Life-Writing and Autofiction in Radwa Ashour's *The Journey*

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Introduction

This paper investigates the challenging conceptions of life-writing's generic identity, developing from the intersection and interweaving of the modes of Autofiction, History, Memory and Travel-writing. The study focuses on the Egyptian author, Radwa Ashour's (1946-2014) autobiographical text, *al-Rihla* (originally published in Arabic in 1983 and translated into English as *The Journey: Memoirs of an Egyptian Woman Student in America* by Michelle Hartman in 2018). *The Journey* is a life narrative that recounts the author's three-year journey to the United States to study for her PhD degree in the USA, at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, in the mid-1970s. Ashour's text has been studied mainly for its direct engagement with public and private History, her unconcealed agency in 'historicizing' events and contexts, creating a counter-history that offers a parallel historical narrative, and the author's development/culmination of her subjectivity as an Arab woman on a United States university campus.[1] However, very few scholarly investigations have been done on the generic identity of the text, since *The Journey* has long been strictly categorized as an 'autobiography' by Ashour herself, and it was critically approached for a long time as such. More recently, it has been translated into English as a 'memoir', a generic labeling assumed in the sub-title by Ashour's translator Michelle Hartman (although the Arabic title does not mention '*memoir*,*'* but says, '*days'* instead). In her "translator's note," Hartman referred to the 'memoir,' being "a book of its time and place and itself chooses what to and what not to explain" (2018, 148). Highlighting the distinctions between these

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different types of life narratives leads to a better understanding of the nature of the text and foregrounds a basis for approaching it critically.

The French theorist Phillipe Lejeune understands an autobiography as "the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality" (1982, 193). As an established genre, Autobiography historically started out as a way to write about one's life in a confessional frame, and included reflections and speculations about history, politics, religion, science, and culture (Smith and Watson 2001, 2), commonly written to trace the beginning of the author's life up to the point of writing. More sub-genres were also developed under the umbrella of life narratives like memoirs, which Linda Anderson distinguishes from Autobiography as being "more flexible and outward-looking," in the sense that they allow the author to recount life events of a specific experience, and can focus on "any episode" from his/her life (2011, 113). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson also make distinctions between life-writing and life-narratives: "*life writing* as a general term for writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or an explicit self-reference to the writer. We understand *Life-Narrative* as a somewhat narrower term that includes many kinds of self-referential writing, including autobiography" (2001, 3). Both critics also highlighted the inadequacy of Autobiography to encompass the complexity of self-referential writing practice, stating that "a growing number of postmodern and postcolonial theorists contend that the term autobiography is inadequate to describe the extensive historical range and the diverse genres and practices of Life-Narratives and life narrators in the West and elsewhere around the globe" (2001, 4).

Therefore, one of the expansions in the theoretical approaches under Autobiography Studies, which addresses these problematic issues, is the emerging field of Autofiction. This is why, this paper will expand beyond the limitations of these definitions and trace the intersections of both Autofiction as a relatively recently theorized generic category and travel-writing as a form of life-writing. I will attempt to read *The Journey* in light of such intersections, where I believe the text is disrupting the specificity of its generic labeling as an autobiographical text, and examining the parameters that it functions within, as a travelogue with historicized and autofictional elements. Such crossing of generic borders is possible in the text because of the complexity of the issues it problematizes – the experience of an academic Arab woman travelling alone in the United States, who gets exposed to the 'American' experience that propels

the author to reflect on herself and on life, in a setting complicated by history, race, politics and gender.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first one traces the autofictional dimension in *The Journey* that blurs the boundaries of genre, and explores new possibilities of reading the text as a more inclusionary life narrative, where Autofiction could be ground for bringing together Travel, History, Autobiography, and Fiction all together. The second mode is how Autofiction, both as a potential genre and as a technique, allows the effectuation of 'historicization' as a tool for conceptualizing Ashour's life and 'self,' and how memory plays a vital role in mediating such process, stressing Ashour's 'relationality' to her surroundings on the course of her 'American' journey. The third and final mode is reading *The Journey* as a Travel text that she wrote to 'record' her adventures as an Arab, Muslim woman on a three-year journey in the 'West' represented by America. However, dealing with the Travel theme and structure in this text is mainly highlighted to investigate the validity of using Travel-writing as a tool for life-writing, and the implications of such use.

