**The Literary Pen-Portrait of the Marginalized in Modern Arabic Egyptian Literature**

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**Abstract**

This article makes a connection between the literature of marginality, a style that focuses on the lives of those who have been forgotten and exist at the margins of life, and the literary pen-portrait genre (“al-Sourah al-Qalamiyya”) that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century in the Arab press, in general, and the Egyptian press, in particular. This study attempts to define this interesting genre and its characteristics by exploring literary samples that focus on the class of the marginalized in the Egyptian society. These explorations focus on two pioneering Egyptian writers in this genre. The first is the founder of this style, the writer Abd al-Aziz al-Bishri (1886-1943), who was dubbed “Shaikh al-Sakhirin/Leader of the Ironists” because his writing tended to be humorous and provoke laughter. The second is the writer Khairy Shalabi (1938-2011), who was one of the most prominent writers to live with Egypt’s marginalized classes from the 1960s onwards. Shalabi was given the nickname of the “popular historian of the marginalized classes.”

The study also deals with the most important artistic and structural characteristics of pen-portrait art as a literary genre and draws two main conclusions. The first is that the pen-portrait genre introduced by Abd al-Aziz al-Bishri and Khairy Shalaby in the twentieth century gave readers an insight into a new, different reality for marginalized people. Specifically, this insight revolved around the understanding that the literature of the marginalized was not a “low” or secondary form of literature but rather a realistic form of literature that was connected to the life of ordinary people. Instead of seeing the marginalized as a trivial power in society, we see them as the power that makes the higher classes of society into what they are. The secondconclusion is that the art of the pen-portrait in the form that was established by al-Bishri and Shalaby is still absent in modern Arabic literature. The pen-portrait, as an image that parallels portraiture painting in fine art, is a unique genre of literature, but it is employed to a lesser extent by Arab writers. In other words, the pen-portrait remains a form of marginalized literature in that it does not enjoy popularity among writers, nor do literary institutions devote a significant amount of focus to it.

Critics draw a distinction between the literature of marginality (“Adab al-Hamish”), marginal literature (“al-Adab al-Hamishiyy”) and marginalized literature (“al-Adab al-Muhammash”). An overview of each of these genres is provided below.

**Literature of Marginality**

Somnath Sarkar (2016) defines “literature of marginality” as literature that “deals with the marginalized class of the world who are kept devoid of their fundamental rights to participate in the social, religious, cultural, political, educational and economic spheres of their lives and are kept aloof, alienated, or segregated physically from the general public [….] or the elite classes of the world.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Marginal Literature**

“Marginal literature” is a term referring to any literature that does not accept the ready-made forms that are imposed by the “lobby of culture” in any society, whether on the level of dealing with subjects and societal issues that impose themselves on the artist or on the level of literary genres and techniques of creative writing, which, consequently, see the creator rise up and turn their back on the prevailing norms and standards in writing.[[2]](#footnote-2) The term can also be used to refer to the literature that is produced by marginalized groups in a certain historical period, such as al-Sa'alik or al-Shi'r 'Udhri (the 'Udhri love-poetry) in classical Arabic literature,[[3]](#footnote-3) or the 1990s Arabic Egyptian literature, which is associated with the concept of the “marginal” and its allied concepts of despair and isolation.

The term “marginal literature” necessarily supposes the existence of “central literature,” which is the literature of the ruling institution or authority. The term “authority” here does not refer to the political authority of the state but the authority of the dominating writing trend that considers every type of creative writing that diverts from the familiar system to be “marginal writing.” Thus, the term “marginal literature” does not mean “secondary” or “insignificant” literature. Rather, it means the innovative literature that is liberated from imitation and traditions and which, therefore, is exposed to marginalization by the institution of writing.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Marginalized Literature**

Marginalized literature (“al-Adab al-Muhammash”) is a term that refers to the “literature of those people whom the institute is angry with, either because they fight it or introduce alternatives for life through a progressive literature that sings for liberties.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The literary meaning of this type is likely to refer to other sub-meanings. The marginalized person might be the writer themselves or different literary subjects and themes that no one dares to deal with, such as topics that are considered taboo (specifically, religion, politics, and sex). The marginalized can also refer to the literary form that rebels against definitions of the prevailing literary genre. [[6]](#footnote-6)

This paper focuses on the first type, namely, theliterature of marginality, which observes the life and sufferings of the forgotten people who live at the margins of existence in Egyptian society, such as the poor, beggars, homeless people, vendors, child laborers, and clerks in the oppressed classes.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The literary world has encompassed a number of writers who were interested in marginalized people, such as the Egyptian novelist Najib Mahfouz (1911-2006) in his novel *Malhamat al-Harafish/The Harafish* (1977). “Al-Harafish” is a colloquial vernacular word that is close in meaning to the classical word “Sa'alik,”[[8]](#footnote-8) which means “highwaymen” or “vagabonds.” His novel *al-Liss wa al-Kilab*/*The Thief and the Dogs* (1973) also deals with similar subjects.

