhammad’s biography—for example, the fondness for solitude: “I came to love withdrawing in seclusion (*khalwa*) at home, as well as going forth into the [deserted] countryside” (Radtke & O’Kane, 1996, p. 17; Guillaume, 2004, p. 105). In a similar manner, the dream visions themselves, whose convention was utilised for the sake of considerations about the spiritual development experienced on a mystical path, are not a privilege of the author as an individuality but a reflection of Muslim tradition where they constitute one of the recognised means of transmitting certain truths. In autobiographies, a dream vision is frequently an instrument of legitimisation of the status of the author (in the case of At-Tirmidhī—the spiritual status of a God’s friend—*wālī Allāh*) (Reynolds, 2001, p. 93).

Among the themes which explained the emergence of autobiographies—apart from the divine bounty which was mentioned earlier—there were also didactic reasons. The experiences of the author served as an example for other people. The model nature of somebody’s life (such as

8 For more information about this point see Rosenthal, 2014b, pp. 967–1000.

9 On the mystical path of Sufi mysticism one distinguishes, apart from states (*aḥwāl*)—brief stations (*maqāmāt*) of spiritual perfection (dependent from God’s grace), which are permanent and are attained owing to instances of renunciation.

a scholar, a Sufi, a man of letters etc.) became a guideline for other people. This limited the freedom of the choice of content considerably, for the author could not relate the path to self-cognition, the development of his potential and his own scholarly or spiritual pursuits (if we assume, of course, that he desired to do so!). Just as in the case of *Al-Munqidh min ad-ḍalāl* of Al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), his own intellectual and religious experience was supposed to serve other people<sup>10</sup>—hence the device of introducing the addressee (*al-aḵh fī'd-dīn*—the brother in religion), upon whose request the author wrote his work—a theme familiar in Arabic literary tradition:

You have asked me, my brother in religion, to communicate to you the aim and secrets of the sciences and the dangerous and intricate depths of the different doctrines and views. You want me to give you an account of my travail in disengaging the truth from amid the welter of the sects, despite the polarity of their means and methods. You also want to hear about my daring in mounting from the lowland of servile conformism to the highland of independent investigation: and first of all what profit I derived from the science of *ḳalām*; secondly what I found loathsome among the methods of the devotees of *ta'lim*, who restrict the attainment of truth to uncritical acceptance of the Imam's pronouncements; thirdly, the methods of philosophizing which I scouted; and finally, what pleased me in the way pursued by the practice of Sufism... (translated by McCarthy in Al-Ghazālī, 1992, p. 29; Al-Ghazālī, 1980, p. 2).

Here the addressee seems to be not an individual person but a certain type of reader.<sup>11</sup> The author presents to him the particular stages of his pursuit of knowledge and truth which were covered by various schools of thought—*ḳalām* (speculative theology), Ta'limism<sup>12</sup> and philosophy. Owing to divine grace, Al-Ghazālī found true knowledge (*al-'ilm*

10 That is why, according to Muḥammad Abulayah (Al-Ghazālī, 2001, p. 21), the author does not provide a great deal of information about himself and his achievements. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to remember that *Al-Munqidh min ad-ḍalāl* to a certain extent provides an insight into individual experience (intellectual and spiritual experience). The work may also be considered in the light of the social life of the author (his works and milieu), and the religious and intellectual currents of his times, which he analyses in a critical manner.

11 Such is the opinion of the majority of specialists; see also Al-Ghazālī (2001, pp. 23, 113), which features a suggestion that a specific person could have been an addressee.

12 Ta'limism—one of the forms of Shi'a Batinism (popular mainly among Isma'ilites), according to which each thing has its apparent (*ẓāhir*) and hidden (*bāṭin*) aspect. Hence the Batinists developed an esoteric, allegorical exegesis of the Quran which sought concealed content in the Book. Ta'limism supported the vision of recognising concealed content by means of passive dependence on an infallible Imam.