Autofiction as Genre and Technique in *The Journey*

The constant expansion of the parameters of life-writing allows Autobiography Studies to be inclusionary of more sub-genres and types of life narratives as they develop and flourish. One such recent development is the emergence of theorizing of Autofiction as a more encompassing platform of life-writing than other forms. *Autofiction* is a term coined by French writer Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, mainly to refer to an autobiography with fictionalized elements, or "fiction of strictly real events" (Dix 2018, 2). According to Karen Fererra-Meyers, Doubrovsky's initial understanding of autofiction is to describe "a narrative which has a strictly autobiographical subject matter (certified by the nominal shared identity between author, narrator and main character), but whose manner, that is the narrative organization and stylistic craft, is novel-like" (2018, 28). She also highlights the difference between Autobiography and Autofiction, noting that "whereas traditional autobiography tries to describe a character which really existed in the most realistic and effective way possible, autofiction fictionalizes a character which really lived. That is the pragmatic point of view regarding autofiction raised by Doubrovsky in 1977" (2015, 205). Part of the ongoing debate between Autofiction theorists concerns exploring the limits of the demarcation of generic boundaries. Theorists of Autofiction like Eliane Lecarme-Tabone made contributions to how critics can approach the 'autofictional text', and define its elements as a "narrative in the first person

singular, with agreement of the names of the narrator/ the author, but with all the signs of fiction's implausibility" (Lecarme-Tabone qtd in Ferreira-Meyers 2018, 29). As opposed to Lejeune's idea of creating an implied 'contract' of authenticity with the readers of autobiography[2], Jacques Lecarme suggested an "autofictional pact" (1993, 242) instead, because he questioned the ability of aligning the author, protagonist and narrator to strictly identify with each other, and negated the possibility for autobiographical writing to mediate historical events in a way that is not narrativized, and therefore fictionalized. This pact attempts to resolve the tension between saying the 'truth' in a factual manner, and using narrative, fictive techniques.

Lecarme and Eliane Lecarme-Tabone's contributions were beneficial in the way they allowed 'autofiction' as a term to be transnational and not exclusively used in one part of the world. The two distinctions they made in theorizing the nature of Autofiction was twofold: autofiction depending on 'real' events that are narrated in fictionalized narrative technique, and more widely, autofiction as a technique that blends imagination with memory (Fererra-Meyers 2018, 29). Furthermore, other critics explained autofiction as an "exploration of the different layers of the *self*" (qtd in Ferreira-Meyers 2018, 29) because it constitutes a "quest" for authors who seek to interpret life's elusiveness and indescribability, and then it becomes a project of "self-exploration and self-experimentation on the part of the author" (Dix 2018, 4).

In her essay "My Experience with Writing," Ashour progressively describes the nature of her text in the same light:

> *The Journey* was a full length text, but it was the result of an experience that I had lived through and people that I knew. Of course *I influenced the arrangement of the material and the conclusions drawn therein*, both implicitly and explicitly. But I did not invent any of the situations or characters that are portrayed in it. (1993, 174; my emphasis)

Such emphasis that blends both 'factual' events with literary narrative techniques, such as the "transposition of time, which allows for an incident lasting minutes to consume pages while a situation enduring for years can be written about in two lines," (Ashour 1993, 173) or using a narrator to her recounted story, along with the shift in the voice of narration, in her use of first and then third person, or the internal experimentation, along with external exploration of new locales all offer a new light to reading *The Journey* as

autofictional; thus, demarcating the fixities of genre and offering fresh interpretations to the author's insight and experience. Such shifts in theoretical frameworks that deal with self-referential texts specifically, and literary and non-literary production more generally come from a substantially changed demographics, and the rise of post-colonial, anti-Eurocentric/Imperialist tendencies that allow more fluidity and fragmentation of ideas, concepts, and writing modes. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, the debate of whether to consider Autofiction a legitimate genre is not as relevant here. However, the "concept" of Autofiction will be used as "as a lens through which to approach and explain writing styles" (Ferreira-Meyers 2018, 35).

The Journey's generic categorization has always been assumed to be of autobiographical nature. Ashour wrote many texts that were generically categorized as 'autobiographies' or 'autobiographical novels.' She talks about the process of how she started infusing self-referential writing into her oeuvre. Life-writing for her was a means to gain the 'courage' to blend and reconciliate the blatant dichotomies of the personal and the public, the Self and the Other, the individual and the collective. In her essay "My Experience with Writing," she recounts the development of her writing style:

> In 1980 I embarked upon an autobiographical project. I wrote pages on my life's experiences in the years between 1946 (the year when I was born) and 1956. I discovered that the threads which made up the consciousness of a ten-year-old girl, and those which wove the history of that period, were tighter and more closely interwoven than that which I was capable of writing on. I found myself stumbling when writing about the relationship between the personal and the general which were interlocked to a degree that made it difficult to distinguish one from the other. I was afraid of slipping into rhetoric or lyricism. The material that I was dealing with was not just personal experience, but also the history of the nation, and I stopped, feeling ill-equipped and fearful. I decided that I needed a workshop where I could train and learn. The writing of *The Journey: An Egyptian Student's Days in America* was the workshop to which consciously I gave my attention, thinking of it as a workshop of preparation. (1993, 172-173)

This highlights her generic awareness of the problematic of "slipping into rhetoric and lyricism" as features of fictional writing, while she embarked on

writing her memoir. This is why, by rereading Ashour's text as partly autofictional, it would solve such a problematic issue by allowing this mode of reading to substantiate and mediate self-referentiality, history and self-exploration without the fear of 'slippery' into fictional modes that she thought would sabotage the 'authenticity' of her text.