The Egyptian writer Yusuf Idris (1927-1991) also took an interest in seeking out marginalized people within Egyptian society, describing their daily lives and the difficult circumstances within which they existed. Idris’ focus lay on the pressure of poverty and the deprivation of these people’s elementary human rights, as can be seen as in his first collection *Arkhas Layali*/*The Cheapest Nights* (1954).[[9]](#footnote-9) In addition, the novel *'Ushb al-Lail*/ *Night Grass* (1997) by the Libyan writer Ibrahim al-Kouni (b. 1948) also deals with a marginalized human class, the “Tuareg people,” who represent the Amazigh people living in the Great African Sahara to the south of Algiers.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The novel *Tarmi Bi Sharar*/*Throwing Sparks* (2010) by the Saudi novelist Adbo Khal (b. 1962), which won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (Arabic Booker Prize) in 2010, is considered to be a voice of the marginalized because it introduces desperate and broken characters in a way that clashes with readers’ expectations of Saudi society, which is associated with exorbitant richness and conservative traditions. The trilogy by the Moroccan writer Muhammad Shukri (1935-2003), entitled *al-Khubz al-Hafi*/*For Bread Alone* (1982), *al-Shuttar*/*The Shrewd Ones* (1992) and *Wujuh/Faces* (2000), is also worth mentioning. In this trilogy, Shukri skillfully observed the underground world of the marginalized people in Tangier, where his life intersected with the lives of his fictional heroes. The trilogy aroused a great deal of controversy and was banned in some Arab countries due to its blunt but true and accurate description of the hard and painful reality experienced by marginalized people.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Definition of the Pen-Portrait as a Literary Genre**

The pen-portrait is a literary work that stands in parallel to portrait painting in the fine arts. It is defined as a description of a certain individual by pen instead of by the brush, where the topography of the face and body constitute an entrance via which to dive into the hidden secrets of the person and describe their behavior and secrets in their life and fate. Thus, by delving into the depths of the person, the writer displays their psychological, ethical and intellectual dimensions, while also connecting their personality to the system of social relationships that prevails in society.

The pen-portrait became a popular and well-developed form in the Egyptian press in the first half of the twentieth century and played a role in the documentation of public life in Egypt. The pen-portrait was a kind of “press-diary,” as critic Mahmoud Adham called it. He defined it as “a creative type of writing in which the writer draws an image, not with a brush or paint or camera or light, but by drawing a pen-portrait, which is mostly an image of people that they knew and dealt with […] and if the word ‘image’ is usually used to indicate everything that has connection to concrete expression […] we do not draw a complete literary picture as the writer or the poet does, but we transfer by our pen a complete and mostly real image of the people who live among us and among whom we live, such as an old friend from childhood, a university friend, wondering where he is now, a friend from the village days, or the Ma'zoun of the village.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Mahmoud Adham explained the features of the pen-portrait and its characteristics in the following way:

* A concentration on one aspect of the character, attitude or scene.
* A concentration on external features and internal psychological aspects.
* Realism in thought, treatment, description and expressions.
* Positive content that provides the reader with intellectual and meaningful knowledge through description of the events and details of the portrait.
* A focus on the elements of the hidden, strange, and marvelous in the field of the portrait and its theme.
* A focus on the and previous components and revealing their impact on the main characteristic of the person.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Some critics use the term “profile” to refer to the literary pen-portrait,[[14]](#footnote-14) while others classify it under the literature of “biography” or “autobiography.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In modern criticism, several studies distinguish between “autobiography” and “literary portrait”[[16]](#footnote-16) and between the “literary pen-portrait” and the “press pen-portrait.” While the press pen-portrait is mostly to be found in news report, the literary pen-portrait deals with the feelings, emotions, aspirations, dreams, and sufferings to be found within people’s souls. It is also shaped by the subjective impressionistic style.

**The Main Technical Features of the Literary Pen-Portrait**

**The main characteristics of the literary pen-portrait include focusing on certain distinguishing human attributes of each person; connecting the cognitive/cultural with the human; connecting the character with the space to which they belong and the symbolic indications of their relationship with the place; a focus on the beauty of language and the description of the character, considering that the portrait is a descriptive art that is dominated by the aesthetic function; formulating the description in narrative language and a contemplative tone; drawing on memory and direct and real-life experience; guaranteeing the artistic techniques of narration and imagination besides the historical events.**[[17]](#footnote-17)

**The Pioneering Writers of the Literary Pen-Portrait**

The Arab literary movement saw certain groundbreaking authors take an interest in writing about the marginalized and the oppressed within the art of the literary pen-portrait. The pioneer of this art in the twentieth century was the talented Egyptian writer Abd al-'Aziz al-Bishri (1886-1943). Al-Bishri was born in Cairo and died there. He studied at al-Azhar, worked various jobs and held different ranks, the last of which was as an “administrative observer” at the Arab Academy for the Arabic Language in Cairo. He was dubbed “The Leader of the Ironists/Sheikh al-Sakhireen” due to his inclination towards humor and sarcasm. Others called him the “Leader of the Rotten/Sheikh al-Mu'affinin,” inspired by his interest in writing about many groups of poor people, such as beggars, shoeblacks, mourners at funerals, callers at weddings and Kor’an readers. He was influenced by the experiences of the classical authors, such as Abd Allah Ibn al-Muqaffa' (724-759 CE) and al-Jahiz (775-868 CE).