*al-haqīqī*) in mysticism—knowledge which inspires one to honour God, knowledge which inspires (God’s) fear, hope and knowledge which prevents one from committing a sin. This experience is offered to the reader so that he may benefit from it.

### The force of social hierarchy

In the majority of cases, a culture with well-established collectivistic models accepts the inequalities that appear in interpersonal relations. The modern term which was introduced to refer this dimension of culture is power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 61, 102–103). The greater the distance the greater the acceptance of inequalities among people in various contexts. In a culture with a considerable power distance, both within the family and the educational contexts, there is a dominance of submissiveness, obedience and respect toward one’s elders. People of a lower rank accept the exercise of control over themselves and subordinate themselves to those who occupy a higher position in the family or social hierarchy. This is tantamount to accepting the opinions of the authorities, the unquestionable recommendations of one’s parents and lack of criticism (opposition toward the authority of a parent or a teacher is considered an act of disobedience).<sup>13</sup>

The nature and the extent of interdependence between children and their parents in classical Arab-Muslim culture is represented by the model of a traditional family. The family was hierarchic in nature, the man occupying the superior position.<sup>14</sup> Since the beginning of its development (as it carried the burden of pre-Islamic tradition in reference to the model of the family), this culture was characterised by features which nowadays are referred to as the determinants of a great-power-distance culture. Family relations were based on strict obedience and respect shown toward one’s elders regardless of the age of the children. The authority of the father permitted the application of corporal punishment (Giladi, 1992, p. 48). The relation of dependence and obedience solidified the model of an extended family. Submission to the authority of one’s elders translated into a lack of motivation to oppose their will. Such a model probably influenced the fact

---

13 See a more comprehensive treatment of this point in Hofstede, 2001, pp. 98–102.

14 According to the law, a woman was capable of making decisions concerning certain things associated with day-to-day existence, but the man was charged with the obligation to support his family and to represent it in the public sphere. A hierarchic structure was visible also among siblings—the position of a brother was superior in reference to his sisters, regardless of their age (Lindsay, 2005, pp. 178–188; Rapoport, 2005, pp. 53, 60, 114).

that in autobiographies one seldom finds considerations about the experience of rebellion or the experience of one's own, different vision of life.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the belief (sometimes contested by Muslim thinking itself) that the personal social status was determined above all by birth could render useless comprehensive writing about maturing, the development of a person in the context of time, place and milieu (Enderwitz, 1998, p. 7; Rosenthal, 2014b, p. 991). In culture, there was a strong belief about “the impact of one's family's pure Arab descent, virtues, language and personal dispositions upon the autobiographer's character” (Enderwitz, 1998, p. 7).<sup>16</sup> Identity was constructed mainly on the basis of genealogical affiliation. Autobiographies devoted much attention to a reconstruction of genealogical heritage; the dates and the place of origin of one's ancestors were provided.

Childhood itself was commonly considered an imperfect state; hence Franz Rosenthal stated the following on the basis of an analysis of ample source material: “childhood, thus, was in general not considered a happy state to which one would wish to return” (Rosenthal, 2014a, p. 945). It is likely that this was one of the reasons why autobiographies did not devote much space to childhood as such. The childhood memories which are featured in autobiographies constituted a few or a dozen or so sentences and were devoted above all to the course of one's education—memorisation of the Quran, the study of other subjects or teachers. There were cases when the author provided information about his failures in these areas in an anecdotal manner.

### Quranic vision of man's freedom

The Quran assigned a specific role to man (in the latter's relation to God), which determined to a certain extent the limits of his freedom. God in the Quran is a supreme being, whereas any other kind of reality, including man, has a subordinate status in reference to him. Therefore, the existence of man and his life as God's creature is also embraced in reference to God. Man is linked by multifarious relations with God—relations which determine his attitudes in life, in which two attributes associated with God's action

---

15 See e.g. an example of Ibn al-ʿAdīm, religious scholar and historian (d. 660/1262) who mentioned a marriage with a daughter of a wealthy, influential and noble Shāfiʿī master having been arranged by his father. The complete text of the autobiography was not preserved. Fragments were related by Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (1993, vol. 5, p. 2085).