It is complicated to situate *The Journey* on the autofictional spectrum. Yet, one key point that autofiction poses for reading texts is the starting point – whether the texts are mostly autobiographical with autofictional elements, or vice versa, and whether autofiction can be used as a technique in texts with autobiographical nature. In this section, I will be focusing on examples of autofictional techniques used in the text. But in a more general sense, my analysis of the two subsequent modes of reading (that is History and Travel-writing) will substantiate my claim that the text can fall under Autofiction as a potential genre that encompasses various sub-genres and does not stop at or concern itself with the fixity of generic borders.

The Journey can be read as an autofictional text for its main employment of narrative and stylistic techniques of fiction in a text that has clear autobiographical features. For instance, the use of 'memory' as a technique of remembering events, which will be analyzed in the next section for its thematic significance, is one of the markers that reinforce the aspects of 'fictionalization' that Ashour deployed. The technique of using flashbacks from the 'past' and flashforwards, for example, probes this mode of reading the text as a fictionalized narrative. In remembering details of her past life as a young girl in Egypt, and infusing it with reflections on her 'present' moment in the American setting that is implicitly affected by that past, Ashour creates a background for her 'protagonist' just like an author would do within their 'fiction' writing:

> I had learned to conquer my earliest childhood fears and was able to use every experience had to emerge with my head held high. I grew up with three brothers whom I always feared would be associated with bravery and courage because they while I would be associated with weakness and fear because I was not. So I used to plunge headlong into things. I would always be the one to reach out and take the first shot and then claim it didn't hurt […] I never squirmed when swallowing bitter medicine; I would swallow it with feigned calm, claiming that it wasn't so bitter. I would bet my eldest brother that I could carry as much as he could […] I didn't show my fear when I had to go into a dark room. I don't know exactly what traces this

> childhood stubbornness and assertiveness left on my later behavior, but I know that I gained a measure of moral courage and bravery from it. In this American university where I was living and studying, however, I experienced an insistent fear for the first time since my very early childhood. Those Zionists succeeded in arousing a deep anxiety inside me. Would one of them attack me with a large bat and bash my head in? The violence in the look of that young guy from the Jewish Defense League made me wonder what kind of harm his hatred might translate to. America did not make me feel safe at all. (2018, 25)

The detailed description of her character traits as a child, and the narratological jump from her past memories as a child, where she felt safe both physically and emotionally to be herself and practice her stubbornness with little or no fear, to the present moment that posed a psychological as well as physical threat to her as an adult provides a literary and fictive resonance to her writing. Moreover, the process of 'fictionalization' here includes portraying a character that looks and sounds fictional even though it is 'real'. Ashour represents her different versions of herself through Radwa the child, the young adult at home, and the adult in the US. Each one of these versions is given a voice, and a consciousness of her own.

Moreover, autofictional analysis subsumes the stylistics and formal aspects to make them integral in the text, which is also the marker of a fictionalized, imagined narrative. Ashour uses poetic language with vivid and detailed descriptions of her surroundings, relying on imagery and metaphors that enliven the scene she is portraying. The visual and olfactory sensations invoked by her description of the mesmerizing setting is compelling:

> Spring had still not completely arrived in Amherst at the end of April. But then May came and the earth changed. The people of the town could enter warm, happy spaces with new green on the trees and the soft scent of lilacs wafting through the open windows. You could hardly smell it during the day but at night it filled the air. When winter is long, snow piles up on the ground and trees grow bare as if there is no hope life will ever return to them. A sunny spring day is as joyful as the birth of a child in a house where everyone else is elderly. (2018, 68)

Ashour also extensively deploys intertextual interjections of literature and poetry she makes Radwa[3] recite as part of her state of continuous reflection and commentary on her present, which is one of the features of autofictional analysis of a text. *The Journey* is already a highly intertextual text. For instance, Radwa and Mourid comment on the morbid weather that pervaded New York on the day of their trip, reciting lines from T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland:*

> *Unreal city under the brown fog of a winter dawn.*
> *I had not thought death had undone so many.*
> *Unreal city under the gray fog of a summer dusk.*
> *Vienna! Paris! London! Unreal!* (Ashour 2018, 108)

The use of these verses from *The Waste Land* shows multiple levels of awareness. One of them is the author's awareness of the importance of intertextuality in expressing the complexities of the past/present dichotomy. T.S. Eliot depicts a fragmented, gloomy sentiment about cities of Europe in a relatively near past, but it can be felt in a present moment across the continent, in New York. So, intertextuality can highlight and complicate the spatial and temporal dimensions in the text. The second one is the protagonist's awareness of such dimensions, and her frequent commentary on it. Radwa infuses poetry, folk-narratives, and African American slave songs as a way of making sense of her own consciousness and existence through literature.

The deployment of these different narrative techniques in the text renders it to an autofictional reading that relies on the personal narrative of the author, who chose to write her version of the 'truth' about her journey in America, in a frame of 'fictionalization' of characters, events and setting; even with those three drawing from 'real' sources.