Abd al-Aziz al-Bishri wrote a number of essays under the title *Fi al-Mir'ah/In the Mirror* and published them in the magazine *al-Siyasa al-'Usbou'iyya/The Weekly Politics*[[18]](#footnote-18) and in a book that carried the same title. In these essays, al-Bishri explored various individuals, mostly Egyptian celebrities of his era, including politicians such as Sa'd Zaghlul (1858-1927), Adli Yakan (1864-1933), intellectuals such as Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (1872-1963), authors such as Hafiz Ibrahim (1872-1932) and Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932), and artists such as composer Sayyed Darweesh (1892-1923). Besides this, he was well-known for his famous book *al-Mukhtar/The Selected*, in which he introduced pen-portraits of a large number of marginalized and oppressed people. The wonderful introductions to the two-part book *al-Mukhtar/The Selected* were written by the Lebanese writer Khalil Motran (1872-1949) and the Egyptian writer Taha Hussein (1889-1973).[[19]](#footnote-19)

In his books *Fi al-Mir'ah* and *al-Mukhtar*, al-Bishri showed a talented, critical descriptive sense and an extraordinary ability to draw extremely accurate, beautiful portraits of a large number of authors, artists and creators whom he had met and with whom he was acquainted. Besides this, he wrote about oppressed members of humanity, such as street sellers, vendors, shoeblacks, beggars and misers.[[20]](#footnote-20) Some of the most exciting characters that al-Bishri described from the marginalized class in his book *al-Mukhtar* are al-Tifl al-Shareed/The Homeless Child; [[21]](#footnote-21) al-Mutajawwiloun wa Masihu al-Ahdhiya /The Wanderers and the Shoeblacks;[[22]](#footnote-22) al-Radio Kama Yassifuhu A'rabi Qadim min al-Badiya/The Radio as it is Described by a Bedouin [[23]](#footnote-23); al-Shahhazoun/The Beggars.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Little has been written about al-Bishri, in spite of his being a prominent figure in Arab and Egyptian culture. In the modern period, some consider the Egyptian writers Bilal Fadhl (b. 1973) and Omar Taher (b.1975) to be adopters of the style of Abd al-Aziz al-Bishri, especially in employing irony and sarcasm as a tool in criticizing society.

The pen-portrait genre became popular and widespread in the first half of the twentieth century. The following Egyptian journalists were skilled at writing in this genre: Ahmad al-Saawi Muhammad (1902-1989), Muhammad Zaki Abd al-Qader (1906-1982), Tharwat Abaza (1927-2002), and Ahmad Shafiq Bahjat (1932-2011). Besides these individuals, the writer Yahya Haqi (1905-1992) excelled in writing pen-portraits, especially in his book *Itr al-Al-Ahbab*/*Perfume of Sweethearts*, which constitutes an important work in the art of the literary pen-portrait.[[25]](#footnote-25) Haqqi defined this genre under the title of 'Al-Lawhat al-Qalamiya (“pen-paintings”).

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He also praised the book *Mudhakarat al-Sheikh Fazari*/*Memoirs of Sheikh Fazari* by the Azhari writer Mustafa Abd-al-Raziq (1885-1947) as one of the first creators of pen-portraits in the Arab Renaissance period.[[26]](#footnote-26) In addition, the writer Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad (1889-1964) praised this art due to its contact and interaction with the Egyptian celebrities and the leaders of the literary, political, and intellectual renaissance.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, some other writers adhered to a style more akin to that of journalistic daily diaries, while others took an approach closer to that of the autobiography.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Egyptian writer Khairy Shalaby (1938-2011) revived the art of literary portraiture in the style of al-Bishri. Shalaby was called “The Story-Teller of the Marginalized/Hakka' al-Muhammashin,” and “Malik al-Kahyanin/King of the Poor.” He wrote hundreds of pen-portraits throughout his fruitful career, exploring a crowded world of Egyptian communities including vagabonds, oppressed people, chased people, unemployed people, thieves, hashish addicts, impoverished workers, cemetery dwellers and craftsmen such as undertakers,[[28]](#footnote-28) gravediggers,[[29]](#footnote-29) coffeemakers,[[30]](#footnote-30) carriage-drivers,[[31]](#footnote-31) ironers,[[32]](#footnote-32) and nurses.[[33]](#footnote-33)

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He believed that a person’s face was the window through which it was possible to infiltrate and reach the depths of their soul. Khairy Shalaby was influenced by the Egyptian writer Yahya Haqqi and considered him to be his spiritual father. He said: “Haqqi is one of the pioneers who affected me most in knowledge, language and style besides the real Egyptian spirit that he revived in my generation.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Critics also consider him to be the pioneer of the historical fantasy in the modern Arabic novel. His contribution was not limited to the short story or the novel: it also encompassed historical research and literary criticism. Some of his works include *Ayaan Misr*/*Egypt’s Dignitaries* (1998); *Suhbat al-'Ushaq/Friendship of Lovers* (1996); *Fursan al-Dhihk/Knights of Laughte; 'Anaqid al-Nur*/*Clusters of Light* (2010) and *Burj al-Balabel/Tower of Nightingales* (2009).