16 See also Robinson's remark (2007, p. 62) in the context of the entire bulk of biographical and prosopographical literature, in which the nature of an individual is not *contingent and dynamic*, but it is usually *determined and fixed*.

come to the fore: the attribute of omnipotence and unlimited will. As a result the relations which are marked by these attributes reveal a peculiar human ideal. If he is to give a positive answer to God, he must recognise him as the sole Creator and giver of life; he must respond to his call and follow the God-appointed path to salvation, demonstrating complete obedience to his decrees, accept the role of a servant and be in awe and show gratitude, as well as fear of damnation (Izutsu, 2002, pp. 185–187; Izutsu, 2008, p. 79).

One of the cultural consequences of the Quranic relation of God and man became the depreciation of originality and invention, as well as the formalisation of human activity and subordination of human activity to the purposes determined by God, pursuing a set path. In order to fulfil this task, the believer was supposed to imitate the example of the prophet Muhammad and other authorities; he was supposed to replicate the traditional norms, as discussed earlier.

The second aspect in the discussion about the Quranic divine omnipotence and limitless will is the question of predestination and man's free will. On the one hand, the Quran presents God as an all-knowing, all-powerful creator and ruler of all things, on the other hand, it shows man who is responsible for his deeds. The Quran does not offer unambiguous answers; therefore, the history of theological thought knows many concepts of predestination and the limits of man's free will according to the trends of interpretation. Without entering an in-depth analysis of the problem, we may say that, on the whole, in considerations and social practice there was the dominance of a deterministic interpretation: it was difficult to come to terms with the fact that aside from God there was an entity which acted completely independently. A primary attribute of God, responsible for the deterministic concept, was divine knowledge. Due to eternal and irrefutable omnipotence, all the particulars of man's fate should be predetermined (Rosenthal, 2007, p. 127). In other words, the concept of divine omnipotence contributed to a great extent to the solidification of the idea of determinism. Consequently, man's decisions and activities were not perceived as instances of autonomy but as a result of divine will (Izutsu, 2008, p. 152). The range of God's activity did not leave much space for the activity of man himself.

Thus in medieval Arab-Muslim culture there developed a model of man who was usually resigned to his fate; a man who did not struggle with himself and against the odds was a man who had come to terms with the world as it was. Such a man had no spiritual and moral dilemmas that would inspire in him a desire to preserve such a sentiment for others.<sup>17</sup>

---

17 One may mention a significant example that the Arabs were not interested in Ancient Greek tragedy, poetry etc. Even though the *Iliad* of Homer or the *Poetics* of Aristotle were partially translated

The theocentrism of the collectivistic culture of Islam was responsible for the fact that self-development did not become a goal of education and that man's autonomy did not become the highest value. Hence autobiographies were also suffused with a strong idea of utilitarianism. This resulted, among other things, from the fact that material goods as well as intellectual and spiritual goods were not perceived as the exclusive property and merit of man. Those who were deprived of such goods were entitled to them. Sharing these goods was a means of showing gratitude to God or relinquishing the belief that these goods were the exclusive fruit of human effort.

### Summary

The literary representation of the self has a history of its own. This history is indissolubly linked with the development of writing (and literacy), which enables the mind to embrace new functions—writing which facilitates the development of a new set of concepts that become the object of knowledge and consciousness, an object of analysis and reflection.

The purpose of this article was to examine the most basic aspects of medieval Arab-Muslim culture which could have constituted a barrier to the complete embracing of the cognitive possibilities offered by writing. One such possibility is that of self-inspection, reflecting upon oneself and the surrounding world. Despite the active participation of the users of writing in its development, the apex of the capability of the creation of individual opinions and beliefs, the capability of examining and analysing reality critically, including self-examination and self-analysis, only appeared in the modern period (not only in the history of European culture but also in Arab culture).