History and Memory as tools of "Conceptualization of Existence"

From the first chapter of *The Journey*, it is evident that Ashour employs what critic Bart Moore-Gilbert describes as the process of 'pushing the text towards Historiography' (2009, 59), while maintaining the balance of its core essence, being a personal life narrative. Moore-Gilbert notes that this is a distinctive feature of post-colonial women's life-writing, mostly employed as a reaction to the stagnation of the traditional male autobiographical writing traditions, and the need to revisit history in a different light (2009, 22-23). In her essay, "Eyewitness, Scribe and Story Teller: My Experience as a Novelist," Ashour reflects on the importance of (re)writing history in personal and public

endeavors: "'Always historicize,' Brecht once said. I do not historicize for ideological reasons but because I have no other means to *conceptualize my existence* and reconstruct it into meaningful categories" (2000, 88; my emphasis). So, 'historicization' here is an integral tool to (re)shaping the author's - and by extension, many of post-colonial women writers' – understanding of their existence and making sense of its complexities by writing about it and exploring its boundaries. Georg Misch, one of the early critics of Autobiography Studies, views self-referential writing as 'personal history' that encompasses more public forms of history, thus blurring the boundaries between the private/public dichotomy.

However, his view of autobiographical writing as a 'high' form of art when it tackles the conundrums of the "great man" (Smith and Watson 2001, 114) is dismissive of so many other forms of self-referential writing, done by minorities or disenfranchised groups like women, people of color, people coming from a post-colonial background, or combined all together. Moore-Gilbert, on the contrary, believes that self-referential writing can be used as a means to promoting new types of history "from below", which seeks to make traditionally marginalized groups "more prominent as historical agents" (2009, 77). This is where Autofiction can reconcile such a problematic, by offering a flexible platform that can combine various ways and dimensions of self-expression. In that light, Ashour defies that limiting view, and explains that she chooses to 'write' as an act of:

> self-defense and in defense of countless others with whom I identify or who are like me. I want to write because reality fills me with a sense of alienation. Silence only increases my alienation while confession opens me up so that I may head out toward the others or they may come to me themselves. (Ashour 1993, 170)

This is shown in the way Ashour recounts her experience with the African-American and Puerto-Rican communities in UMASS, for instance, where she expresses her personal reflections on the histories of these 'marginalized' groups and their shared activism on campus, creating what Lionnet calls a "métissage" (1989, 4) (or braiding) of cultural forms. Such strategy allows transformation of the genre and changes "relations of power in society" (Moore-Gilbert 2009, 70). Radwa explains her fascination with "reading history and literature voraciously," which allowed her to "[enter] emotionally challenging fields of knowledge:

reliving the suffering of the African content whose wounds have bled for hundreds of years" (Ashour 2018, 18).

Moreover, the concept of 'Memory' permeates the text, both as a theme and a well-established technique. Max Saunders offers insight on using memory as a technique in life-writing: "one thing that life-writing shows is that while we may think of memory as somehow prior to auto/biography, or literature, or any form of textuality, our memories are always already textualized. They are by definition "after the event," but also, as representations or mediations or narrativizations of the event, they have always begun to turn the event into something else" (2008, 323). Misch also introduces a further point, asserting the 'fictionalized' nature of using memory as a life-writing technique, where "memory [is] viewed as a mode of creation, even invention, rather than as something which offers unproblematic access to past 'realities'" (1973, 11). This agrees with V.S. Naipaul, who saw memory as "essentially a creative act" (qtd in Moore-Gilbert 2009, 75).

Memory, as a technique, is a tool used to mediate Ashour's attempts to create a narrative that combines (re)historicization of personal and public historical experiences with an autobiographical dimension. For one, Radwa 'remembers' historical events, both personal and public in order to move from being a mere spectator, into an active critiquing agent of history. Readers of the text will gain her insight on such interjections and reflections, making her not only an autobiographer of her own story, or a creator of an autofictional narrative, but also a passionate historiographer. Ashour muses on this very same idea in "My Experience with Writing": "I realise now that history, in the sense of the recording of a historical reality, was always something that engrossed me" she says (1993, 174).

Ashour creates an intricate weave, or more of a pattern to writing *The Journey* that infuses an interplay between memory, history and self-referentiality all together. She describes normal, day-to-day, ordinary details of her life in Amherst, and portrays a very detailed picture of the city and campus, using factual details of street names, buildings (like Prince House, where her dorm room resides), or her newly established "relationship with the little mailbox with my room number -224- on it on the ground floor of Prince House" (2018, 12). She then shares and reinterprets -mostly in a cynical tone - significant moments and events in history that she remembers and believes are disregarded or recounted by the voice and eye of the dominant hegemonic powers. She, for instance, recounts her trip to Boston with her friends, and how she was enraged while walking on the Freedom Trail, where they were telling her about the

Boston Massacre in 1770. She points out that learning about the Boston Massacre immediately activated the remembrance of the Chilean National Stadium in Santiago where thousands were killed, or the Six-Day War massacres in June 1970 (2018, 66), which she saw as more or less indirectly caused or directly executed by the United States. She also offers her blatant critique of how each of these massacres would not be recognized for their gruesomeness, where there will be no "representatives" (2018, 67) to visit the massacre site or acknowledge their crimes. This is precisely what Moore-Gilbert mentioned when surveying the work of Feminist Autobiography critics that saw how women Autobiographers "second […] the objectives and methods of their historian colleagues, proposing that women's life-writing should be considered not just as legitimate historical evidence but also as a form of (counter-) History" (2009, 78).