Khairy Shalaby had a special style that distinguished him from his teacher Abd al-Aziz al-Bishri in his pen-portrait literature about marginalized people.[[35]](#footnote-35) Firstly, he had actually lived among this class for such a long time that his writings became connected to its individuals and their life. Consequently, he continued to document this oppressed group. Secondly, in his works, he always endeavored to set out the aesthetics of the character and the history that set them apart.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Shalaby introduced the art of the pen-portrait into his novels, too, writing long sections with penetrating observations of the characters and their psychological and ideological dimensions.[[37]](#footnote-37) The pen-portraits in his novels do not merely include descriptions of the faces and the characters but also of the place, time and popular neighborhood, as we see in his works *al-Awbash/The Bastards* (1978); *Wakalat 'Atiyya/Attiyya's Agency* (1999) and *Mawal al-Bayat wa al-Nawm/The Bayat Folk Song and Sleep* (2005) [[38]](#footnote-38).

The language in Shalaby’s literary pen-portraits is characterized by its transparency and simplicity. Shalaby tended to break the authority of language and its centrality by diverting from the official, standard elite rules of language and combining colloquial Egyptian with standard Arabic (Fusha). He uses allusions to the oral heritage and local dialect, while also relying on the techniques of similes, metonymy and simple metaphors.

Shalaby’s pen-portrait writing was not limited to the marginalized people in society: it also introduced historical and political figures, too, such as the singer Um Kulthoum (1898-1975), Sa'd Zaghlul and the writer Yusuf Idris. Shalaby also wrote about non-Egyptian celebrities such as the singer Fairuz (b. 1935), the poet and author Jibran Khalil Jibran (1883-1931), and Georgi Zaidan (1861-1914). All these luminaries are Lebanese.[[39]](#footnote-39)

**Examples of Literary Pen-Portraits**

The following sections introduce two examples of literary pen-portraits. One was written by Abd al-Aziz al-Bishri and the other by Khairy Shalaby.

1. ***Al-Tifl al-Sharid/ The Homeless Child* by Abd al-Aziz al-Bishri**

A dusty deformed face, as if covered with the soil of a grave; two cavernous temples, as if caused by the effect of a collapse; two protruding cheeks that look like two knees of a camel; his skin is so stuck to his bones that his grave would not be able to peel it off on the Resurrection Day; these are two eyes that are constantly puzzled and confused; they steal looks at all sides [ …] this is a bare leg and those are shabby rags that are ripped and torn; they were made of torn pieces and rags; they reveal more of the body than they hide; uncover more flaws than they conceal […], here he observes the piece of bread in your hand if you are eating and the cigarette butt if you are smoking; his eyes might be drawn to a remnant of food thrown to the ground, which the raven might hate and dogs would not eat […]; he is always afraid, constantly frightened; fears everything and is even scared of anything; he expects harm from anyone and anticipates that someone will attack him; the poor man had been deprived of the father’s and the mother’s emotions; and he had been deprived of presents from the uncle and his assistance […] Oh, able people of power, have mercy on those on land so that He who is in Heaven would have mercy on you! "[[40]](#footnote-40).

1. ***Al-Hajja Zahra* by Khairi Shalabi**

Since my aunt Tawhida got married and my uncle Abd al-Rahman Amr, who was the most famous barber in our village, died, Hajja Zahra has sat on the sidewalk of the shop day and night and no one has talked to her from one hour to the next except one of the children of her son, Arafat […] she spends her time sitting at the entrance of her home leaning her elbow on the pavement in front of the shop […] Hajja Zahra has a large body and she looks like a bread-oven in the way she sits; she’s thick, strongly built, and as black as coal. Her head, which is encircled by black gauze, looks like a black frying pan that has been turned over […] She is always bending her head and nobody of those who see her knew if she was awake or was in deep or everlasting hibernation. She has been in this position for many years […] people think that she is either asleep or dead while she is gazing from below her drooping eyelids at those who come and go.

If she laughs, you will think she is weeping; you will be frightened at first sight, probably because you might think that her face is as hard as a rock and will not be soft, and you will suddenly see it come to life again and become like a dough that is full of curves and topographic relief; her constantly drooping eyes have become like two splits that shed heavy tears […] For me, when I used to remember her at night when I was alone, my body would shake because of wild hidden laughter because her shape would look identical to the shape of my uncle Zakariya when he laughs or gets excited and my father’s shape when he shows his disgust at anything."[[41]](#footnote-41)

**The Characteristics of the Artistic Structure of the Literary Portrait**

An in-depth reading of these literary excerpts demonstrates that writing pen-portraits requires a special skill, especially in the process of organizing this literary genre. As B.K Bazylova states: “An important component of a portrait poetic is a way of organizing his perceptions. The perceptions of literary portrait is not just in a process of interpretation of verbal sights, which has its own specific sequence, designed to develop the reader the law of semantic and syntactic hierarchy. [...]There goes a hierarchical restructuring of impressions that is characterized by the fact that in a process of narration every reader discovers something new.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

The main characteristics of the structure of the literary portrait are summarized in the following points:

1. **Narration in the Service of Description**

Generally, description is connected to narration or is complementary to it. However, in the case of the pen-portrait, the discourse is mainly descriptive, aiming to shed light on the character and sketch out their features and essence. Therefore, narration serves to follow the description and is not followed by it, as is commonly alleged. The character’s description is considered to be one of the most important elements of a successful narrative work, like plot and style. By combining description and narration, the writer leads us on a journey in which we come to know the character and their experience in life in a gradual way.