In the medieval Arab-Muslim world the individual had limited means of self-cognition at his disposal, which in the field of autobiographical works, especially those written by people who were raised in the circle of the ulama (the learned of Islam), translated itself into relatively fixed compositional and content-related solutions in the presentation of oneself and the world perceived from the perspective of the self. Such basic, recurrent solutions (from the point of view of a modern, Western reader!) include very rare attempts at making the self and one's experiences, features and feelings an object of one's own reflective attention. There is a dominance in the perception of these things in terms of events and activities in a specific situational context. Moreover, there is a common interpretation of oneself according to the rules

---

into Arabic (in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century and in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, respectively—the latter translation was made from a Syriac version), their influence upon the Arab thought was negligible.

of a model and recurrence. In the light of the literature that has been analysed, an answer to the question “Who am I” has no autotelic value. Finally, one’s character is frequently burdened by inherited virtues and advantages.

One should perceive the reasons for such a state of affairs above all in the worldview evaluation which dominated at that time. Through such an evaluation certain cultural features were fixed in social practice and they limited the possibilities of the influence of writing upon cognitive processes: traditionalism, the dominances of collective consciousness over individual consciousness, acceptance of social hierarchic structure and a Quranic vision of the limits of man’s freedom. These are not the only features, although, in my opinion, they are dominant, for one should not forget about other features, such as the understanding of privacy and the right to maintain it. For the sake of indicating a research issue which could open a new avenue of study, one should point out that even though the terms “private” or “public” do not appear in the Quran and in Muhammad’s tradition in theological narratives or in jurisprudence (Kadivar, 2003, pp. 660–661), Islam not only recognised the existence of the private sphere but also granted man a complete right to maintain privacy.<sup>18</sup> Man has the right to keep certain things secret (a result of which is a moral and legal injunction against interfering in the things which happen or exist in the private sphere and an injunction against the divulging of information which pertains to this sphere). Moreover, even if somebody does not want to express his or her opinion about anything openly, he should not be coerced (Kadivar, 2003, pp. 666–667). Therefore, as we may infer, there was a whole array of themes, activities and relations which were subject to a cultural taboo. Therefore, it is likely that in the public sphere and consequently in literature, any cases of divulging information that pertained to family life, one’s spouse, children, relations or the associated sphere of dreams and thoughts were very rare.

#### REFERENCES

- Abū Shāma, Shihāb ad-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. (1974). *Adh-Dhayl ‘ala-r-rawḍatayn*, ‘I. al-Ḥusaynī ad-Dimashqī (Ed.). Beirut: Dār al-Jayl.
- Enderwitz, S. (1998). From Curriculum Vitae to Self-narration. Fiction in Arabic Autobiography. In S. Leder (Ed.), *Story-telling in the Framework of Non-fictional Arabic Literature* (pp. 1–19). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

---

18 One of the most distinct mechanisms of regulating privacy (keeping in secrecy everything which refers to and which happens in the private sphere) was the division into the commercial sphere and the residential sphere (which corresponded with the idea of the segregation of sexes, associated with the clear division of gender roles in the social system).