Although Radwa is extremely passionate about history, she is selective about which history to bond with. She mentions that as a school-girl, the American Revolution didn't "speak to [her] at all" (Ashour 2018, 66). History as she comprehends it is 'contrived,' and built on massacres she feels strongly about, and therefore does not count as one worthy of celebration. Radwa does the exact opposite: she attacks, undermines, or ignores it at most. So, in this sense, she does not just play as an active agent in celebrating Third World solidarities, but brings the marginalized history to the center and pushes the dominant historical narrative to the peripheries, in a total reversal of power and agency. This complicated process is facilitated by the overlapping and interconnectedness of genres in the text. Radwa beautifully exemplifies this strong sense of defense of the marginalized history of everything that is non-Western in the text, when she contemplates the vibrant nature of African-American gatherings. "Why are Afro-American gatherings characterized by such vibrancy, as if people are carrying baskets in which to collect the fruits of the endurance, joy, and sorrow that they reaped over the harvest of a lifetime?" she asks (2018, 82). This process of deliberate 'historicization' consequently turns the text into a source of cultural memory.

According to Moore-Gilbert, unlike male life-writers, "the subjectivity in women's life-writing is primarily relational rather than monadic, [creating] relational or collective identities" (2009, 18). This, in turn, forms a relationship between Ashour the individual and her "representative identity" (2009, 22) as a rebellious woman archetype, and between the author and the 'colonizer' (in a Fanonian essence). In the text, Radwa has "the imperative […] to identify with a collective destiny" (2018, 73). He also argues that "postcolonial subjectivity is

characteristically constructed between historical and collective historical experience" (2018, 82), which is precisely the case in *The Journey.* This is demonstrated in her usage of the pronoun "we," every time she talks about the shared destiny and solidarity of Arabs, Africans, Latin-Americans and African-Americans, for example. In the beginning of the text, Radwa was attending meetings of the Committee she and her Arab friends formed right after war broke out between Egypt and Israel in 1973, as part of her activism for the Third World Students. She describes the setting of how "we Arab students were spread throughout the room and participated in conversations … We were seven Arab students" (2018, 22). Sharing a common goal, Radwa was proud that "we made our position clear in our manifesto and in a number of letters to the editor. We focused on our opposition to Israel" (2018, 23). Her subjectivity, then, was closely related to a bigger entity, where she felt she represented and was part of a collective identity and a shared destiny that calls for solidarity and unity.

This plural tone increases as the narrative continues, as she also identifies herself in relation to Afro-Americans who shared together the same African ancestry with her. Radwa feels familiarity and belonging amongst her African-American friends, partly because "we were able to form this immediate close connection because of how deeply they felt they were Africans who had been deracinated and still somehow belong to Egypt. Thus, I was not a stranger, but another Egyptian among them" (2018, 34). Ashour, through Radwa, takes it further and explores her identity in relation to those who share the state of 'exile' with her. In one of the parties she attended on campus, she couldn't help but wonder "why in exile do we clutch onto our roots like this and attend every gathering affirming our identities? Is it fear or nostalgia? Or is it a pride in our tales of adversity?" (2018, 82). These contemplative questions compel us to reflect on the protagonist/author/narrator voice, where the demarcation between the voice of Radwa (the protagonist) and Ashour (the author/narrator) is not always distinct. This is an instance where the three of them merge into one blurred, collective voice.

Radwa further explores 'relational' identity when she attended a lecture by a leader from an Indigenous People community. She expresses how mesmerized she was with his recounts of the struggle to gain equal civil rights, his acts of 'resistance,' and she felt that "he brought a real place out of a fake cinematic context and gave it a place within History. I learned from it and became a part of it." She also "mourned the dead" and "glorified life" with Chilean men playing Andean flutes on the stage (Ashour 2018, 90). Later, when she attends a concert as a finale for Liberation Week `activities, where she was actively

organizing demonstrations and talks advocating for the Palestinian cause, she expressed her awe at how people from different 'Third World' nations all came together in solidarity for Palestine. She describes the vibrant atmosphere around the room and contemplates the reason behind it:

> Was our excitement that night a result of the success of the week we had organized? Or was it because the band and their songs were so good? Or was it that in watching the news every day we'd started to realize that this era was ending in *our* favor, even though we weren't expecting it to? […] But as for us coming from the rest of the world, the brothers and sisters whipped by the stinging lash of imperialism's whip, the news of this liberation and the raising of the revolutionary flag in Saigon was not merely the joyful media story we had been hoping for. It was also something that we related to, something at the very heart of our own stories, histories, and futures. (2018, 95; my emphasis)