1. **From the General to the Particular**

The movement of the description in the pen-portrait is not arbitrary; it is a systematic process that depends on organization, selection and choice. When the writer describes the character, they have two choices: either to start from the general and move to the particular, or the inverse. For example, the writer might start by describing the appearance of the character, their temper in general and then gradually describe their specific attributes such as the character’s height, face, skin color, features of the eyes, nose, and mouth, and so on. In this gradual movement from the general to the particular, or from the whole to the part, we notice a clear and amusing act of branching-off. Sometimes, we find that the specific part of the character being described takes on a general tone, with other attributes integrated under other specific parts. For example, the character’s face might be a specific part when we describe the appearance of the whole character, but from a different angle, it becomes general in relation to the other parts, such as the eyes, the nose, and the mouth, as these parts constitute the sub-parts from which the whole face is formed.

1. **From the External Form to the Internal Essence**

The human being is a form and essence, a body, a mind and conscience. A good description of the character should include the two sides and forge a tight connection between them. In the pen-portrait samples mentioned above, we have seen that each writer gradually and skillfully describes the external appearance of the character, and then moves to the internal structure of their soul, their mind, and the way of thinking that makes the character a distinctive person. Sometimes, the external description serves as a tool that symbolizes the internal world of the character. For example, the reference to “white hair” evokes the concepts of wisdom and dignity. Similarly, the description of facial wrinkles symbolizes originality and belonging to the place at hand, and the look of the eyes evokes the notion of “intelligence” and so on.

**4. Rigorous Investigation of Details**

One of the reasons for the success of pen-portraits is the writer’s accurate description and rigorous investigation of the details that are related to the character. Generally, each character has specific good or bad characteristics that distinguish them from other characters. Portrait writers focus on describing these physical details, such as a snub nose, wide mouth, obese body, or a wrinkled or furrowed face. The writer also concentrates on the shape of the face, and the calmness, elegance and shyness of the character. There is no doubt that these characteristics become distinguishing marks of the person and leave good impressions on the reader. In addition, they constitute productive material for the writer. Therefore, some writers elaborate on describing the details in order to generate particular effects on the reader. With this detailed investigation and description, the writer responds to the reader’s desire and expectations. It is doubtless the case that the reader would like to know everything about the character being described, especially individuals in the public eye and well-known celebrities.

**5. Poetic Description and Appealing to the Senses**

Language is the only tool that the writer of the literary portrait has at their disposal: they need the pen of a poet and the brush of an artist. The pen-portrait depends on poetic language that relies on intensifying meanings while also embodying and personalizing abstract qualities. Poetic language is characterized by the prominent presence of the senses, while impressive language piques the senses of the reader. In the literary pen-portrait, the writer resorts to deploying tangible, tactile elements of description and chooses suitable forms, colors, sounds, smells, tastes and clothes to do so. There is no doubt that appealing to the senses serves to lend a poetic atmosphere to the description and aligns it with the reader’s perceptions and realizations. When the details speak to the reader, they trigger experience and knowledge in their mind, enabling them to understand the character and perceive them to a better extent.

1. **Irony**

Irony is considered to be one of the strategies on which the writer draws in the art of the literary pen-portrait, especially the portraits of marginalized, helpless people, who have to face a great deal of difficulties – as seen in Egyptian society. Irony requires a keen sense of intelligence that enables the reader to see essential aspects that are concealed behind external superficialities and understand the critical dimension that the writer is employing. In addition to this, writing in an ironic style requires expertise in writing and mastery of the language in such a way that allows the writer to choose the vocabulary and phrases that are able to make the reader laugh.[[43]](#footnote-43)

**Conclusion**

In light of the above review, examples, and discussion of the genre of the literary pen-portrait, it is possible to draw the following conclusions. Firstly, the art of the pen-portrait that al-Bishri and Khairy Shalaby introduced in the twentieth century acquainted readers with a new, different reality relating to marginalized people, mainly in Egypt. The phenomenon of marginalization is not limited to deviants: any ordinary person can also be marginalized. As Ali Fahmi points out, both groups share the characteristic of being “far from the productive process” in society.[[44]](#footnote-44) Al-Bishri and Shalaby also corrected our understanding of marginalization. Instead of seeing the marginalized as a trivial mass of people in society, we see them as the power that underpins the higher classes in society, those that lead social relationships. If the higher classes did not gain from the marginalized classes, they would not be able to achieve their lofty status. The literature of the marginalized and the lower classes is not low-level or trivial literature as much as it is a realistic form of literature with a connection to these people. Its main function is to introduce the issues of the lives of human beings and their sufferings, in the true sense of the word.

Secondly, the pen-portrait genre in the form that al-Bishri and Khairy established became widespread and popular in the first half of the twentieth century. However, it has disappeared from modern Arabic poetry and is rarely used by modern-day writers. In other words, the pen-portrait remains a form of marginalized literature which is not sufficiently explored by contemporary writers and critics. Furthermore, the dominating literary institute and authority does not show an interest in it, despite its significance and aesthetics.