- Enderwitz, S. (2007). Autobiography and “Islam”. In O. Akyıldız, H. Kara & B. Sagaster (Eds.), *Autobiographical Themes in Turkish Literature: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives* (pp. 35–42). Würzburg: Ergon Verlag.
- Al-Ghazālī, Abū Hāmid. (1980). *Deliverance from Error (al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl)* (R.J. McCarthy, Trans.). Boston: Twayne, American University in Beirut.
- Al-Ghazālī, Abū Hāmid. (1992). *Al-Munqidh min ad-dalāl* (M. Bijū, Ed.). Damascus.
- Al-Ghazālī, Abū Hāmid. (2001). *Deliverance from Error and Mystical Union with the Almighty* (M. Abulayah, Trans.). Washington D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy.
- Giladi, A. (1992). *Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood in Medieval Muslim Society*. London: Macmillan.
- von Grunebaum, G.E. (1971). *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation*. Chicago—London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Guillaume, A. (Ed. & Trans.). (2004). *The Life of Muḥammad. A Translation of Iṣḥāq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Gurevich, A. (1985). *Categories of Medieval Culture*. London—Boston—Melbourne—Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Haslam, A. (2004). *Psychology in Organizations. The Social Identity Approach*. London: Sage Publications.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture’s Consequences. Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations across Nations*. London—New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G.J. & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and Organizations. Software for the Mind*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Izutsu, T. (2002). *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’ān*. Montred & Kingstad—London—Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Izutsu, T. (2008). *God and Man in the Qur’ān. Semantics of the Qur’ānic Weltanschauung*. Tokyo: Keio University Press.
- Kadivar, M. (2003). The Public, Private, and Islam. *Social Research* 570/3: 659–680.
- Kmita, J. (1982). *O kulturze symbolicznej*. Warszawa: Centralny Ośrodek Metodyki Upowszechniania Kultury.
- Lane, E.W. (2003). *Arabic-English Lexicon* (CD-ROM ed.). Vadus, Liechtenstein: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation.
- Lindsay, J.E. (2005). *Daily Life in the Medieval Islamic World*. Westport, Connecticut—London: Westwood Press.
- Lowry, J.E. (1997). Time, Form, and Self: Autobiography of Abū Shama. *Edebiyāt* 7: 313–325.
- Mrozek, A. (1967). *Koran a kultura arabska*. Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza.
- Nasalski, I. (2006). Kiedy muzułmanin porzuca swą wiarę. Apostazja w islamie. *Teofil. Pismo Kolegium Filozoficzno-Teologicznego Dominikanów* 2 (24): 101–124.

- Ong, W.J. (2005). *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*. London—New York: Routledge.
- Pilarska, A. (2012). *Ja i tożsamość a dobrostan psychiczny*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wydziału Nauk Społecznych UAM.
- Prochwicz-Studnicka, B. (2020). Literary Representation of the Self in Medieval Arabic Autobiographies and the Cultural Barriers to Self-Cognition. The Literacy Theory Perspective. Part 1. *Perspektywy Kultury* 30: 135–150.
- The Qur'an. A New Translation* (A.M.A.S. Haleem, Ed. & Trans.). (2004). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Radtke, B. & O'Kane, J. (1996). *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism. Two Works by Al-Hakim At-Tirmidhi. An Annotated Translation with Introduction*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.
- Rapoport, Y. (2005). *Marriage, Money, and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society*. Cambridge—New York—Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Reynolds, D.E. (2001). *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Robinson, Ch.F. (2007). *Islamic Historiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosenthal, F. (2007). *Knowledge Triumphant. The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*. Leiden: Brill.
- Rosenthal, F. (2014a). Child Psychology in Islam. In D. Gutas (Ed.), *Man versus Society in Medieval Islam* (pp. 941–964). Leiden—Boston: Brill.
- Rosenthal, F. (2014b). Materials for an Appraisal of Knowledge as Societal Force. In D. Gutas (Ed.), *Man versus Society in Medieval Islam* (pp. 967–1000). Leiden—Boston: Brill.
- Aṣ-Ṣuyūṭī, Jalāl ad-Dīn. (1975). *Kitāb at-taḥadduth bi-ni'mat Allāh* (E.M. Sarrain, Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Turner, J.C. (1982). Towards a Cognitive Redefinition of the Social Group. In *Social Identity and Inter Group Relations* (H. Tajfel, Ed., pp. 15–40). Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, Ibn 'Abd Allāh. (1993). *Mu'jam al-udabā'. Irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb* (I. 'Abbās, Ed., Vol. 5). Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī.

**Bożena Prochwicz-Studnicka** – Arab studies researcher, assistant professor at the Institute of Cultural Studies of the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Cracow. Her research interests revolve around the classical period of Arab and Muslim culture and civilization, including the legal aspects of classical Islamic culture, the cultural landscape of the traditional Arab-Muslim city and the interpretation of Arab culture from the perspective of the theory of writing. Member of the Polish Cultural Studies Society and the Bezkręsy Kultury Association. Deputy editor-in-chief of the journal *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture. New Series*.