Radwa, then, does not only 'relate' to others because of their shared struggle, but she has a 'relational' identity with history itself. It is an integral part of her subjectivity and existence, and in return, she lives, relives, celebrates it, and even claims the right to be equally involved in it, as she "[felt] like crying every time she sees the minarets and cornices of Al-Azhar because she thinks she is 'denied its history'" (2018, 49). Radwa's 'relationality' to history, then, is strongly tied to her personal narrative and unique recounting of events while on her journey, which are all emphasized through her use of a 'fictionalized' form of writing.

Travel-Writing as a Form of Life-Writing

Travel, as both theme and genre, has been widely and intensively used in writing about oneself in a narrative of what the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms* calls "exploration and adventure" (1999, 937). The online encyclopedia.com platform also refers to travel-writing as a practice that "has always been as much about the exploration of the writer's self as it has been about the places or peoples visited" (2020). Reflecting on the earlier definition of life-writing stated by Smith and Watson in the introduction section, travel-writing then, could be a valid form of life-writing, since it is consumed with taking the 'life' of its author/narrator/protagonist (or all of them) as its subject, and situating it in a context of spatial and personal exploration.

The tradition of travel-writing has widely been attributed to, and practiced by European male travelers, but Arab travel-writing can be traced back as far as the ninth century. European tradition of writing travelogues started being visible with medieval and Renaissance travel that explored European expansion to other parts of the world and was more consolidated during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth century as Europe was turning into an imperial, colonial entity. Women travelers from the 'West' have also taken the liberty of frequently writing about their journeys and adventures in the 'exotic' orient. In the book *Women Travelers on the Nile*: *An Anthology of Travel Writing through the Centuries,* for example, Deborah Manley (2016) inspects the experience of three middle-class Englishwomen, Florence Nightingale, Amelia Edwards and Harriet Martineau, who traveled to Egypt, in the nineteenth century, and wrote their accounts and impressions as they traveled from one village to the other. Manley highlights how the three women adopted an individualistic approach to travel and writing about it, moving away from the usual post-imperial, colonial agenda at that time. Travel-writing scholar, Sahar Abdel-Hakim, also writes about Sophia Poole's book *The Englishwoman in Egypt*, which presented Poole's involvement in Egyptian life and ways, and problematizes the reception of her work back in England when it was published. Abdel-Hakim highlights such problematic of "constructing the female self as a one coherent self that verges on the heroic, thereby following in the footsteps of patriarchal definition and practice. Such readings also tend to applaud imperial perceptions and colonial collaboration rather than acknowledge the rights of the topic of the text along with those of its writer" (2002, 108).

What is worth mentioning here is that there is scarcely the same amount of literary production, reception, and criticism, for that matter, from Arab women 'exploring' the West, let alone expressing their views on it. This is where Ashour's narrative is important: it fills an important gap in the canon of both Life and Travel writing produced by women. In that sense, it is important to mention critic Joyce Kelley's discussion about the differences in structure and themes between how men and women write a text with travel as one of its themes, especially around the nineteenth century, having noted that unlike men, "women concerned themselves with a smaller mapping of space; often their quests were less about opening new territories for their country and more about opening new spaces for themselves and their readers at home" (2005, 357-358). This is essential to highlight due to its relevance to my argument later that Ashour was a pioneer in, first, writing a travel text as an Arab woman academic traveling to America due to the obvious absence of literary production on that

front by women who hold as many layers of 'disenfranchisement' if one may call it so, and second, in subverting and re-inscribing the pre-existing discourse and structure of travel texts written by Western women traveling to the 'Orient'. Moore-Gilbert asserts that postcolonial life-writers "use travel-writing as a counter-discourse, in a way which exceeds the ambitions of their western counterparts," on the grounds that the genre provides room for "auto-ethnographical challenges to western representations of the non-West and for an ethnography to the West itself" (2009, xxii – xxiii). The core essence of Ashour's text is her brilliant infusion of "historiography, fiction and travel-writing," which, according to Moore-Gilbert, are originally all western forms of writing that "are now being used to 'defend' the non-West" (2009, xxiii) In my opinion, they are constitutive of what Autofiction as a form of writing has to offer, or encompass for that matter.

The process of construction of subjectivity in autobiographical and life-writing texts, narrating the self and establishing, or coming to terms with identity, have all been explored and expressed in travel-writing. Ashour's narrative interrogates what Moore-Gilbert calls the "generic convention [that established] a stable, complete and 'sovereign' Self," by creating a "hybrid text" (2009, 88) that disrupts and reaffirms conventions of genres and demarcates the boundaries of autobiography and life-writing, through offering a comprehensive perspective from Ashour's (dis)location in America. Furthermore, it is also argued that postcolonial life-writing "engages to a very significant degree with both travel and its effect on the constitution of subjectivity, not least because of the substantial psychic and affective implications of (dis)location" (2009, 83). Therefore, the text was successful in dealing with pre-conceived cultural baggage and subjectivity affirmation against everything the United States symbolizes: colonialism, hegemony, and domination which seemed to gradually unload as she arrives and familiarizes herself with Amherst and the university campus.