There is no doubt that modern Arabic literature is home to brilliant examples of the art of the pen-portrait. Some of them are devoted to the class of the marginalized and introduce human archetypes that play a significant role in society. However, these examples are few in number, compared to other types of writing. They include *Wujuh Marrat: Portrihat Iraqiyya/Faces That Have Passed: Iraqi Portraits* by the Iraqi writer Abd al-Rahman Majid al-Rabi'i (b.1939), which includes the biographies of a number of Iraqis, most of whom come from socially marginalized backgrounds; the book *Sayyed al-'Ashira: Nusus Sardiya/Head of the Clan: Narrative Texts* (2011) by the Moroccan poet Muhammad Bo Jubairy (b. 1956), in which he introduces biographies of people who are part of the village environment and area within which he was born, grew up and has lived to date;[[45]](#footnote-45) the book *Hikayat Suwar: Ta'weelat Naqdiya*/*Stories of Pictures: Critical Interpretations* (2009) by Sharaf al-Din Majdolin is a combination of the style of the pen-portrait and a critical analysis in which he recounts the life of Moroccan novelists and poets that influenced him;[[46]](#footnote-46) the two books *Fi Hadhrat al-Baha: Portrihat bi Hibr al-'Unutha*/*In the Presence of Gorgeousness: Portraits by the Ink of Femininity* (2015) and *Mubdi'un la Yantiqun ‘an al-Hawa: Portrihat Ashiqa/Creators who Do Not Speak about Love: Portraits in Love* (2015) by the Moroccan writer Hassan Birish (1971), which include portraits of male and female writers from the world of culture and literature in Morocco;[[47]](#footnote-47) the book *Portrait* (2006) by the Lebanese journalist Marline Khalifa, in which she wrote biographies of more than forty Lebanese people from the fields of politics, society, literature and art in a style closer to that of journalistic texts.[[48]](#footnote-48)

In conclusion, while literary pen-portraits deserve respect, they are still relatively minor in scope. This is probably because they receive little attention from the writers and critics of this genre, which results from the fact that writing on this type of literature takes a lot of courage, as the literary pen-portrait is considered a source of abundant information about the biography of a certain individual and their impact. This requires observation of the positive and negative aspects of the character, which constitutes a specific risk, be it on a social or a legal level. From a social perspective, pen-portrait writing can defame a person and be a cause of a total separation or a reason for taking legal action against the writer, or the rupture of relations between the writer and the critic.

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1. Somnath Sarkar, “What is Marginality in Literature?,” All about English Literature, 2016, [http://www.eng-literature.com/2016/08/what-is-marginality-literature-examples.html#](http://www.eng-literature.com/2016/08/what-is-marginality-literature-examples.html). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. La'la Sa'adah, “Adab al-Hamish: Naghma li al-Ghina' wa Ukhra li al-Buka',” Aswat al-Shamal, 8 May 2011, <http://www.aswat-elchamal.com/ar/?p=98&a=17311>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Hassan Bahrawi, “Adab al-Hamish: Adab Muhammad Shukri min al-Hamishiyya ila al-Markaziyya,” in *'Alamat* (Morocco), 18, 2002: 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For information about central and marginal literature, their concepts and types, see: Dalila al-Bah & Tibermasin Abd al-Rahman, “al-Markaz wa al-Hamish: Its Concept, Types and Roots,” in *Majallat Qira'at: Makhbar-Wahdat al-Takween wa al-Bahth fi Nazariyyat al-Qira'a wa Manahijiha* )Algeria: University of Baskara(, 4 (2012), 297-317. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kamal Al-Riyahi, “al-Falsafi fi 'Ushb al-Lail li Ibrahim al-Kuni,” Diwan al-'Arab, June 12, 2007, <http://www.diwanalarab.com/spip.php?article9391>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Majdi Ahmad Tawfiq, “Adab al-Muhammashin,” *Jihat al-Shi'r*, <http://www.jehat.com/ar/JanatAltaaweel/drasatnadaryah/Pages/majdai_a_tawfeeq.aspx#1>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ### The final years of the twentieth century witnessed an increased interest among critics of literature and sociologists, politicians, and advocates in studying marginalized social groups and classes in Egypt. These studies attempted to refer to the historic roots of marginal groups in Egyptian society, their types, and their social and economic conditions. For further details on this subject, see Ibtisam Allam, *Al-Jama'at al-Hamishiya al-Munharifa fi Tarikh Misr al-Ijtima'i al-Hadith* (Cairo University: Faculty of Humanities- Markaz al-Buhuth wa al-Dirasat al-Ijtima'iya, 2002); Huwaida Saleh, *Al-Hamish al-'Ijtima'i fi al-Adab: A Socio-cultural Reading* (Cairo: Dar Ru'ya li al-Nashr, 2015); Ali Fahmi, “al-Muhammashoun fi Misr al-Mahrousa,” al-Kitaba al-'Ukhra, January 1993,

   ### http://archive.sakhrit.co/newPreview.aspx?PID=2129797&ISSUEID=196&AID=59933.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In a television interview with Najib Mahfouz and the al-Harafish Group, the player Ahmad Mazhar explained the meaning of the nickname “Harafish,” stating that it was a Turkish word that consists of two parts (Hara = neighborhood) and “fish” (“does not exist”), i.e. “without a neighborhood.” Thus, “al-Harafish” are groups of people that have no neighborhood or anywhere to live. It is similar to the term “Sa'alik” (the vagabonds) in the pre-Islamic period. See the television interview with Najib Mahfouz, Ahmad Mazhar and others: “Ya'ni Eh Harafish?/So, what does “Harafish” mean? Najib Mahfouz and Ahmad Mazhar reply in a rare interview,” in *al-Yawm al-Sabi’* newspaper, January 12, 2017, [http://www.youm7.com/story/2017/1/12/](http://www.youm7.com/story/2017/1/12/%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%89-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D9%87-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D9%86%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B8-%D9%88%D8%A3%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B8%D9%87%D8%B1-%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%89-%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A1/3049335). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Many authors in the 1960s wrote about the marginalized classes in Egyptian society. They included Muhammad Mustajab (1938-2005), Abd al-Hakim Qassem (1935-1990), Yusuf al-Qa'id (b. 1944) and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Kamal al-Riyahi, “al-Falsafiy fi 'Ushb al-Lail li Ibrahim al-Kouni,” in Diwan al-'Arab, June 12, 2007, <http://www.diwanalarab.com/spip.php?article9391>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. On the presence of the marginalized in the Arab novel, see “al-Muhammashoun: Kayfa Ya'ishoun fi al-Sard al-'Arabi,” in Middle East Online, December 13, 2012, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/?id=152919>.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mahmoud Adham, *Al-Maqal al-Sahafi* (Cairo: al-Anglo al-Misriya, 1984), 185-186. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ismael Azzam, “al-Profile…Tariquka li Kitabat Qissa Sahafiyya Hawla Shakhsiyyat fi Uslub Hayy,” Shabakat al-Sahafiyyin al-Dowliyyin, April 15, 2015, https://ijnet.org/ar. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The Tunisian critic Jalila Turayter connects the art of the portrait to “self-literature,” which includes biography, autobiography, memoirs, diaries and private letters. See Jalila Turayter, *Adab al-Portrait: al-Nazariyya wa al-Ibdaa'* (Tunisia, Dar Muhammad Ali li al-Nashr, 2011), 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. On the difference between autobiography and portrait, see Michel Beaujour, *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait*, Trans. from French by Yara Milos (New York and London: New York University Press, 1991), 25. See also Abd al-Wahab al-Rami, *Al-Ajnas al-SahafiyYa: Miftah al-'Ilam al-Mihani* (Morocco, ISESCO: Islamic, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2011), 143-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See: B. K Bazylova and Zh. D. Suleimenova, “The Model of the Genre of Literary Portrait in Modern Literary Criticism,” *Journal of Social, Behavioral, Educational, Economic, Business and Industrial Engineering* 6, no. 6, 2012: 1110-1113; Jalila Turayter, *Adab al-Portrait: al-Nazariyya wa al-Ibdaa'* (Tunisia, Dar Muhammad Ali li al-Nashr, 2011), 36-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *al-Siyasa al-'Usbou'iyya :*A political and cultural newspaper that was published in 1926, which mainly dealt with political issues but also included essays on philosophical, intellectual and social topics. It was established by The Constitution Party in Egypt and its editor-in-chief was Muhammad Hasanin Haikal (1888-1956). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For details about the life of al-Bishri and his literature, see Jamal al-Din al-Ramadi, *Min A'lam al-Adab al-Mu'asser* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, n.d.), 64-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Al-Bishri says that his purpose in writing these essays is “to analyze one of the well-known characters that is appreciated by people, to infiltrate their temper and deal with what is seen through it and introduce it to the reader in an amusing and humorous way.” He adds that “this type of rhetorical writing is borrowed from the West and we are still imitating them in it, though some of the Arab writers like al-Jahiz preceded them with a certain kind of this metaphorical description.” See Yosri Abd al-Ghani Abd Allah, “Al-Sheikh Abd al-Azizal-Bishri: Min al-Adab al-Sakher ila Al-Naqd al-Adabi,” al-Majalla al-'Arabiyya(Saudi Arabia), March 10, 2016, http://www.arabicmagazine.com/Arabic/AboutUs.aspx. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Abd al-Aziz Al-Bishri, *Al-Mukhtar* (Cairo: Mu'asasat Hindawi li al-Nashr, 2014), 151-154. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 427-431. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 187-196. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 437-439. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Yahya Haqqi, *'Itr al-Ahbab* (Cairo: Nahdhat Misr li al-Tiba'a wa al-Nashr, 2008), 160-185. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See the texts of “Mudhakarat al-Sheikh Fazari,” in Ali Abd al-Raziq, *Min Athar Mustafa Abd al-Raziq*, Revised by Taha Hussein (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'aref, 1957), 79-121.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See “al-Surah al-Shakhssiya wa al-Qalamiya li al-Aqqad,” in Isma'il al-Minshawi, *Fan al-Maqal wa Tatawuruhu 'Abr al-'Usour* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Azhariya li al-Turath, 2000), <http://vb.mediu.edu.my/archive/index.php/t-40306.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Al-Hanuti: the undertaker who takes care of the dead body and buries it. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Al-Turbi: the gravedigger. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Al-Qahwaji: the coffee-maker. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Al-Arabji: the carriage-driver. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Al-Makwaji: the ironer. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Al-Tamarji: hospital service-worker/nurse. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Muhammad Sayyed Barakah, “Khairy Shalaby: al-Hakka' Watad al-Riwaya al-Misriya,” in *al-Islam al-Yawm,* July 3, 2012, <http://magazine.islamtoday.net/m/art.aspx?ID=731>. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Khairy Shalaby wrote an eloquent portrait about his teacher in which he confirmed his pioneering role in the literary renaissance. He also touched on the art of portraiture, saying: “We should know that Abd al-Aziz al-Bishri is the founder of the art that we today call the ‘Art of Portrait’ in modern journalism. In fact, this art is an Arab one, with its foundations connected to the literary pen as a competitor to the brush of the painter, which is considered taboo in the Islamic faith. The writers used to draw faces with pens in such a way that the brush of the painter could not do, but al-Bishri excelled them all because he combined the shades of the colors of the brush and the eloquence of the pen in literature.” Khairy Shalaby, *'Anaqid al-Nur* (Cairo: Dar al-Usra, 2010), 75-86. See also Khairy Shalaby, *Kutub wa Nas* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 2009), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The famous Egyptian journalist Zaki Mubarak (1892-1952) was heavily critical of al-Bishri, hinting that al-Bishri described the class of the marginalized people but he did not live among them or experience what they feel; he described them as sculptures and phenomena rather than live human beings. He said: “He is one of the most skilled describers of visual things; you would think that his pen is a brush of a painter that moves between colors but […] where is the writer who tells us about what we know or do not know about the secrets of the souls and the feelings of the hearts? I looked for this writer in the essays of Abd al-Aziz al-Bishri but could not find him […] al-Bishri's essays tell you that he has become acquainted with lots of people and when you read, you find their appearances but you do not find him aware of or alert to the indications of those features. Al-Bishri the writer has eyes that see colors and ears that hear sounds but he lived without a heart and did not realize the minute differences between the colors and sounds from the perspective of their indications of meanings […] I am asking about the writer who describe human feelings, and what concerns us as Egyptians as well as humans; the human poet finds echos of his emotions everywhere in the country.”