As soon as she settles in, she begins recounting her 'story' that includes both personal, and historical details to Michael, the young Head of Department, "about Abdel Nasser, the Six-Day War, [her] family disowning [her] for [her] marriage to someone they didn't approve of, the student protests, and the amazing love poem that Shaykh Imam sang about Alexandria" (Ashour 2018, 9). She also explains her reasons for studying Afro-American Literature "because of [her] interest in the relationship between literature and the reality of people's struggles" (2018, 6), expressing the importance of carrying the burden of being relevant to the present. "I also said that I taught in an English literature

department, but didn't want to become someone so embroiled in their research that I spend my whole life studying things which are not at the heart of the urgent issues that matter to me – the most pressing causes of our times," she adds (2018, 6). Travel-writing, then, helps in elucidating Ashour's subjectivity as "relational" to others, as previously discussed in the last section, and thus engaging with, not only issues of gender, but also of race, political solidarity, challenging post-imperialist ramifications on marginalized and disenfranchised groups in her sphere, and "break[ing] the private/public dichotomy" in Nawar Al-Hassan Golley's terms (2003, xii).

Radwa starts her 'journey' in America by affirming her subjectivity as a woman who is not "besotted with the bright lights of Imperialism" (Ashour 2018, 2) unlike other past scholars, like Shaykh Rifa'a Tahtawi, who traveled to learn in foreign European countries. So, we know from the very beginning that she would not embark on a journey of identity formation (or reformation). Instead, she realizes the cultural and political sensitivities of her place as an Arab woman travelling alone on a three-year learning journey in a place where she would always be perceived as an 'Other.' The protagonist, nevertheless, is 'certain' that she carries the memory and experience of Tahtawi within her consciousness. She compares herself to him, as someone who was out to seek knowledge, in a land "far-far away from us, the furthest from consideration" (2018, 2), but then contrasts her situation with him and his generation. "But I was unlike him, too. I was leaving neither as a neutral person who doesn't know what she is faced with, nor like the generation of researchers who followed him" (2018, 2). Hartman contends that Ashour

> self-consciously invokes not only Tahtawi himself, but the generations of Egyptian and Arab men who traveled to the West, in search of knowledge and education to improve not only their individual lots in life, but with the express purpose of helping to modernize and improve Egypt and the Arab world. As 'Ashur herself has stated, her committed stance as a Third World woman and intellectual impelled her not only to write a testimony in that same tradition, but to challenge and rewrite that very tradition. (2005, 289)

So, in fact, Ashour assumes a sophisticated intellectual and political stance when embarking on the trip and states that she will not fall prey to the bright lights, as her male predecessors did. Instead, she challenges all the existing mental and physical obstacles of travel, and ascribes to herself the mission of proving that

as a woman of Middle Eastern origin, she is equally qualified to (re)write the past and the present as she sees it.

It was also her involvement and shared solidarity with the African-American and Puerto-Rican communities on UMASS campus that dissipated the challenging emotional and ideological implications of the physical, as well as the metaphorical 'journey' on Radwa, shown in her recurrent reiteration, "what am I doing here?" (Ashour 2018, 5-9), "what compelled me to travel abroad?" (2018, 3) which is stimulating to think about, since it would be apparent that she had a 'choice' in going abroad to study. However, the answer to that repeated question is a few chapters later:

> I am in a permanent state of motion. As a child I had an overflowing, consistently powerful life force and was always on the move. As an adolescent, I kept moving for fear of my developing body and my impending confinement to the home as a woman. As an adult I moved so much so that I could remain equal to men my age. I kept moving so I could learn, I kept moving so I could be free, I kept moving so my family wouldn't envelop me in their love and regulations. I stayed in motion so that society wouldn't force me into the inferior compartments it confines women to, and eventually all this movement became second nature. This was how it had been since I arrived in America. I found myself still constantly moving in order to ward off the feeling of being a stranger and to fulfill the many academic requirements that would allow me to finish my degree quickly so I could go back to Egypt. I attended my assigned courses. I read, wrote, discussed, explained, and passed my time well-always on the move. (2018, 25)

So, she had a multi-layered baggage she needed to unload, challenging the conformity of her familial influence, challenging all the existing barriers of gender, and race as an Arab woman, and taking 'the journey.' This emotional burden that she kept carrying around long after she arrived at Amherst, Massachusetts was a driving force all through the text to keep "wrestling" (2018, 6), rendering her husband's letters as a "homeland" for her when "[she] was away from home. They made [her] feel that [she] was no longer lost in outer space, a place whose rules and customs [she] didn't know" (2018, 18).