    See Zaki Mubarak, “Al-Mukhtar li Abd al-Aziz al-Bishri,” in *Majallat al-Risala* (Cairo), no. 394, November 20, 1941, in Wiki Masdar, [https://ar.wikisource.org/wiki](https://ar.wikisource.org/wikiD9%84%D8%AA%A9). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Amani Fouad, “Al-Portrait fi al-Nass al-Riwa'i Inda Khairy Shalabi: Mawal al-Bayat wa al-Nawm Namuzajan,” in al-Hiwar al-Mutamadden*,* no. 4214, September 13, 2013, <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=377689>. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Hatem Hafiz points out that associating Khairy Shalaby with the literature of the marginalized did a great injustice to him, “not because he wrote about the marginalized but because his writings about the marginalized exceeded the direct concept of the ‘marginalized’ and he set it free to occupy broader spaces: he does not write about the marginalized alone but about the marginalization in the human soul, too. […] Khairy explores this marginalization in the human soul and soon he discovers that this is the main part of the character and their marginalization because the character is unaware of it or denies it as part of what we refuse of our features or for fear of being an open book or easy target among people who live as if they were not human.” Hatem Hafiz, “Na'na' al-Janayin: Riwaya Tusa'il al-Tarikh al-Mawruth,” in *Majallat al-Hilal* (Cairo, December 2010), 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See Khayri Shalaby, *Anaqid al-Nur* (Cairo: Dar al-Usra, 2010); Khairy Shalaby, *A'yaan Misr: Wujuh Misriya Mu'assera* (Cairo: al-Dar al-Missriyya al-Lubnaniyya, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Abd al-Aziz Al-Bishri, *Al-Mukhtar* (Cairo: Mu'asast Hindawi li al-Nashr, 2014), 151-153. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Khairy Shalaby, *Na'na' al-Janayin* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 2006), 50-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. B. K Bazylova & Zh. D. Suleimenova, “The Model of the Genre of Literary Portrait in Modern Literary Criticism,” *Journal of Social, Behavioral, Educational, Economic, Business and Industrial Engineering* 6, no. 6, )2012(: 1113. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See “Abd al-Aziz al-Bishri Mathaf al-Suwar,” inMontada Tawasul, May 17, 2010, http://alsontwasol.yoo7.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ali Fahmi, “Al-Muhammashoun fi Misr al-Mahrousa,” *Majallat al-Kitaba al-'Ukhra* (Cairo, January 1993) 15. See also

    <http://archive.sakhrit.co/newPreview.aspx?PID=2129797&ISSUEID=196&AID=59933>. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See Hamid Said, “al-Soura al-Qalamiya,” al-Ra'I, June 15, 2012, <http://alrai.com/article/520546.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. See “Hikayat Suwar: Kitab Jadid li al-Naqid Sharaf al-Din Majdolin,” in *al-Dustour Newspaper* (Amman), April 26, 2009, <https://www.addustour.com/articles>. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See Nizar al-Qurashy, “Portraihat bi Rishat Hassan Bireesh,” in *Majallat Tanja al-Adabiya* (Morocco), July 1, 2015, <http://aladabia.net/m/article.php?id=13745#sthash.gmjCwHTK.dpuf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. See “Portrait: Siyar Dhatiyya li Wujuh Ma'rufa fi al-Siyasa wa al-Adab,” in *al-Ghad Newspaper* (Amman), August 8, 2006, <http://alghad.com/articles/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)