Towards the end of Radwa's 'journey' (in its physical and metaphorical sense), we can already see that she transcends the feelings of estrangement and

is more comfortable to exercise her agency. At times, she would describe or visualize her surroundings in ambivalence, at other times, she finds herself in need to act in a confrontational or an oppositional way or both. For instance, when her husband visits, she decides to take him to "see America" (2018, 103), but she meant 'see' it through her eyes and perspective. She took a trip with Mourid to New York, in an interesting subversion of roles, since she's the one showing him around and instilling her experience, which is believed to be an explicit assertion of her ownership and subjectivity. Upon visiting New York, Radwa has no problem expressing her sharp, blunt observations on the place and what it represents to her. She ponders on the idea that "New York chooses its deep-seated whiteness and leaves Harlem to the Blacks" (2018, 109). She avoids seeing the Statue of Liberty, and visits Harlem instead, wandering around and showing her husband the streets where minorities that include Puerto-Ricans, Indians and other nationalities from Latin America reside. The following day they see Picasso's *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art, and on the last day of Mourid's trip, they attend a Puerto Rican "day parade" (2018, 119).

At the end of their visit, in the Puerto Rican street parade, Radwa jokingly asks her husband: "Did you really come to New York and leave without visiting the Statue of Liberty, or should we buy a little statue and send your friends a postcard with a picture of it?" to which he understands her sarcastic comment and replies, "let's ask a family for a Puerto-Rican flag!" (2018, 121). The Statue of Liberty is a deliberately diminished emblem, through which Radwa subverts the symbols of the widely accepted versions of American 'national history,' as she feels more at home defining herself and her experience with the 'history' of African Americans and other disenfranchised minorities, once more reinforcing the "relational" bond she had established with these groups. Paul Smethurst also notes that "all travel writing is to some extent a heroic exercise to bring textual order to bear on the experience of heterotopia produced by travel" (Kuehn and Smethurst 2009, 7). Thus, Ashour consciously creates a sense of textual order through understanding *The Journey* as a travel text, to render the American 'other' unambiguous, in contrast to how Radwa has perceived it, in the beginning of her journey.

Conclusion

Ashour's 'journey' is physical, critical, and intellectual. By taking the risk of going to America, she explores herself and the new world she had gone to, through experimenting the physical, mental, emotional, critical and intellectual parameters and limits she could reach. In deciding to embark on writing this text,

she has consciously taken on the challenge of consolidating her place as a distinguished, masterful writer that expresses extremely sensitive and complicated notions. Ashour's processes of historicization, interpretation and reflection are a way to 'fill the gaps' on the levels of her personal narrative, of public history, and of the Autobiography genre itself, one that is infused with many autofictional elements. Moreover, dealing with *The Journey* as a Travel text serves as a tapestry wide enough to encompass the rich, multi-layered narrative that she created. Travel, both as motif and genre, accentuates Ashour's experience as a woman traveling to the West, shattering the layers of 'Othering' and challenging the long-existing tradition of travel-writing. She fills in the gaps of lack of understanding of the provided historical contexts from the perspective of not just an Arab academic, but a woman academic. She also fills the gap of the dilemma of delineation of boundaries of genre, and presents a new model that enriches and complicates the debate about generic definitions and theorization.

Memory and the act of 'remembering' are extremely pervasive in the text. She takes the massacres, the war, and other interventions she inserted in the text very, very personally. That aspect of historicization in the life narrative has a personal aspect that cannot be avoided or go unnoticed. And that is where the autobiographical (and autofictional) element jumps in – it is not just telling the story of getting her PhD, but it is the story of how she perceives all the history that she has learned about or witnessed and how it has shaped her. So, it becomes a mutual process: she shapes history, and history shapes her as well. The 'her' here is, I think, not entirely autobiographical. It is autofictional. In the text, Radwa offers an amalgamation of the author's personal past, heritage, history and contemporary present (in the 1970s). Here is the intersection of the genres of autofiction, history, travel-writing and life-writing. So, in other words, the Radwa in the text is a persona that could have fictional aspects derived from her reflections on history, the past and the present, rather than just Radwa Ashour the writer and the teacher we know. In successfully 'braiding' together history, travel-writing and autofiction in the text, the three of them cease to be distinct genres, and turn into interwoven 'techniques' that affirm her agency in 'telling the story' on her own terms, thus, accentuating her authenticity, as well as liberating her from the stagnancy of conforming to existing writing conventions.

Endnotes

[1] Studies of Radwa Ashour's work have appeared in *al-Mandeel al-ma'qoud* (*The Knotted Handkerchief*), a bi-lingual critical volume edited by Faten Morsy and published in 2016. (See Kamal's article on *The Journey*).
[2] See Philip Lejeune's "Autobiographical Contract" (1982)
[3] There is a distinctive difference between the voices of the narrator, protagonist, and author that should be highlighted in this work. This is why I will be using 'Radwa' to refer to the protagonist, and 'Ashour' to the author herself, and will refer to the narrator as such if I need to.

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